



Corpse exposure and cosmological ecology: Ritual, space, and death in an indigenous mortuary landscape

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study explores the distinctive *mepasah* burial practice observed by the indigenous Trunyan community in Bali, Indonesia, in which deceased bodies are neither buried nor cremated, but instead placed openly on the ground beneath the sacred *Taru Menyan* tree. In contrast to the widely practiced *ngaben* cremation ritual of Balinese Hinduism, *mepasah* reflects a theo-eco-cosmological worldview in which death is regarded as a sacred process of returning the human body to the cosmic order. **Methods:** Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study draws upon participant observation, in-depth interviews with customary leaders, and analysis of customary law texts (*awig-awig*). **Finding:** Findings indicate that *mepasah* serves not only as a spiritual-ecological expression but also as a subtle form of resistance against the commodification and homogenization of death rituals. The sacred landscape of *Sema Wayah*, where corpses naturally decompose beneath the *Taru Menyan* tree, is interpreted as a living deathscape that preserves ancestral harmony and embodies a localized ecological ethic. **Conclusion:** Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of ecological spirituality and dark green religion, this study reveals *mepasah* as a form of sustainable mortuary practice rooted in indigenous ecological wisdom and cultural cosmology. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** The originality of this article lies in its application of a theo-eco-cosmological lens to the analysis of indigenous death rites. It offers a significant contribution to the fields of postmortem body anthropology, spiritual ecology, and relational ontology, while presenting *mepasah* as a living heritage that bridges ancestral spirituality with ecological reverence for death.

KEYWORDS: ancient Bali; burial; death rituals; trunyan.

1. Introduction

Burial traditions represent one of the most profound and symbolically rich aspects of human culture. Across the world, communities have developed diverse ways to honor the deceased, and these mortuary practices often reflect the social, spiritual, and philosophical values of a society. One such unique tradition still practiced today is the ancient burial custom of Trunyan village in Bali, Indonesia. In this tradition, corpses are not interred or cremated, as is commonly practiced in Balinese Hinduism, but instead placed openly on the ground and ritually safeguarded. The decomposition of the body is naturally mitigated by the fragrant aroma of the *Taru Menyan* tree, which is believed to neutralize odors (Upayogi,

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2019). This practice has become a defining feature of Trunyan's cultural identity, attracting both local and international attention (Asteria et al., 2023; Audyandari, 2024).

While several studies have touched upon Trunyan's ritual practices and its appeal as a "dark tourism" destination (Handayani & Korstanje, 2018; Korstanje & Handayani, 2017), existing literature lacks a deeper analysis of how this continuum of open-air death is understood within a cosmological-ecological framework and the spatial structure of ritual life in the village. Previous research has not systematically examined the interplay between corpse exposure practices, the cosmological significance of the *Taru Menyan* tree, the bamboo cages used for corpse placement, and the cemetery landscape (*setra*) as an integrated spiritual and material ecology of Trunyan.

This study aims to critically investigate the cosmological meanings of corpse exposure practices in Trunyan, particularly within the context of localized spirituality and ecological wisdom that has been passed down through generations of Bali Aga communities. The tradition not only reflects beliefs about the cyclical nature of life and death but also illustrates an intimate relationship among humans, ancestral spirits, and natural elements, especially the *Taru Menyan* tree, which functions both as an olfactory purifier and a sacred symbol within the open-air deathscape. The research also seeks to map the spatial configuration of ritual elements, including bamboo enclosures, the cemetery (*setra*), and the location of the *Taru Menyan* tree, as symbolic structures that reveal how the Trunyan community organizes death as part of a larger cosmological and ecological order. Notably, death is not conceived as a final severance, but rather as a migration of the soul continuing its evolution within the ecological-cosmological matrix.

By holistically examining the interplay of space, ritual, and belief, this study seeks to address how corpse exposure practices shape and reflect a distinct cosmological ecology, namely, a relational system that integrates theological, ecological, and socio-spatial dimensions into a unified whole. The central research question asks: how does this open-air mortuary practice create a ritual space that functions not merely as a site for soul transition, but also as a sacred ecological landscape that maintains equilibrium among life, death, and the environment (Jemiwi & Dharma, 2025). This research hypothesizes that Trunyan's corpse exposure practice is not merely a localized cultural phenomenon but rather a manifestation of an ecological cosmology that affirms a deep spiritual and ecological connection between humans and their surrounding world.

