

HOW PUPUHU ADAT AS GUARDIANS OF SPIRITUALITY AND INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP IN INDONESIA? A CASE STUDY FROM SUNDA WIWITAN COMMUNITY, KAMPUNG SUSURU CIAMIS REGENCY

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Abstract

This paper examines indigenous leadership within the Sunda Wiwitan community, focusing on Susuru Hamlet in Kertajaya Village, Ciamis Regency. Indigenous leadership plays a crucial role in ensuring the survival of indigenous groups in Indonesia, particularly within Sunda Wiwitan, where leadership is deeply embedded in cultural and spiritual traditions. In this community, the highest leader is the Pangeran (Prince), a position currently held by Prince Gumirat Barna Alam. As the traditional leader, the Pangeran's authority extends across various Sunda Wiwitan communities in West Java. The Pangeran is also recognized as the Pupuhu Adat, a title attributed to the community's spiritual and cultural leader. The role of the Pupuhu Adat includes guiding collective decision-making, preserving cultural traditions, and providing spiritual leadership. Leadership is inherited hereditarily rather than determined through electoral processes, with consensus-based decision-making being highly valued. The Pupuhu Adat serves as the custodian of ancestral wisdom and traditions, ensuring the continuity and cohesion of the Sunda Wiwitan community.

Keyword:

Indigenous, leadership, Sunda Wiwitan, Pupuhu Adat, Indonesia

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1. Introduction

This Sunda Wiwitan is an indigenous community and an ancient belief system adhered to by the Sundanese people in West Java, Indonesia. One of its main centers is located in Cigugur, Kuningan Regency, where it is known as AKUR Sunda Wiwitan Cigugur. AKUR is an abbreviation of *Adat Karuhun Urang*, which means "the ancestral traditions of the people." The term *karuhun* refers to ancestors or ancestral spirits that are venerated within this traditional Sundanese belief system. These ancestral elements are deeply embedded in their cultural practices, rituals, and way of life. Sunda Wiwitan is recognized as a local belief system or indigenous religion in Indonesia, distinct from the six officially recognized religions. The term *wiwitan* literally means "origin," thus Sunda Wiwitan can be understood as the original or early Sundanese belief system

(Muttaqin, 2009). The word “Sunda” refers to one of the major ethnic groups in Indonesia, primarily residing in West Java and Banten Provinces (Novianti, 2022). The Sundanese constitute the second-largest ethnic group in Indonesia after the Javanese, within a population of approximately 280 million, reflecting the country’s multicultural and multiethnic composition (Aziz et al., 2020).

As an indigenous community, Sunda Wiwitan is often categorized as an indigenous religion. Its followers are sometimes referred to as *Karuhun Urang*, a term denoting adherence to ancestral traditions. These followers maintain a strong connection to ancestral teachings, which shape their cultural identity and everyday practices. Their beliefs and rituals have been transmitted across generations, reflecting a deep reverence for cultural heritage. However, there are no official statistics regarding the number of Sunda Wiwitan adherents, who are spread across several regions in West Java. Historically, this belief system was developed in Cigugur Village, Kuningan Regency, by Prince Madrais (Saringendyanti et al., 2018). Sunda Wiwitan was first introduced by Prince Madrais, also known as Sadewa Alibassa Koesoema Widjaja Ningrat. He was born in 1822 in Susukan Village, Ciawigebang, Kuningan Regency, and was a descendant of Prince Sutajaya and the Kasepuhan royal lineage (Hidayat, Siswono, & Januari, 2020a). His father, Pangeran Gebang IX (Alibassa Kusuma Wijaya Ningrat), was the ruler of the Gebang Sultanate in Cirebon. Prince Madrais studied in several *pesantren* but was more influenced by mystical teachings. He claimed to have received divine revelations, which led him to establish *Agama Djawa Sunda* (ADS), also known as Sunda Wiwitan (Waluyajati, 2017). This belief system represents a local faith that integrates elements of ancient Sundanese beliefs with aspects of Islamic teachings (Rostiyati et al., 2024). Prince Madrais founded a *pesantren* in Cigugur, which later became the center of his teachings. This site is now known as Paseban and remains the central location of Sunda Wiwitan. Since its establishment, leadership within the Sunda Wiwitan community in Cigugur has been held by four main figures: Prince Madrais (1832–1939) as the founder; Prince Tedja Buwana (1939–1987) as his successor; Prince Djatikusumah (1987–2025); and Prince Gumirat Barna Alam (2025–present), the current leader continuing this lineage.

