

Mangku Leadership in Trekking Practice Rituals: Insights from Local Beliefs of Rural Destination in Rinjani Geopark, Indonesia

Muh. Nuh Ilyas

Tourism, Universitas Bima Internasional, Indonesia

Corresponding author: nuh-ilyas@unbim.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines the role of the *Mangku* in ritual practices associated with trekking Mount Rinjani in Lombok, Indonesia, with a particular focus on local Sasak belief systems and their interaction with contemporary tourism development. Although Mount Rinjani is globally recognised as a geotourism destination, it remains a sacred cultural landscape inhabited by ancestral spirits according to Sasak cosmology. The *Mangku* serves as a central spiritual authority, leading ritual ceremonies before, during, and after the ascent to ensure spiritual protection, ecological harmony, and adherence to customary norms. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, involving *Mangku*, traditional leaders, local guides, and community members. The findings reveal that the *Mangku* plays multifunctional roles as spiritual mediator, guardian of customary rules, ecological steward, and transmitter of intergenerational cultural knowledge. However, increasing tourism and modernisation have generated tensions that risk shifting ritual meaning toward cultural commodification, while diminishing the spiritual significance perceived by younger generations and visitors. Despite these challenges, the *Mangku* continues to serve as a resilient custodian of intangible heritage, preserving cultural values within a rapidly changing tourism landscape. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of spiritual leadership within geotourism contexts and highlights the importance of integrating local belief systems into sustainable tourism planning.

Keywords: Mangku, Leadership, Local Belief, Rural Destination, Trekking Rural, Rinjani

Introduction

The Geopark of Mount Rinjani¹, located on Lombok Island², Indonesia, is not only a renowned natural tourism destination but also constitutes the spiritual centre of local belief systems (Siburian et al., 2024). As the second-highest mountain in Indonesia, Rinjani attracts climbers from around the world due to its breathtaking natural landscape and challenging trekking routes (Gordon, 2018; Torabi Farsani et al., 2012). Yet, beyond its global appeal as a tourist destination, the mountain holds profound significance in the spiritual life of the

¹ **Mount Rinjani** is an active volcano located on Lombok Island, West Nusa Tenggara, and is the second-highest mountain in Indonesia. The area has been recognized as part of the Rinjani Lombok Geopark, which is listed as a UNESCO Global Geopark due to its outstanding geological, ecological, and cultural significance. Beyond its natural attractions, Mt. Rinjani holds profound spiritual meaning for the indigenous Sasak community, who believe it is the dwelling place of ancestral spirits. Combining ecological value, spiritual significance, and tourism potential, Mt. Rinjani has become one of Indonesia's most important natural and cultural destinations.

² **Lombok Island** is located in the province of West Nusa Tenggara and is one of Indonesia's leading tourist destinations, renowned for its white-sand beaches, traditional culture, and the scenic beauty of Mount Rinjani. Lombok is also famously known as the "Island of a Thousand Mosques" due to the significant number of mosques found in almost every village, reflecting a strong religious identity, particularly among the Muslim Sasak community. In addition, the island possesses rich cultural traditions such as weaving, gendang beleq performances, and various customary ceremonies that continue to be preserved across generations.

surrounding Sasak communities (Sánchez-Cortez et al., 2024; Slater, 2011). They believe that Mount Rinjani is a sacred dwelling place for ancestral spirits, and several ritual practices are performed to express reverence for them. Within these ritual processes, a spiritual figure known as the *Mangku*³ plays a central role in leading and safeguarding the integrity of ceremonial practices (Munajat et al., 2022; State University of Malang, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Geography, Malang, Indonesia et al., 2024).

The *Mangku* serves as a spiritual leader responsible for guiding customary procedures, including those associated with the Rinjani ascent (Kawashima, 2016; Prozano, 2022). Their role extends beyond the climbing rituals and encompasses multiple aspects of the Sasak spiritual system. In the context of climbing, the *Mangku* ensures that each ritual is conducted in accordance with tradition, maintaining the sacred relationship between human beings, nature, and ancestral spirits (Department of Geography, Universitas Negeri Malang, Malang, Indonesia et al., 2024). The presence of the *Mangku* is fundamental in sustaining spiritual balance throughout the ascent, which is often perceived not merely as a physical activity but as a spiritual journey that connects humans, nature, and the supernatural realm (Pescatore et al., 2019).