Although several studies have investigated burial customs in Bali, including in Trunyan, most have focused on descriptive accounts of ritual practices without critically engaging the embedded social, cultural, and ontological values upheld by the community (Putri, 2021). Furthermore, much of the existing scholarship has not considered how these traditions are affected by contemporary socio-economic transformations. As noted by Harianja & Lubis (2023), many indigenous practices today face significant challenges due to globalization and shifting value systems. Accordingly, this study provides a timely and necessary in-depth examination of how Trunyan's ancient mortuary tradition is preserved and adapted amid modernity.

Despite its centuries-long existence, the preservation of this burial tradition is increasingly challenged by the rapid advance of globalization and modern life. These dynamics have altered how traditional communities understand and enact their cultural practices, including rituals surrounding death. Thus, the present study also seeks to understand how the people of Trunyan negotiate and maintain their ancestral mortuary practices in the face of these growing pressures.

Overall, this research contributes to broader discussions on the preservation of cultural traditions in Indonesia, especially within the richly textured Balinese context. By exploring the deeper meanings of Trunyan's mortuary customs, the study aims to highlight the cultural significance of maintaining local traditions and to examine how communities can balance heritage preservation with adaptation to contemporary challenges. As Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) suggest, a more nuanced understanding of local cultural practices can inform policy-making and community-based preservation programs, enriching global discourse on cultural diversity and heritage.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary framework by integrating cosmological ecology theory with ritual-space analysis to interpret *mepasah*, Trunyan's open-air corpse exposure practice, as a living manifestation of Bali Aga spiritual-ecological order. Drawing inspiration from the cosmological ecology perspectives of Descola (2013) and Ingold (2000), this approach emphasizes that human-environment relationships are inseparable from the cosmologies in which they are embedded. The *Taru Menyan* tree, the *setra*, and bamboo cages are not merely physical objects but cosmological agents that shape a spiritual landscape and mediate energetic flows between ancestral spirits and the ecosystem. In this view, corpse exposure is not a passive ecological act but an active ritual engagement in sustaining cosmic balance, echoing Ingold's dwelling perspective, which posits that humans dwell in the world rather than merely occupy it.

Spatial configurations of ritual are also examined through the socio-spatial lens developed by Reuter (2002), who highlights how space in Bali Aga communities is not only a reflection of social relations but also an agent in shaping cosmological order and status hierarchies. The *Setra Trunyan*, with its differentiated zones for *sema wayah*, *sema nguda*, and *sema bantas* (depending on the cause and nature of death), reflects an indigenous system of sacred death classification rooted in collective memory, social structure, and environmental interconnection.

Complementing these frameworks, contemporary theories such as DeLanda (2016) assemblage theory and Harvey (2013) new animism are also employed to explore how Trunyan's mortuary practices constitute a dynamic assemblage of human and non-human entities, corpses, trees, soil, spatial markers, and ancestral narratives, interacting to form a cohesive ritual ecosystem. Assemblage theory offers a way to conceptualize the Trunyan deathscape as a non-hierarchical configuration of heterogeneous elements, while new animism foregrounds the spiritual agency of non-human entities within local knowledge systems. Within this theoretical constellation, death is not an end but part of a continuous flow of life sustained through multispecies and multispiritual relationships. Through this framework, the study analyzes how Trunyan's mortuary tradition enacts a dialog between body, space, and cosmos in a complex, ecological, and cosmological ritual logic.

Although a number of studies have addressed burial practices in Bali and Indonesia more broadly, significant gaps remain in the literature. Most existing research tends to focus on ritual description or archaeological elements, with limited engagement with the embedded cultural meanings and social values of these practices. For instance, the study by Suyasa & Widyastuti (2019), which examines the characteristics of foreign students in Bali, neglects the living traditional cultural practices such as Trunyan's burial system. This suggests that while the Trunyan tradition is widely recognized, its deeper cultural and social dimensions remain underexplored.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design with an ethnographic approach to investigate the open-air mortuary practice (*mepasah*) in Trunyan Village, Bali. This approach was chosen to capture the symbolic meanings, social structures, and cosmological relations embedded in the tradition as enacted in the everyday life of the Bali Aga community. A qualitative methodology allows the researcher to access emic perspectives, insider understandings, that would be difficult to uncover through quantitative means (Bungin, 2012; Crozier et al., 1994). As Creswell & Poth (2018) emphasize, ethnographic design is particularly well-suited for exploring cultures symbolically structured through practice, space, and narrative, especially when the researcher seeks to understand how meanings are formed and transmitted within specific social contexts.