This research aims to examine indigenous leadership within the Sunda Wiwitan community, particularly in Susuru Hamlet. It focuses on the structure of indigenous leadership and the roles played by leaders within the community. The significance of this topic lies in the crucial role of indigenous leadership in fostering self-determination and empowering indigenous communities. Indigenous leaders are instrumental in introducing new knowledge, challenging existing assumptions, proposing change, and mobilizing collective action. At the same time, they uphold cultural traditions and spiritual values. Indigenous leadership is essential for preserving cultural traditions, serving community needs, advocating for indigenous rights, and contributing unique perspectives to broader institutional contexts. In the Sunda Wiwitan tradition, leadership is hereditary and passed down through specific family lineages. Leaders play a central role in maintaining the belief system, customs, and way of life, ensuring adherence to ancestral teachings (*karuhun*) and sustaining cosmic balance and harmony. This leadership emphasizes the preservation of ancestral heritage (*Sasaka Buana*), harmony with nature, and adherence to customary rules (*pikukuh*). Leaders also provide spiritual guidance and make collective decisions for the community.

Previous studies on Sunda Wiwitan communities have mainly emphasized religious identity, ritual traditions, cosmology, and cultural communication, while the role of *Pupuhu Adat* as indigenous leaders has not been sufficiently examined within the context of contemporary social transformation (Venus, 2019; Alfian, 2024). Existing research generally focuses on

ceremonial practices such as *Seren Taun*, cultural preservation, and legal recognition of indigenous belief systems, but it rarely explores how traditional leadership responds to generational shifts, digitalization, and modernization pressures in rural indigenous communities (Umam et al., 2026; Sapatulloh et al., 2024). Furthermore, prior studies have concentrated on well-known Sunda Wiwitan communities in Cigugur and Baduy areas, leaving Kampung Susuru in Ciamis Regency underexplored as a distinct socio-cultural context. Consequently, there remains limited scholarly understanding of how Pupuhu Adat simultaneously function as spiritual guardians, cultural mediators, and adaptive indigenous leaders in contemporary Indonesia. This study offers novelty by positioning Pupuhu Adat not merely as ritual authorities, but as dynamic actors who negotiate spirituality, social legitimacy, cultural continuity, and digital-era challenges within the Sunda Wiwitan community of Kampung Susuru. The research also contributes a localized perspective on indigenous leadership transformation by integrating spirituality, intergenerational adaptation, and socio-cultural resilience into one analytical framework.

Leadership in the Sunda Wiwitan community is embodied in a figure commonly referred to as *Rama* by followers, who holds the title of Pupuhu Adat. This article examines the significance of the Pupuhu Adat in the leadership structure of the Sunda Wiwitan community, particularly in the Cigugur area. Pupuhu Adat serves as both a spiritual and cultural guardian and occupies the highest leadership position, currently held by Prince Gumirat Barna Alam. This position is determined through hereditary succession rather than formal electoral mechanisms. This model of indigenous leadership is rooted in lineage, mutual respect, and consensus-based decision-making. It emphasizes the preservation of ancestral traditions and the provision of spiritual guidance. The strength of this leadership lies in its deep connection to tradition and its community-oriented nature, enabling the continuity of cultural practices and a cohesive leadership system beyond formal political institutions. This study addresses three main questions: (1) How is the leadership structure of the Sunda Wiwitan community organized? (2) What is the position and role of the Pupuhu Adat within the community? (3) What is the role of *rengrengan* as part of the traditional leadership system in the indigenous community?

2. Method

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic approach to investigate indigenous leadership dynamics within the Sunda Wiwitan community. Ethnography was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of cultural meanings, social relations, and leadership practices from the perspective of community members themselves. In this research, the ethnographic position of the researcher was that of a participant-observer who engaged directly with the community to gain contextual understanding through prolonged interaction and immersion. This approach allowed the researcher to examine not only observable cultural practices but also the symbolic meanings and social values embedded in everyday life (Creswell, 2014; Kramer & Adams, 2017). Through sustained engagement, the researcher sought to minimize external interpretations and better understand indigenous leadership within its cultural setting. Fieldwork was conducted in several stages to support a longitudinal ethnographic strategy. The initial research was carried out over two months in April 2018 in Susuru Hamlet, Kertajaya Village, Panawangan Subdistrict, Ciamis Regency, West Java. Follow-up fieldwork was conducted in October 2021 to observe continuity and contextual changes within the community over time. Additional interviews were undertaken in June 2024 through telephone communication with key informants, namely Suhya Sukmana and Dayat Hidayat. These multiple phases of fieldwork enabled the researcher to cross-check information, maintain data consistency, and validate

emerging findings across different periods. The longitudinal design also strengthened the study by capturing social transformations and intergenerational transmission of Sunda Wiwitan teachings, particularly concerning the role and genealogy of Adiwijaya and his descendants.