However, with the increase in tourism activities on Mount Rinjani, there is growing concern that the spiritual meaning embedded in climbing rituals has begun to erode under the pressures of modernisation (Debarbieux, 2014; Molokáč et al., 2023). Tourists who visit Mount Rinjani tend to focus on recreational and scenic experiences without engaging deeply with the spiritual processes that have historically constituted an essential component of the ascent (Lu et al., 2017; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). This phenomenon raises critical issues concerning the role of the *Mangku* in safeguarding traditional rituals. On one hand, the *Mangku* continues to carry out spiritual duties; on the other, the modern tourism economy has reduced appreciation for the spiritual dimensions inherent in these ceremonies (Aquino et al., 2018; Różycki & Dryglas, 2017).

This issue becomes more complex as younger generations in the local community shift their perceptions of ancestral rituals. Tourism pressures have led many young people to prioritise economic opportunities over traditional values passed down by their ancestors (Arnold & Shultz, 2025). Rituals once performed with solemn reverence are now often seen as cultural attractions staged for tourists. Consequently, the ceremonial role of the *Mangku* has become increasingly marginalised, and the spiritual significance of the rituals has gradually diminished (Jacquemoud, 2023).

Although studies on Mount Rinjani as a tourism destination are growing, particularly in ecotourism and environmental conservation, research specifically examining the role of the *Mangku* in climbing rituals remains limited. Most existing scholarship focuses on economic or ecological aspects of tourism, thereby neglecting the profound spiritual dimensions of climbing traditions (Hose, 2016). Such knowledge gaps result in a limited understanding of how local traditions—especially the role of the *Mangku* can be preserved amid rapid tourism modernisation. In fact, more profound insights into these spiritual traditions are crucial for balancing heritage conservation with contemporary tourism development (Milne & Ateljevic, 2001).

This study seeks to fill this knowledge gap by focusing on the role of the *Mangku* in climbing rituals and ceremonial processes on Mount Rinjani from the perspective of local belief systems.

³ **Mangku** is a spiritual leader within Sasak tradition who is responsible for guiding ritual processions, safeguarding customary rules, and serving as an intermediary between humans, nature, and ancestral spirits. This figure holds religious authority in various customary ceremonies, including those associated with climbing rituals on Mount Rinjani.

The *Mangku* is examined not only as a spiritual leader but also as a cultural custodian, responsible for maintaining traditional values that govern relationships among humans, nature, and spirituality (Farmaki et al., 2020). The study explores how the *Mangku* performs these responsibilities and how local belief systems shape the ceremonial trajectories associated with the ascent of Mount Rinjani.

Furthermore, this research investigates how tourism modernisation affects the execution and meaning of these ritual practices. Questions concerning the adaptive strategies employed by the *Mangku*, and the extent to which traditional values remain relevant within contemporary tourism contexts, are central to this inquiry. Understanding the role of the *Mangku* in relation to ritual practice and belief systems is expected to offer significant insights for preserving spiritual traditions that have long been integral to Sasak cultural life.

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, to analyse the role of the *Mangku* in the rituals associated with climbing Mount Rinjani. Second, to explore the spiritual values embedded in these rituals and how they are maintained within the local community. In doing so, this study aims to offer new insights concerning the importance of the *Mangku* and local belief systems in maintaining equilibrium between tradition and tourism development in the Rinjani region.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of the *Mangku* in the ritual processes of trekking Mt. Rinjani, viewed through the lens of local Sasak belief systems. This approach was selected because it enables the researcher to explore symbolic meanings, embodied experiences, and spiritual relationships that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. Through this design, the study seeks to interpret the spiritual dimensions of pilgrimage-like climbing practices and the relational dynamics between humans, nature, and ancestral spirits as understood by the local community.

Sampling was purposive, selecting actors directly involved in the ritual practices associated with Rinjani climbing. The key informants included *Mangku*, traditional leaders, local guides, community members, and climbers who had participated in ritual procedures. Snowball sampling was also used to identify additional informants with substantial customary authority and cultural knowledge. This strategy enabled the researcher to access diverse insights regarding the spiritual functions of the *Mangku*, the transformation of customary practices, and the community's perspectives on tourism development in the Rinjani area.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, including customary archives, ritual records, and local cultural sources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture informants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of climbing rituals. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved coding, categorising, and interpreting meanings in light of theoretical frameworks on spirituality, local knowledge, and cultural tourism. The validity of the findings was strengthened through source and method triangulation, ensuring that the interpretation reflects cultural experiences in a comprehensive and context-sensitive manner.