Fieldwork was conducted in Trunyan Village, located in Kintamani Subdistrict, Bangli Regency, Bali, known for its unique corpse exposure system beneath the *Taru Menyan* tree. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement and deep knowledge of the ancient mortuary tradition. Participants included customary priests (*pemangku*), village elders, families who had performed the ritual, and residents

living near the burial site. The number of informants was determined by the principle of data saturation, meaning that data collection ceased once repeated patterns emerged and no new information was being obtained (Guest et al., 2006).

Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and cultural document analysis. Observation focused on documenting social dynamics, symbolic gestures, and spatial use during the mortuary rituals. Semi-structured interviews aimed to explore cosmological understandings, emotional experiences, and intergenerational narratives related to death and ancestral spirits. Supplementary materials such as *lontar* manuscripts, customary records, and visual documentation were used to enrich context and support data triangulation.

Data analysis followed the reflective thematic approach developed by Braun & Clarke (2021). This process involved transcription, open coding, categorization, and the development of key themes that reflect the layers of meaning within the mortuary practice. This analytic framework enabled the researcher not only to describe the data but also to interpret the interconnections among meanings within the cosmological, ecological, and social dimensions of Trunyan society.

To enhance the validity of the findings, methodological and source triangulation was employed by comparing data from field observations, interviews, and textual sources. This aligns with Flick (2018) assertion that triangulation is a crucial strategy in qualitative research for improving the credibility and trustworthiness of findings. Ethical considerations were upheld throughout the study by ensuring informed consent, confidentiality of data, and respect for local cultural norms and values at every stage of the research process. Through this methodological framework, the study aims to reveal how Trunyan's ancient mortuary practice functions not merely as a death ritual but as a manifestation of local knowledge systems that integrate theological, ecological, and relational dimensions into a sacred landscape.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Spatiality and the ritual ecology of death

The Trunyan community in Bali upholds a distinctive belief system and mortuary practice that significantly departs from the mainstream Balinese Hindu cremation rites. Located on the eastern shores of Lake Batur in Kintamani, Trunyan is known for its open-air mortuary tradition, in which bodies are not cremated but placed above ground beneath a sacred tree known as *Taru Menyan*. This ancient practice is deeply rooted in a cosmology that blends animism, dynamism, and localized expressions of Balinese Hinduism. Within this framework, death is not seen as a final departure; rather, the spirit of the deceased is believed to linger near the household until it completes a customary transitional process.

Corpses in Trunyan are placed beneath the *Taru Menyan* tree, which is believed to possess spiritual properties capable of neutralizing the odor of decaying bodies. This tradition, known as *mepasah*, involves laying the body within a woven bamboo structure (*ancak saji*) and allowing natural decomposition to take place without burial or cremation. The body is transported to the *setra wayah*, the main burial site, via a ritual procession involving a traditional canoe. Notably, women in the Trunyan community are traditionally not involved in the burial process; they accompany the deceased only as far as the lakeshore, while the actual mortuary rites are conducted exclusively by men, in accordance with long-standing adat customs.

This open-air mortuary system does more than reflect a unique interface between the Trunyan people, nature, and ancestral spirits, it embodies a cosmological vision of death as an ecological process that must not be interrupted or artificially managed. The body is returned to the earth in its natural state, and the spirit continues its journey after a ritual-defined transition period (Surpi, 2023).



Fig. 1 *Mepasah* tradition- a corpse placed in an *ancak saji* (woven bamboo frame) beneath the sacred *Taru Menyan* tree

Within this tradition, there are three types of *sema* (burial spaces), each designated according to the cause of death and the social or spiritual status of the deceased. *Sema Wayah* serves as the main burial site for those who die of natural causes. *Sema Ngude* is reserved for infants and young, unmarried individuals whose bodies are not placed in the open but in caves—symbolizing an incomplete passage through social and spiritual life stages. *Sema Bantas* is designated for those who die under abnormal or socially disruptive conditions, such as from contagious diseases or unnatural causes (often referred to as *salah pati*), marking a symbolic and spatial separation from the normative order of death.