Participants consisted of traditional leaders, community elders, and local residents who were selected using snowball sampling techniques. Informants were identified based on their cultural knowledge, social influence, and involvement in preserving Sunda Wiwitan traditions. Data collection involved in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and documentation review from books, village archives, official statistics, and relevant literature. Ethical considerations were carefully maintained through informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. To reduce potential researcher bias, data triangulation and repeated verification with key informants were conducted throughout the research process. Data were analyzed descriptively through systematic coding, categorization, and interpretation of field notes, matrices, and observational records to identify recurring themes and cultural patterns.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Exploring the History of Sunda Wiwitan in Susuru Hamlet

Susuru Hamlet is one of three hamlets in Kertajaya Village, Panawangan Sub-district, Ciamis Regency, West Java. Located about 5 kilometers from the sub-district center and 45 kilometers from the regency capital, the village lies at an altitude of 1,400 meters above sea level, with average rainfall reaching 150 mm and temperatures around 30°C. Kertajaya Village covers 557,876.4 hectares, most of which are utilized for smallholder plantations, while the remaining land supports rice fields, farms, offices, and other public facilities. Administratively, the village consists of Dayeuhlandeu, Cirukeum, and Susuru Hamlets. Susuru itself spans 263,361.8 hectares and has 898 residents. Agriculture remains the primary livelihood, supported by fertile hilly terrain and diverse community activities, including trade and cottage industries across the region.

Sunda Wiwitan in Susuru Hamlet is one of the Sunda Wiwitan communities located in West Java, with the village situated approximately 32.8 km from Cigugur, which is accessible by motorcycle in about one hour. Despite being administratively part of Ciamis Regency, Susuru Hamlet shares closer cultural ties with Kuningan Regency and borders Majalengka Regency. The structure of the Sunda Wiwitan community in Susuru Hamlet is divided into three areas under the leadership of the Sunda Wiwitan community in Cigugur. These areas include Susuru Hamlet with 46 followers, Cilimus Hamlet with 18 followers, and Cikupa Regency with 14 followers, totaling 78 followers. The followers in Susuru Hamlet maintain and preserve the teachings and beliefs of Sunda Wiwitan, with a dedicated place of worship called the *Bale Saresehan* or meeting place. The community in Susuru Hamlet exhibits strong inter-religious tolerance, living harmoniously with different faiths, and this tolerance is reflected in the existence of places of worship for various religions, including mosques, churches, and the *Bale Saresehan*. Although there is no precise historical data, the oral tradition of the community suggests that Sunda Wiwitan teachings were passed down through generations, originating from their ancestors.

The development of Sunda Wiwitan in Susuru Hamlet can be traced back to Sumarta, who was originally from Sadewata Village. In his search for religious, humanitarian, and supernatural knowledge, Sumarta visited several *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) in West Java. His journey led him to meet Prince Madrais at the *pesantren* in Cigugur, Kuningan regency (Hidayat, Siswono & Januari, 2020b). Following this encounter, Sumarta returned home with a new spiritual teaching, encapsulated in the "Pikukuh Tilu" or three main principles. These principles,

which became the core of Sunda Wiwitan belief, include: (1) *ngaji badan*, which emphasizes understanding the nature of all living things, (2) *ngaji rasa*, which focuses on deepening one's spiritual connection to the divine, and (3) *ngaji amal*, which involves translating spiritual understanding into righteous actions. These principles have become intrinsic to the identity of the Sunda Wiwitan community in Cigugur and beyond, highlighting respect for ancestors and the balance of nature.