Findings

1. The Role of the *Mangku* in Ritual Processes and Climbing Ceremonies on Mount Rinjani

The *Mangku* constitutes a central figure in the spiritual life of communities surrounding Mount Rinjani, particularly in relation to ritual practices associated with climbing the mountain. The *Mangku* plays a crucial role as a spiritual leader, guiding customary rituals performed before, during, and after the ascent. Within local belief systems, Mt. Rinjani is regarded as a sacred site inhabited by ancestral spirits and deities; thus, climbing the mountain is not merely a physical endeavour but a spiritual journey imbued with religious significance.

The primary responsibility of the Mangku is to lead a series of rituals intended to request blessings and protection from supernatural forces believed to reside on Mount Rinjani. These rituals are commonly conducted before the climb, during which the Mangku offers specific prayers and ceremonial offerings to ancestral spirits and mountain deities. Such offerings may include food, flowers, and other symbolic items believed to appease the mountain's spiritual guardians. These practices are intended to protect climbers from misfortune and ensure their safety throughout the journey.

Beyond leading ritual offerings, the Mangku also acts as an intermediary between humans and the natural environment, maintaining the balance between society and its surrounding landscape. In Rinjani climbing traditions, the Mangku guides locally appropriate climbing behaviour. Climbers are expected to observe specific customary prohibitions, such as refraining from using harsh language, damaging the environment, or removing natural objects without permission. Violations of these rules are believed to provoke spiritual retribution; therefore, the Mangku also serves as the custodian of customary regulations that preserve harmony between humans, nature, and spiritual entities.

The Mangku's role does not end once the climb has begun. On various occasions throughout the ascent—especially at sacred sites—the Mangku may recite additional prayers or conduct supplementary rituals to ensure climbers' safety and spiritual well-being. This responsibility becomes even more significant at critical locations, such as Segara Anak, the caldera lake regarded as the holiest place within the Rinjani massif. At this site, the Mangku usually leads a culminating ritual aimed at spiritual purification and offering gratitude to the spiritual ruler of the mountain.

Upon completing the climb, the Mangku performs a concluding ceremony to express gratitude for the protection granted during the ascent. This closing ritual restores the spiritual connection between climbers and the mountain while re-establishing harmony that may have been disrupted during the climbing process.

Table 1: Role of Mangku

Roles	Main Function	Explanation
Spiritual Leader	Leading customary rituals and prayers	The Mangku serves as the principal spiritual figure who leads prayers and ritual offerings before, during, and after the climb as a form of respect to the spiritual guardians of Mount Rinjani.
Mediator between Humans, Nature, and Ancestral Spirits	Maintaining spiritual balance	The Mangku is believed to safeguard the harmonious relationships between climbers, nature, and the spiritual forces residing in Mount Rinjani.
Provider of Blessings and Protection	Requesting safety during the climb	The Mangku performs ceremonial offerings and prayers asking for safety and protection, ensuring climbers are spiritually guarded throughout the journey.
Guardian of Customary Rules	Enforcing traditional prohibitions and ethics	The Mangku reminds climbers of customary restrictions including refraining from speaking harshly, damaging nature, or taking anything from the mountain, as violation is believed to bring misfortune.
Performer of Rituals at Sacred Sites	Conducting ceremonies at specific points	When passing sacred spots such as Segara Anak, the Mangku conducts additional prayers and offerings to ensure climbers' safety and spiritual well-being.
Leader of Closing Rituals	Restoring spiritual harmony after the climb	After completing the climb, the Mangku leads the closing ceremony as an expression of gratitude and to restore balance between humans and the mountain.

Roles	Main Function	Explanation
Custodian of Spiritual and Cultural Heritage	Preserving traditional values and rituals	The Mangku safeguards spiritual values and Sasak customary traditions to ensure their continuity in the midst of tourism modernization.
Transmitter of Cultural Knowledge	Intergenerational transfer of customary beliefs	The Mangku serves as an educator who transfers spiritual knowledge and customary teachings to younger generations through continuous involvement in rituals.
Ecological Steward	Cultivating environmental awareness	Through customary rules, the Mangku instills responsibility for environmental protection as an integral part of the Sasak spiritual worldview.

The role of the *Mangku* in ritual processes associated with climbing Mount Rinjani is not solely spiritual, but also social and ecological in nature. The Mangku safeguards the balance between spiritual, cultural, and environmental dimensions within the context of the ascent. By upholding local belief systems and indigenous values, the Mangku contributes to environmental preservation in the Rinjani area while ensuring that climbing is perceived not only as a recreational activity, but also as a spiritually and culturally meaningful journey.