When interpreted through the lenses of spiritual ecology and relational cosmology (Descola, 2013; Ingold, 2000), the division of burial spaces can be seen as a sacred spatial taxonomy that mirrors the relational harmony between life, death, and the cosmic order. The Trunyanese do not merely manage the body physically, they engage in spiritual and ritual classification: those who are seen as cosmically integrated (*Sema Wayah*), those in an incomplete state of being (*Sema Ngude*), and those regarded as anomalies within the cosmic cycle (*Sema Bantas*). This practice reveals a moral-ecological logic embedded within the spatial organization of death: the body is not only returned to the soil, but also ritually positioned in a way that preserves sacred order among humans, spirits, and nature.

The spatial organization of death in Trunyan reflects a highly structured symbolic system in which death is not treated as a homogenous event but is differentiated according to moral, spiritual, and social dimensions. Through the categorization of *sema*, the community actively constructs a sacred, cosmological landscape of death, one that both ritualizes space and fosters ecological balance between the human world and the spirit realm (Ghosh & Athira, 2024).

From a theo-eco-cosmological perspective, these burial distinctions are not merely social conventions but expressions of a cosmological worldview in which the condition of death is intimately linked to the spiritual and ecological order. For instance, *Sema Ngude*, placed in cave interiors, may be interpreted as a liminal space for souls that have not fully matured in the social life cycle, a symbolic site connecting the human and subterranean spiritual realms. *Sema Bantas*, on the other hand, functions as a ritual quarantine, a spatial and moral safeguard against spiritual and ecological disorder caused by inauspicious deaths.

The theoretical frameworks of ecological spirituality and dark green religion are also applicable to this phenomenon, interpreting it as an eco-cultural practice rooted in

indigenous wisdom. The spatial division of mortuary areas functions as a form of ritual regulation that is ecologically sustainable and socially sensitive to diverse modes of dying. Overall, the *sema* system exemplifies a holistic local paradigm in which death is not merely a biological cessation but part of an ongoing cosmic and ecological cycle, one that must be respected and ritually managed with profound care and consciousness.

Philosophically, this tradition reflects an indigenous understanding of the balance between human life and the natural world, alongside reverence for the cycles of life and death. It manifests core local values that preserve ancestral legacies and cultural identity, while also serving as a form of cultural diplomacy and contributing to Indonesia's rich diversity of mortuary traditions.

3.2 Between heaven and soil: The theo-eco-cosmology of the trunyanese deathscape

The *mepasah* mortuary tradition practiced by the Trunyanese people in Bali reflects a complex system of beliefs that goes beyond ritualism, offering a worldview deeply rooted in spiritual, ecological, and cosmological dimensions. This article examines *mepasah* as a deathscape, a sacred landscape between sky and soil, where the human body is returned wholly to nature, without cremation or conventional burial. The practice opens up a perspective on what may be called theo-eco-cosmology, a life-world view that integrates theology (spirit), ecology (nature), and cosmology (the universe) within a unified customary and spiritual value system.

In the *mepasah* tradition, corpses are placed in an open-air site called *Sema Wayah*, under a sacred tree known as *Taru Menyan*, believed to possess spiritual powers capable of neutralizing the odor of decaying flesh. The absence of cremation or interment reveals a unique worldview: that the body is a part of nature and should be returned to the earth in its natural form. The decomposing body becomes part of the ecological cycle, neither polluting the soil nor the air. This reflects a heightened ecological awareness while reinforcing a spiritual interpretation of death as a return to one's primordial origin, *prthivī* (earth), as reflected in Vedic scriptures and local indigenous cosmologies.



Fig. 2 Human skulls from various years at the *Sema Wayah* burial ground in Trunyan

Cosmologically, death in Trunyan is understood as a transcendental event marking the soul's passage from the material world to the spiritual realm. Unlike the mainstream Balinese Hindu tradition that emphasizes soul liberation through cremation (*ngaben*), the Trunyanese entrust the soul's release entirely to the forces of nature, particularly the *Taru*

Menyan tree and the surrounding sacred mountain landscape (Wibawa, 2022). Mepasah, then, is not merely a burial rite but a release ritual embraced by both earth and sky, where the soul returns to akasha (ether/sky), and the body dissolves into prthivī (earth). This practice forms a unique death cosmology that organically integrates spiritual, ecological, and communal dimensions.