In the 1860s, Sumarta continued his spiritual education at pesantren in Lumbung Village, part of Ciamis District. He further traveled to Panjalu Village, eventually returning to study at a pesantren in Cirebon, where he sought deeper understanding about key spiritual concepts such as *sawarga* (heaven), *naraka* (hell), and *ajian kamanusiaan* (humanity knowledge). These concepts reflect important ethical values in Sundanese and Hindu traditions, emphasizing the moral consequences of actions in the afterlife. After completing his studies, Sumarta found his spiritual teacher in Prince Madrais, who taught him the true meaning of humanity, or what is now known as Sunda Wiwitan. Sumarta and his close friend Adiwijaya returned to their respective regions, where they shared the knowledge they had gained, particularly in Susuru Hamlet, which was then known as Kertayasa Village. This teaching gained significant interest, not only in Susuru but also in nearby villages, leading many to seek spiritual education at the Madrais Pesantren in Cigugur.

During the 1880s, Prince Madrais spread the teachings of Sunda Wiwitan across several regions, including Susuru Hamlet, Cirebon, Dayeuh Landeuh, and Panjalu. As the movement grew, the Dutch colonial government perceived it as a political threat because Prince Madrais was considered a symbol of resistance against colonial rule. Consequently, Sunda Wiwitan became closely linked to nationalist ideas, creating tension between its followers and the colonial authorities. To weaken the movement, the Dutch applied a divide-and-conquer strategy by identifying the followers as Agama Djawa Sunda (ADS), a term first introduced in 1848 in Gebang, East Cirebon. ADS developed rapidly in Cigugur, Kuningan, which later became the main center for the spread of Sunda Wiwitan throughout West Java. However, the colonial government regarded the movement as oppositional, leading to increasing political pressure. In 1964, Prince Tedjabuana officially dissolved ADS due to the unstable political situation. As a result, many followers converted to Catholicism, including communities in Susuru Hamlet that also experienced discrimination and persecution. Following the death of Prince Madrais and the leadership transition to Prince Tatjabuana, Sunda Wiwitan was further suppressed during the political unrest surrounding the G30S/PKI tragedy in 1964. Nevertheless, by the 1980s, interest in the belief revived, prompting many former followers to return. Today, the people of Susuru Hamlet continue to preserve religious harmony, where different faiths coexist peacefully with mutual respect.

3.2 The Enduring Legacy of Sunda Wiwitan: Leadership, Tradition, and Cultural Survival

The Sunda Wiwitan community represents one of the indigenous groups that has managed to survive amidst an increasingly complex modern society. Sunda Wiwitan, according to Indrawardana (2014), refers to the origins of the Sundanese people, embodying their original belief system which predates the influence of Hinduism and Islam (Febriany & Hidayat, 2021). As a primordial faith, it continues to serve as a religious identity for the Sundanese, particularly with the strengthened recognition of religious rights following Indonesia's Reformation era. The community's history is deeply intertwined with the teachings of Prince Madrais Sadewa Alibasya Kusuma Wijayadiningrat, known as Prince Madrais, who introduced these beliefs to the region, especially from his base in Cigugur, Kuningan Regency. The influence of Sunda Wiwitan spread

across various parts of West Java, with Cigugur remaining a cultural and spiritual center for the community.

Prince Madrais' legacy as both a spiritual leader and an anti-colonial figure shaped the history of Sunda Wiwitan. His involvement in uprisings against Dutch colonial rule, such as the rebellion in Tambun Bekasi in 1869, led to his exile to Merauke, Papua. Despite his exile, Madrais continued to write extensively, producing over 200,000 pages of manuscripts documenting his life, social conditions under colonial rule, and the principles of his teachings. His return to Ternate in 1920 marked the revival of his leadership in spreading the Sunda Wiwitan teachings. The community's cultural rituals and spiritual practices, such as the Seren Taun Ceremony, continue to thrive in Cigugur, with the Paseban Tri Panca Tunggal building serving as a central hub for these activities (Adisaputri, Sudrajat & Widiastuti, 2022). This structure, which has been recognized as a national cultural heritage since 1974, remains a symbol of the enduring tradition of Sunda Wiwitan, and its annual events attract both locals and tourists, demonstrating the faith's vitality (Kurnia, 2014). The leadership of Sunda Wiwitan has been passed down through generations, with Prince Djatikusuma, a descendant of Prince Madrais, currently guiding the community. Following Madrais' death in 1939, his son, Prince Tedjabuana, continued the leadership, and after his passing, Prince Djatikusuma took over. He founded the *Paguyuban Adat Cara Karuhun Urang* (PACKU) in 1981, an organization dedicated to preserving the customs of the Sunda Wiwitan. Pangeran Djatikusumah passed away on Friday, May 16, 2025, at the age of 93. His leadership was succeeded by his son, Gumirat Barna Alam known as Rama Anom. He is being groomed to continue the leadership, ensuring the ongoing transmission of the tradition. As the successor to this long line of leaders, the influence of Sunda Wiwitan continues to endure in both spiritual and cultural spheres, ensuring its survival and relevance in the modern world (Sarip, 2017).