2. Spiritual Values within the Rituals of Climbing Mount Rinjani

One of the most fundamental spiritual values embedded in these rituals is reverence and submission to nature and supernatural powers. The Sasak community believes that ancestral spirits and protective deities inhabit Mount Rinjani; consequently, activities involving the mountain must begin with requesting permission through ritual offerings. In these rituals, the Mangku leads prayers and offerings, including food, flowers, and symbolic objects with spiritual significance. Such offerings function not only as acts of respect but also as requests for blessings and protection throughout the ascent.

Beyond expressions of reverence, the principles of balance and harmony constitute essential spiritual elements. In Sasak cosmology, humans must live in alignment with nature, maintaining equilibrium between human needs and environmental sustainability. Thus, climbing Mount Rinjani is understood not only as a physical act, but as one that engages the forces of nature. Accordingly, the Mangku continually reminds climbers to observe customary rules—such as refraining from using offensive language, removing natural objects, or damaging the environment. Violations are believed to provoke spiritual disturbances or misfortune.

Collective spirituality represents another foundational component of these rituals. Climbing ceremonies are not merely personal experiences but also involve collective participation and social solidarity with the local community. Local residents frequently gather for the ritual ceremonies led by the Mangku, believing that these practices ensure not only the safety of individual climbers but also the collective well-being of the community around Mount Rinjani. These rituals, therefore, reinforce social cohesion while preserving spiritual traditions transmitted across generations.

Ecological awareness forms an integral dimension of these spiritual values. For the Sasak community, spiritual beliefs about Mount Rinjani include a responsibility to conserve nature. Throughout the ritual process, the Mangku implicitly communicates the obligation to safeguard the environment by reminding climbers to keep the mountain clean, avoid damaging vegetation, and protect local water sources. In this sense, ritual practice teaches environmental stewardship as an inseparable component of spiritual belief.

Local communities maintain the continuity of these values by consistently involving the Mangku and customary leaders in each climbing activity. Indigenous elders regularly transmit

ritual knowledge to younger generations, thereby ensuring the continuation of ancestral traditions despite increasing modernisation. In parallel, regional authorities and tourism administrators have begun integrating customary ethics into climbing regulations. This policy ensures that climbers comply with cultural rules and helps balance modern tourism with spiritual tradition. Overall, the spiritual values embedded in Rinjani climbing rituals are practised through concrete actions that reflect reverence for nature, social harmony, and ecological consciousness, safeguarded by the Mangku as a key spiritual custodian.

Table 2: Spiritual Values

Spiritual Values	Explanation Based on Local Belief and Ritual Practices
Respect for Nature and Ancestral Spirits	Rituals led by the <i>Mangku</i> begin by asking permission from ancestral spirits and mountain deities through offerings. This reflects a collective attitude of respect toward sacred natural entities believed to inhabit Mount Rinjani.
Harmony between Humans and Nature	Rituals emphasize maintaining balance between humans and the environment. Climbers are reminded to behave responsibly, avoid damaging vegetation, and refrain from violating customary taboos.
Collective Spirituality and Social Unity	Rituals are not only individual practices but involve community participation. The presence of local residents during ceremonies strengthens solidarity and shared spiritual consciousness.
Ecological Awareness and Environmental Ethics	Ritual messages include reminders to protect water sources, maintain cleanliness, and avoid disturbing ecosystems. Rituals thus function as ecological education embedded within spirituality.
Ritual Protection and Divine Guidance	Offerings and prayers aim to seek safety and protection from supernatural forces during climbing, acknowledging dependence on divine guidance throughout the journey.
Cultural Continuity and Transmission of Beliefs	Rituals serve as a medium for intergenerational transmission of spiritual knowledge, where <i>Mangku</i> and elders teach younger generations about values and customary obligations.

Discussion

This study finds that the role of the Mangku is central in sustaining spiritual balance between humans, nature, and the supernatural forces believed to reside within Mount Rinjani (Niangwujia & Havnevik, 2023). The Mangku is responsible for leading customary rituals, such as offerings and ceremonial prayers, to ensure climbers’ safety and maintain harmony with nature (Stara et al., 2025). Spiritual values such as reverence for nature, ecological awareness, and both social and spiritual harmony form the core of each ritual guided by the Mangku (Caetano & Ponciano, 2021; Carvalho et al., 2021). However, this study also reveals challenges linked to modernisation and tourism pressures, which have shifted ritual meanings, especially among tourists and younger generations, thereby weakening the authority of the Mangku (Sotomayor et al., 2019).

These findings align with earlier studies that emphasise the role of spiritual leaders in preserving local traditions at sacred natural sites (Caetano & Ponciano, 2021). Research in Bali and Java similarly demonstrates that spiritual leaders are crucial in mediating relations between

human communities, nature, and the spiritual realm. This similarity indicates that in many mountain regions in Indonesia, ritual leadership has ecological outcomes, since customary rules serve to protect natural landscapes (Gordon, 2018).