From a theo-ecological perspective, as articulated by ecotheologians such as Berry (1999) and Taylor (2010), spiritual consciousness of nature is not merely symbolic but inherently practical and ritualistic. Mepasah manifests as a tangible expression of indigenous ecological spirituality, where nature becomes a spiritual partner throughout the processes of life and death. In this context, the Trunyanese deathscape is not a “dead” place but a sacred, living space that nourishes humans, nature, and ancestral spirits simultaneously.

Mepasah should thus be understood as a form of ancestral wisdom offering an alternative to the contemporary ecological and spiritual crisis. In a modern world often detached from the meanings of death and the interconnectedness of life and nature, Trunyan’s practice stands as a living philosophy of life and death in harmony with both earth and sky (Tripathi, 2022).

This tradition is reserved only for adults who were married and died of natural causes. The body is placed on the ground in an area known as Sema Wayah, beneath the sacred Taru Menyan tree, whose spiritual aroma is believed to neutralize the odor of decay. Thus, even as the body decomposes in the open, no disturbing odor is present. The body is placed in a bamboo frame known as *ancak saji*, and once decomposition is complete, the bones, especially the skull, are arranged neatly in a designated area as a sign of ancestral reverence.

Mepasah is not merely a mortuary ritual, it is laden with deep spiritual and philosophical meanings. The Trunyanese regard death as part of the natural life cycle and view the human body as a component of nature that must return to the earth unaltered. The practice expresses ecological-spiritual harmony and affirms the role of nature in the soul’s transcendence to the ancestral realm. This tradition exemplifies a belief system that integrates animism, dynamism, and a localized Balinese Hindu cosmology. In cultural terms, mepasah stands as a preservation of unique local identity and a demonstration of how indigenous communities maintain ancestral values amid modern pressures.

More than a burial practice, mepasah expresses the Trunyanese philosophy of life, in which the body must be wholly returned to nature without artificial intervention. Allowing the body to decompose naturally affirms reverence for both ecological and spiritual processes. In this context, the Taru Menyan tree functions as an animistic agent within the framework of new animism (Harvey, 2013), where nature is perceived as alive, imbued with spirit and agency. The interaction between body, space, and tree forms a spiritual relational system, an expression of a lived, local cosmology (Ardiyani et al., 2025).

In the framework of new animism, this practice reflects that the corpse, the earth, and the tree are part of a connected cosmological community. These relationships are not merely symbolic but are consciously enacted and maintained by the Trunyanese people. Nature is not separated from ritual, and spirit is not detached from the material body. This tradition exemplifies how death is experienced as both ecological and spiritual, reinforcing cultural identity and sustaining indigenous knowledge systems in the face of modern transformation.

According to collective memory, the sacred Taru Menyan tree is estimated to be around 1,100 years old. It is believed to possess not only a fragrant essence but a spiritual force that maintains ecological harmony. Field research reveals that only 11 corpses are allowed to be placed under the Taru Menyan at a time. Strict rules govern who may be buried here: the deceased must have died under natural conditions, not due to accidents (*salah pati*) or suicide (*ulah pati*). When a new eligible corpse is brought, the oldest set of remains is respectfully removed and relocated, based on duration of placement. This reflects a symbolic rotation system, expressing the continuity of life and death within the Trunyanese cosmological perspective.

3.3 Transformation and cosmological morality

The findings revealing a strict limitation of 11 corpses allowed beneath the Taru Menyan tree, along with selective criteria based on cause of death (natural vs. unnatural), are highly relevant when analyzed through the lens of cosmological ecology, as developed by Descola (2013) and expanded by Ingold (2000). Within the framework of cosmological ecology, Trunyan's burial practice is not merely a mortuary ritual but part of a relational system that integrates humans, nature, and ancestral spirits into a sacred cosmic order. The Taru Menyan tree is not just an ecological object; it is a sacred entity serving as both odor neutralizer and spiritual mediator between the world of the living and the ancestral realm. The limitation of 11 corpses reflects the community's effort to maintain spiritual ecological balance, preserving cosmic harmony within the sacred burial space (Surpi, 2022).