The lasting legacy of Sunda Wiwitan is kept alive not just through its spiritual practices and cultural ceremonies, but also through the leadership that has guided its community for many generations. From the leadership of Prince Madrais, who also fought against colonialism, to the current leaders, Prince Djatikusuma and his successor, Rama Anom, the values and traditions of Sunda Wiwitan have been passed down carefully, ensuring their survival and growth. The leadership is based on family heritage and respect within the community, blending tradition, religion, and resistance to outside influences. The creation of *Paguyuban Adat Cara Karuhun Urang* (PACKU) in 1981 helped further strengthen this continuity by offering a platform to preserve and spread the key values of Sunda Wiwitan. These efforts have helped the community maintain its identity while adapting to modern challenges, ensuring that the teachings of Sunda Wiwitan remain meaningful and influential for future generations.

3.3 The Authority of Pupuhu Adat in Sunda Wiwitan

The leadership of the Sunda Wiwitan indigenous community has evolved through several historical periods, each marked by influential figures who have shaped its traditions and beliefs. The first significant leader was Prince Madrais (1885-1939), who founded the Sunda Wiwitan in Cigugur in 1885 and introduced the teachings of Pikukuh Tilu. His influence was strongly shaped by Hindu and Islamic philosophies. Following his death, the leadership was passed on to Prince Tedjabuana (1939-1964), who faced numerous challenges, including Japanese occupation policies, opposition from orthodox Islamists, and conflicts with the Republic of Indonesia's government. Despite these struggles, the community thrived under his leadership, though they were forced to convert to Catholicism during the Suharto era (1964-1965). The current leader, Prince Djatikusumah (1981-2025), revived the Sunda Wiwitan faith and strategically presented

it as a cultural heritage, ensuring its acceptance by the broader society. His son, Rama Anom, is set to succeed him, continuing the legacy of leadership and unification in the Sunda Wiwitan community. The leadership title in Sunda Wiwitan is known as Pupuhu Adat, which refers to the highest leader or traditional head within the community. This position holds great significance in maintaining and preserving the ancestral values and traditions of the Sunda Wiwitan people. While the community's followers are scattered across several regions of West Java, the *Pupuhu Adat* in Cigugur remains the central authority. This leader plays an essential role in regulating and enforcing norms, guiding rituals, and acting as the supreme lawgiver for the community. The role of Pupuhu Adat is hereditary, passed down from father to son through a traditional process called 'nukur' or 'ngaraksa,' which signifies initiation and inauguration. Pupuhu Adat is tasked with ensuring the continuity of Sunda Wiwitan customs and the spiritual guidance of its people.

Pupuhu Adat holds substantial autonomy in regulating and overseeing the customs and traditions of Sunda Wiwitan. Their primary responsibilities include directing the implementation of these traditions, making decisions on customary norms, and safeguarding the cultural heritage of the community. Additionally, the Pupuhu Adat is responsible for protecting customary lands and cultural artifacts, transmitting cultural identity to younger generations, and providing testimony in legal matters related to customary land disputes. This leadership position is supported by various advisory structures, such as the *Girang Panimbang Adat*, a council of elders who offer guidance, and the *Girang Pangaping Adat*, a body responsible for representing the Pupuhu Adat in different regions. These structures ensure that the leadership is not only effective but also well-rooted in the community's values.

Under the leadership of the Pupuhu Adat, several other structures help maintain the social and cultural order within the community. These include the *Dewan Ais Pangampih Adat*, which consists of three councils: the Belief Council (*Panata Ajaran*), the Customary Law Council (*Panata Hukum Adat*), and the Governmental Council (*Panata Pamarentahan*). These councils are responsible for teaching, promoting customary values, managing cultural assets, and coordinating with external authorities. The leadership structure is further supported by the *Ais Pangampih* and *Paniten* positions. *Ais Pangampih* acts as the spokesperson and leader at the regional level, overseeing the daily governance and ensuring the community's traditions are upheld. Meanwhile, *Paniten* serves as an observer and supervisor, ensuring the community's welfare and making reports during traditional rituals. These figures are crucial in ensuring the preservation and continuity of Sunda Wiwitan customs across generations.