Nevertheless, this study also differs from research showing that modernisation may cause more severe cultural erosion (Dela Santa & Tiatco, 2019). In several international cases, tourism development has replaced customary leadership with formal tourism governance, reducing the spiritual meaning of ritual practices to market-oriented attractions (Shepherd, 2002; Hollinshead, 1998). In contrast, although tourism pressure remains, the role of the Mangku continues to be recognised and defended, especially by local communities. This demonstrates deliberate efforts to maintain balance between spiritual tradition and modern tourism despite persisting challenges.

However, the study presents several limitations. First, the research primarily focuses on local perspectives and does not extensively examine tourists' perceptions of ritual practices (Eyisi et al., 2021). Given the centrality of tourist experience in contemporary tourism, tourist attitudes may significantly affect the sustainability of ritual traditions (Somark, 2024). Second, the qualitative approach and limited number of informants restrict broader representativeness. Future research should involve a more diverse range of participants, including youth groups and tourism actors (Lee & Karimova, 2021). Research also needs to investigate long-term impacts of tourism on local customary transformation (Chen et al., 2021; Özgeriş & Karahan, 2021).

Addressing these limitations will provide a deeper understanding of the role of spiritual traditions in sustainable tourism planning and open pathways for integrating indigenous knowledge in tourism governance.

Future research on this topic carries significant implications for both academic inquiry and policy development. By examining how spiritual leadership such as that of the *Mangku* evolves alongside the increasing commodification of tourism, future studies may contribute to broader debates on heritage governance and community-based tourism management in Southeast Asia. In particular, comparative research across other sacred mountains or indigenous belief systems in Indonesia could deepen conceptual understanding regarding the resilience of spiritual traditions under modern pressures. Moreover, future empirical investigations that incorporate visitor perceptions and behavioural responses may inform more culturally sensitive tourism planning, ensuring that local belief systems remain integral in sustainable tourism frameworks. Ultimately, advancing research in this field can generate more robust strategies for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage while strengthening the artistic legitimacy of indigenous communities within contemporary tourism agendas.

Conclusion

This study aims to analyse the role of the *Mangku* in the processions and ritual practices associated with climbing Mount Rinjani and to explore the spiritual values embedded in these traditions from the perspective of Sasak local belief systems. The findings indicate that the *Mangku* plays a central role in maintaining the spiritual equilibrium between human beings, nature, and the supernatural forces believed to inhabit the mountain. The *Mangku's* responsibilities extend beyond leading ritual offerings and encompass safeguarding customary and spiritual values transmitted from generation to generation. Through ritual practices guided by the *Mangku*, values such as reverence for nature, social harmony, and ecological awareness are preserved.

In terms of spiritual values, the study revealed that the Sasak belief systems are deeply integrated into everyday life, particularly in the context of climbing Mount Rinjani. Rituals led by the *Mangku* demonstrate the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, emphasising the necessity of ecological balance in every climbing activity. Furthermore, the *Mangku* also serves as a custodian of customary regulations by reminding

climbers of specific prohibitions intended to protect the natural environment and ensure spiritual safety during the ascent.

However, the growing influence of tourism modernisation has led to shifting meanings and practices surrounding these rituals. The findings suggest that many climbers—especially tourists—do not fully comprehend the spiritual significance embedded in ritual processions. Without more intensive preservation efforts, such conditions may threaten the sustainability of the tradition and weaken the Mangku's role in the long term.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study predominantly focuses on the viewpoint of Sasak local beliefs and does not deeply examine the perspectives of tourists or external actors involved in climbing activities. A more inclusive inquiry involving a broader range of viewpoints—both from local communities and visitors—may provide a more comprehensive understanding. Second, the research relies primarily on direct observations and interviews with Mangku and customary leaders, which may not fully reflect the diversity of local perspectives concerning ritual climbing practices. Studies involving a larger and more diverse group of informants would help strengthen these findings.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed for future studies. First, further research should examine tourists' and tourism actors' perspectives on ritual climbing to understand how their perceptions may influence cultural sustainability. Second, future research needs to explore in greater depth the impact of tourism modernisation on the role of the Mangku and on associated spiritual values, particularly how these traditions can persist amid the expanding tourism sector. In addition, subsequent research should focus on concrete strategies for engaging younger generations in cultural preservation, for example, by examining the role of customary education in sustaining local spiritual traditions in the future.

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