The rotational system, wherein older corpses are removed to make space for new ones, demonstrates not just spatial management but a deep understanding of life and death as a cyclical and continuous process. This aligns with Ingold (2000) dwelling perspective, which posits that humans and the environment exist in ongoing relational continuity. Death, in this view, is not an end but a transformation within a relational network that mirrors the rhythms of ecological regeneration.

The restriction based on unnatural deaths also reinforces Trunyan's moral cosmology. Those who die from accidents (*salah pati*) or suicide (*ulah pati*) are viewed as being out of alignment with the cosmic order and are thus not eligible for burial under the sacred tree. This reflects an ethical system in which final resting places also represent the spiritual status of the deceased. Thus, Trunyan's mortuary practice represents a form of local cosmopolitics, a knowledge system and ritual framework uniting humans, ancestors, and the natural world within a coherent landscape of meaning.

The *mepasah* tradition is an animistic expression of a worldview where nature is an integral part of local spirituality. In the framework of new animism (Harvey, 2013), entities like the Taru Menyan tree are understood not as inanimate objects but as living beings with will, spirit, and reciprocal relationships with humans. The tree is revered not only for its odor-neutralizing function but also for its role as a spiritual guardian of the burial space. This relational ethic strengthens harmony between humans and the universe.

Further, the practice reflects a dwelling cosmology rooted in Bali Aga cultural space, wherein life and death are seen as natural processes that should not be artificially manipulated. The human body belongs to the earth and should return to it unaltered, a view that is both spiritual and ecological. It affirms that the body is not individual property but part of the larger ecosystem.

In today's context, this tradition plays a crucial role in preserving local identity amid pressures of modernization and cultural homogenization. While many indigenous communities have lost their ancestral rites, Trunyan has maintained a mortuary practice that serves as a philosophical and ecological resistance to dominant funeral systems. Thus, *mepasah* can be interpreted as a symbolic act of resistance and an affirmation of enduring ancestral values rooted in ecological spirituality.

The study reveals that this ancient burial tradition continues to hold profound meaning for the Trunyanese community. Burial beneath the Taru Menyan tree is more than a religious ritual; it symbolizes the cyclical continuity of life and death, regarded as natural and sacred. These findings echo Geertz (1973) and Goffman (1974) assertion of ritual's role in reinforcing social bonds and imbuing life with meaning.

The fact that only 11 corpses may be laid beneath the tree, and only if the cause of death is natural, indicates a stringent moral and cosmological order. A village elder remarked:

"There are only eleven. When a new one arrives, the oldest will be moved eastward, and only the bones will remain. Because Taru Menyan is not just a tree, it is also the keeper of scent." (Informant, a village elder).

This limitation ritualizes space and time. The absence of odor is not due to technology but to symbolic intervention by nature. The tradition aligns with ecophenomenology (Abram, 1996), viewing the land not as a passive backdrop but as a relational subject that “receives” the body through symbolic and natural processes. Taru Menyan acts as a sacred decomposer, preserving the sanctity of the funerary atmosphere. By leaving bodies uncovered, the Trunyanese perform an act of ecotheology, integrating the human body into multispecies relations. Air, soil, trees, and microorganisms all participate in the death ritual.

Fieldwork, participant observation, and literature analysis reveal that *mepasah* is more than a funerary rite, it is a manifestation of local theo-ecological and cosmological knowledge. The practice takes place in *Sema Wayah*, a sacred zone under the Taru Menyan tree and governed by strict *awig-awig* (customary law). The corpses decay naturally without emitting foul odors, thanks to the fragrant tree believed to intervene spiritually.

The Trunyanese understand the human body as composed of the *panca mahabhuta* (five great elements), which must be returned to nature in pure form. The absence of cremation or burial reflects a profound ecological-spiritual equilibrium. A village elder remarked, “Once the body has fulfilled its physical function, there is no need for fire, the earth and the tree will take it back peacefully.” This expresses a sacred ecological worldview in which the decomposition process is believed to occur under the guardianship of ancestral spirits and cosmic forces.