The community's leadership structure is deeply integrated with the territory, or "wareh," where the followers live and practice their traditions. The Sunda Wiwitan community is divided into 11 warehs, each with its own leadership under the guidance of *Girang Pangaping*. Every *wareh* has a designated *Ais Pangampih*, an assistant to the Pupuhu Adat, responsible for translating cultural values, providing information, and ensuring that the local customs are followed. Although the overall leadership structure is patriarchal, the participation of women, such as the daughters of the Pupuhu Adat, illustrates that leadership roles are also accessible to women. This system ensures that the community remains cohesive and that its traditions are preserved, even as the leadership passes from one generation to the next. The role of *Ais Pangampih*, alongside other community figures like *Sesepuh*, is vital in maintaining the continuity of the Sunda Wiwitan belief system while fostering strong ties among the various warehs. Authority within Pupuhu Adat in Sunda Wiwitan reflects a central role in both spiritual and cultural leadership, guiding practices, preserving traditions, and making key decisions based on consensus. Unlike elected leaders, Pupuhu Adat's authority is rooted in hereditary succession and the community's deep respect for tradition, ensuring the survival of Sunda Wiwitan's values

and identity. The author uses the term "authority" to highlight that Pupuhu Adat's power is not merely influential but a respected and recognized force within the community, shaping spiritual, cultural, and social life while maintaining continuity of its practices.

3.4 Leadership Transformation the Sunda Wiwitan Community

The Pupuhu Adat occupies a highly respected and essential role within the Sunda Wiwitan community, functioning not only as a customary authority but also as a spiritual leader, protector of tradition, and preserver of cultural continuity. Their leadership is grounded in ancestral teachings and inherited wisdom that sustain the community's spiritual and cultural foundations. As guardians of sacred values, the Pupuhu Adat ensures that customary rituals, ceremonies, and indigenous norms continue to follow traditions transmitted across generations. In addition to safeguarding cultural practices, they hold significant authority in communal decision-making, particularly regarding customary forests, indigenous territories, and collective social matters. Community decisions are generally guided by the direction and consideration of the Pupuhu Adat. Furthermore, they are regarded as intermediaries between the living community and ancestral spirits through their leadership in prayers and ritual ceremonies. Their responsibilities also include transmitting traditional knowledge and cultural values to younger generations to preserve the identity of Sunda Wiwitan. The authority of the Pupuhu Adat is supported by the *wareh* adat structure, consisting of Ais Pangampih, Girang Serat, Paniten, and Candoli, collectively known as *Rengrengan Nu Nyangga Pancen*. This Sundanese concept symbolizes individuals who firmly uphold principles, cultural values, and commitments with consistency, loyalty, and resilience against external influences.

Within the customary hierarchy of Sunda Wiwitan, the Pupuhu Adat holds the highest authority and serves both as the principal spiritual leader and advisor in religious and ritual affairs. In major traditional ceremonies involving Sunda Wiwitan communities from different regions, including customary marriage rituals, the Pupuhu Adat acts as a protector and coordinator for the broader indigenous community. In Cigugur, this leadership is supported by Ais Pangampih who are assigned across several *wareh* communities. Their responsibilities include coordinating and supervising Girang Serat, Paniten, and Candoli within their respective territories. Communication between local customary structures and the Pupuhu Adat is maintained consistently through reports concerning social and communal developments among followers. Monthly meetings are regularly organized during the first week of each month at Paseban Cigugur and attended by Ais Pangampih together with representatives from every *wareh*. These gatherings discuss various matters, such as illnesses, disasters, deaths, and visits from students or researchers. The term "wareh" refers to a regional community of Sunda Wiwitan followers acknowledged by the Pupuhu Adat as an essential cultural and spiritual unit. Beyond administrative purposes, these meetings reinforce solidarity, kinship, and cultural cohesion. Although WhatsApp Groups now facilitate communication, direct meetings remain important because face-to-face interaction is considered vital for preserving communal relationships and maintaining unity among Sunda Wiwitan leaders and followers.

The evolution of leadership within the Sunda Wiwitan community reflects a significant transition from the hereditary authority of the Pupuhu Adat to the more organized Rengrengan system. This shift indicates broader transformations in governance, social organization, and community management while continuing to uphold essential indigenous values and spiritual traditions. Although the Pupuhu Adat still retains strong cultural and spiritual influence, the Rengrengan model provides a clearer and more systematic structure for collective leadership and decision-making. The historical roots of this development in Susuru Hamlet began with

Sumarta, originally from Sadewata, Ciamis, whose spiritual journey eventually led him to study under Madrais in Cigugur and spread Sunda Wiwitan teachings in Susuru Hamlet (Komarudin, 2017).

During their studies in Cigugur, Sumarta and Adiwijaya from Cinyasag village pursued spiritual enlightenment under the guidance of Madrais. They learned teachings that combined spirituality, humanitarian values, and indigenous cultural traditions. The pesantren emphasized cooperation, mutual respect, and cultural preservation, which strongly shaped their worldview and motivated them to spread Sunda Wiwitan teachings within their respective communities. After completing his studies, Sumarta returned to Susuru Hamlet, married Nawati, raised eight children, and founded Bale Sarasehan in his home as a center for worship and communal activities. His leadership established him as the pioneer of Sunda Wiwitan development in the region. Meanwhile, Adiwijaya settled in Cilimus Hamlet and continued disseminating the same teachings, contributing to interfaith harmony and social cohesion (Komarudin, 2017). Following Sumarta's death, leadership passed to Karta Permana, who preserved Sunda Wiwitan traditions during colonial domination and increasing pressure from foreign religions. Despite forced conversions and external challenges, he successfully defended the community's spiritual identity (Komarudin, 2017). Leadership later continued through Darmini and Juhri. After returning to Sunda Wiwitan in 1981, Juhri revitalized indigenous spirituality and strengthened cultural commitment. This long struggle culminated in official state recognition of Sunda Wiwitan in 2017.

3.5 Hereditary Authority, Indigenous Governance, and Modernity

The leadership structure of the Sunda Wiwitan community demonstrates a complex relationship between indigenous traditions, state intervention, and modernity. Although the hereditary leadership of the Pupuhu Adat has been portrayed as an important mechanism for preserving cultural continuity and spiritual authority, such a model also raises critical questions concerning the exclusivity of power, democratic participation, and social accountability within indigenous governance systems. The manuscript explains that leadership is transferred through genealogical inheritance from one generation to another, particularly within the lineage of Prince Madrais and his descendants. While this succession system strengthens cultural legitimacy and reinforces ancestral continuity, it simultaneously concentrates authority within a limited familial structure that may marginalize alternative voices inside the community. The hereditary nature of indigenous leadership in Sunda Wiwitan reflects a broader pattern found in many traditional societies where authority is legitimized through sacred ancestry and spiritual charisma rather than institutional accountability. In this context, the Pupuhu Adat functions not only as a cultural guardian but also as a symbolic bridge between ancestors, spirituality, and social order. However, the concentration of leadership within a single lineage risks creating an exclusive political structure in which legitimacy is determined primarily by blood relations rather than collective competence or participatory consensus. Such a system may unintentionally limit opportunities for broader community representation, especially for women, younger generations, or dissenting members who possess cultural knowledge but lack genealogical status. As McCall (2020) argues, indigenous leadership is ideally rooted in collective responsibility and relational accountability rather than centralized authority. Therefore, emphasizing hereditary succession without critically examining its power implications oversimplifies the realities of indigenous governance in contemporary society.

Moreover, the interaction between the Sunda Wiwitan community and the Indonesian state further complicates this leadership structure. Historically, the state has oscillated between

marginalization and recognition of indigenous belief systems. During the New Order era, Sunda Wiwitan followers experienced discrimination and pressure to convert to officially recognized religions, illustrating how state modernity often positioned indigenous spirituality as incompatible with national religious policy (Mutaqin, 2014). In response to such political exclusion, hereditary leadership became a strategy of cultural survival, allowing the community to preserve continuity amid external pressures. Nevertheless, the institutionalization of hereditary authority may also reproduce rigid internal hierarchies that mirror the centralized forms of power historically imposed by the state itself. Modernity also introduces new challenges to indigenous leadership through education, digital communication, migration, and democratization. The manuscript notes that the Sunda Wiwitan community has adopted communication technologies such as WhatsApp groups while maintaining traditional meetings and ritual structures. This demonstrates that indigenous traditions are not static but adaptive. However, adaptation to modernity requires more than technological adjustment; it also demands critical reflection on governance practices and inclusivity. Younger generations exposed to democratic values and human rights discourse may increasingly question whether leadership based solely on heredity remains compatible with contemporary expectations of equality and participation. In this regard, modernity creates a tension between preserving sacred traditions and encouraging institutional openness.