Scholars such as Ter Haar & Smid (2024) conceptualize grief as a dialectic of presence and absence. Ratcliffe adds that grief is a variable, nonlinear process, alternating between presence-in-absence. Shardlow (2024) sees grief as an interaction between presence and loss, emphasizing temporal awareness and the metaphysical-psychological dimensions of mourning. These theories open a time-consciousness approach to understanding death and grief, including the idea of “ongoing presence.”

Moreover, *mepasah* reinforces Trunyan’s identity as a Bali Aga community safeguarding pre-Majapahit ancestral heritage. It also serves as a form of cultural resistance to state funeral policies and the exoticization of ritual through tourism, which risks reducing *mepasah* to a spectacle (Patera et al., 2023). This practice represents living ecospirituality, a holistic spiritual relationship between humans, spirits, and nature. The theo-eco-cosmological perspective analyzed here reveals that the body is not the end of life but the beginning of integration into cosmic forces (Piette, 2020). This view aligns with dark green religion (Taylor, 2010), which sees nature as sacred and active in shaping human spiritual consciousness. Trunyan shows that the human body can return to nature without cremation or burial, not due to technological limitations, but because of a deep life philosophy.

In a global context of environmental and spiritual crises, *mepasah* offers a sustainable, localized, and reverent approach to death. The Trunyan deathscape symbolizes a world where life and death are united within a cosmic whole, where sky (spirit) and earth (matter) commune in peace (Maulana et al., 2022). This ritual challenges modern conceptions of death as medicalized, private, and isolated. Here, death is communal, open, and spiritual, showing that how we treat the body after death reflects our cosmology of life.

Trunyan’s open-air burial tradition embodies local wisdom integrating the human body into the grand cosmic cycle without artificial intervention. By keeping the body in an open space, limiting the number of corpses, and placing them beneath the Taru Menyan tree, the Trunyanese maintain a deep relationship between body, earth, and sacredness. Through phenomenological and ecophenomenological perspectives, this practice is a form of resistance to bodily alienation from nature, a way of life that sees death not as rupture, but as a complete return to the earth (González-Soto et al., 2021).

The *mepasah* tradition in Trunyan, as represented in the conceptual diagram, exemplifies a mortuary system that transcends mere ritual function and embodies what this study identifies as the spiritual ecology of open-air death. At the heart of this practice is the understanding that death is part of a sacred cosmological order, wherein the human body is not destroyed through cremation or burial but returned wholly to nature in its original state. This ritual unfolds in a dedicated space called *Sema Wayah*, beneath the sacred Taru Menyan tree believed to possess spiritual power to neutralize the stench of decomposition.

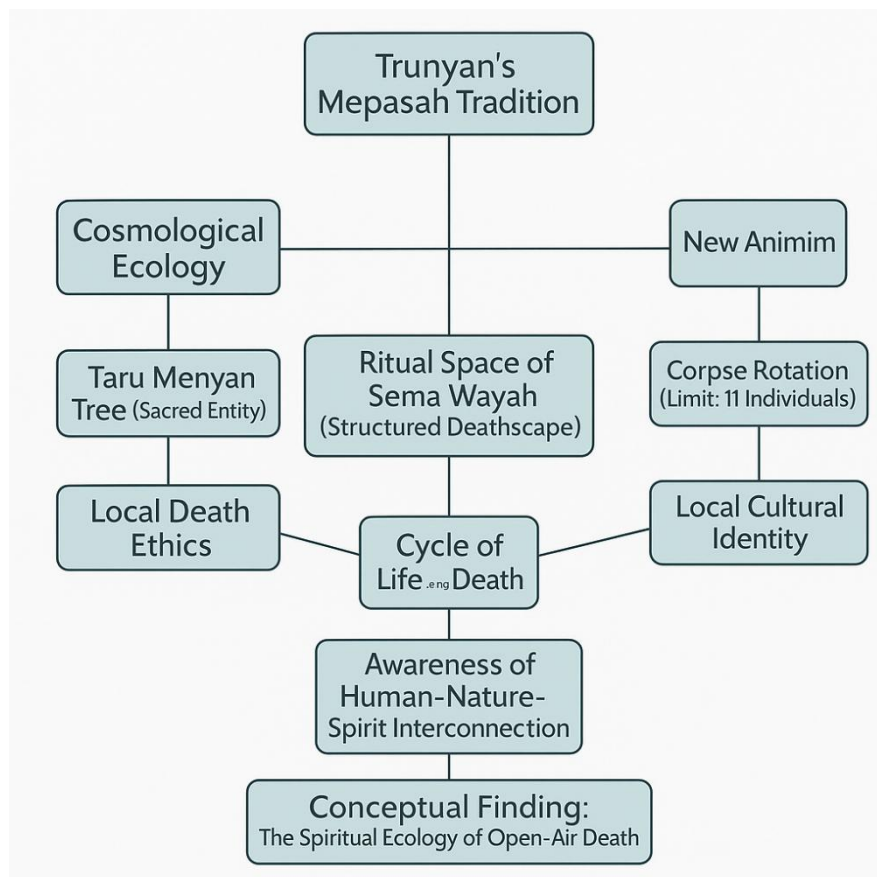


Fig. 3 Research findings on the theo-eco-cosmology of the burial process in Trunyan

Theoretically, the tradition is best understood through the lenses of cosmological ecology and new animism. Cosmological ecology articulates the deep interconnection between humans, nature, and spirits as a unified, harmonious whole. In this framework, the Taru Menyan tree is not only ecologically functional but a spiritual actor maintaining the sanctity of the burial space. Meanwhile, new animism, as developed by Harvey (2013), affirms that natural elements are treated as living beings with agency and intentionality. Nature, in this sense, is not a passive background but an active participant in the soul's transcendence (Barot, 2023).

A defining characteristic of the tradition is the rotational rule, only 11 corpses may lie beneath the tree at any one time. When a new body is brought, the remains of the longest-placed individual are respectfully relocated. This demonstrates a communal understanding of death as part of a continuous life-death cycle. Furthermore, not everyone qualifies for this sacred rite. Only married individuals who die of natural causes are eligible, reflecting a local ethical system that upholds cosmological balance.

All these dimensions coalesce into a collective awareness: that humans, spirits, and nature coexist in mutual interdependence and reverence. This awareness constitutes the central finding of this study; that the Trunyanese practice is a living cosmology, a spiritual ecology of open-air death, which integrates local spirituality, ecological values, and social structures within a sustainable cosmological system.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of frameworks on local cultural preservation and identity, particularly within the traditional Balinese context. It enriches our understanding of how communities sustain ancestral traditions amid modernization and globalization. The findings also highlight the role of social rituals in strengthening community cohesion, resonating with the core premises of social ritual theory (Allocco, 2021).

Practically, the study underscores the need for cultural preservation policies that actively involve local communities in safeguarding their traditions. Local governments and

cultural institutions must collaborate with the Trunyanese to ensure that the ancient burial practice is preserved without losing its spiritual essence. Culturally embedded education for younger generations and support for heritage sustainability will be crucial for the ongoing vitality of this sacred tradition (Usher, 2007).

4. Conclusions

The mepasah tradition in Trunyan is not merely a cultural practice but a profound philosophical expression of embodiment, death, and human–nature relations. This study reframes the corpse as a cosmic and relational body embedded within a sacred ecological framework, challenging modern narratives that sterilize and privatize death. By allowing natural decomposition beneath the sacred Taru Menyan tree, the Trunyanese enact a theo-ecological cosmology in which death signifies transformation and continuity rather than cessation, sustaining ancestral ties and ecological harmony.

This perspective enriches anthropological, multispecies, and environmental humanities scholarship by positioning death as a reabsorption into a more-than-human landscape. Trunyan's spiritual ecology of open-air death exemplifies a resilient, place-based knowledge system and offers a decolonial framework that foregrounds relational ontologies and localized epistemologies.

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Author Contribution

Conceptualization, N.W.J.J. and A.L.; Methodology, N.W.J.J. and N.K.S.; Validation, A.L. and S.L.N.S.; Formal Analysis, N.K.S.; Investigation, N.W.J.J. and N.K.S.; Resources, A.L.; Data Curation, N.K.S.; Writing-Original Draft Preparation, N.W.J.J.; Writing – Review & Editing, S.L.N.S and A.L.

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Not available.

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Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Written informed consent has been obtained from the participant(s) to publish this paper.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Certain data have been excluded due to ethical and privacy considerations regarding community anonymity.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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