Furthermore, the romanticization of indigenous leadership as inherently harmonious can obscure internal inequalities and power negotiations. Indigenous communities are often portrayed as unified cultural entities, yet leadership structures may contain contestations over legitimacy, authority, and access to resources. The authority of the Pupuhu Adat over customary lands, rituals, and social decision-making grants significant influence over both symbolic and material dimensions of community life. Without mechanisms of accountability or transparent deliberation, hereditary leadership may reinforce elite dominance under the guise of cultural preservation. Critical indigenous scholarship emphasizes that protecting tradition should not prevent communities from evaluating whether certain customs reproduce exclusion or silence marginalized perspectives (Corntassel, 2012).

At the same time, dismissing hereditary leadership entirely would ignore its important role in maintaining indigenous identity amid centuries of colonialism, state intervention, and religious homogenization. The endurance of Sunda Wiwitan illustrates how cultural resilience often depends on strong symbolic leadership capable of unifying communities across generations. Therefore, the challenge is not simply to replace hereditary authority with modern democratic systems, but to create more reflexive forms of indigenous governance that balance ancestral legitimacy with broader participation and accountability. Such an approach would allow indigenous traditions to remain dynamic and socially relevant rather than becoming rigid structures resistant to internal critique. Ultimately, the relationship between indigenous traditions, the state, and modernity within the Sunda Wiwitan community reveals an ongoing negotiation between cultural continuity and political transformation. While hereditary leadership has contributed significantly to the preservation of Sunda Wiwitan identity, a critical analysis must also acknowledge its potential exclusivity and concentration of power. Indigenous governance should therefore be understood not as a timeless or flawless system, but as a living institution continuously shaped by historical struggles, social change, and evolving community aspirations.

3.6 Pupuhu Adat and Everyday Power Practices

The leadership of the Pupuhu Adat within the Sunda Wiwitan community of Kampung Susuru, Ciamis, reflects a complex indigenous governance system that integrates spiritual authority, customary law, and social regulation into everyday communal life. While the Pupuhu Adat is often described as a guardian of ancestral traditions and cultural continuity, a deeper analysis demonstrates that leadership practices are also shaped by negotiations of power, symbolic authority, and internal social dynamics. Beyond serving as a spiritual leader, the Pupuhu Adat holds significant influence over ritual obligations, customary regulations, and collective decision-making processes. This legitimacy is reinforced through hereditary succession and ancestral lineage associated with the teachings of Prince Madrais, the founder of Sunda Wiwitan in Cigugur. In daily practice, authority within Kampung Susuru operates through interconnected formal and informal structures, including Ais Pangampih, Paniten, Girang Pangaping, and Candoli, which supervise social relations and ritual participation. These mechanisms promote social harmony, obedience, and respect for ancestral values, while simultaneously functioning as systems of surveillance and social discipline. Although hereditary leadership preserves cultural continuity and spiritual legitimacy, it may also limit broader participation, particularly among younger generations and women. Furthermore, the community's historical experiences of political pressure, religious conversion, and later cultural return reveal that social harmony within Kampung Susuru is continuously negotiated through adaptation, identity struggles, and collective resilience.

Modernization has further transformed indigenous leadership practices. The use of digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp groups among customary leaders reflects an adaptive strategy to maintain coordination and solidarity across wateh communities. Nevertheless, modernization also introduces new expectations regarding transparency, participation, and democratic accountability. Younger generations exposed to formal education and digital discourse increasingly question whether authority based solely on hereditary lineage remains relevant within contemporary society. These developments create subtle tensions between preserving sacred traditions and responding to modern ideas of equality and representation. Interview findings strengthen this critical perspective on indigenous leadership. Dayat Hidayat, one of the indigenous leaders in Kampung Susuru, emphasized the importance of preserving ancestral teachings while acknowledging the challenges of maintaining unity in changing social conditions: "The duty of the Pupuhu Adat is not only to lead ceremonies but also to protect the community from losing its ancestral identity. However, today we face many challenges because younger people have different ways of thinking. Some want traditions to remain strict, while others ask for more openness in decision-making. We try to maintain balance because if authority becomes too rigid, people may feel distant from the adat itself. Yet, if traditions are abandoned completely, the community may lose its spiritual foundation and collective identity." (Dayat Hidayat, personal communication, June 2024). Similarly, Suhya Sukmana explained that leadership within Sunda Wiwitan involves continuous negotiation between tradition, community expectations, and external pressures: "Customary leadership in Kampung Susuru cannot rely only on ancestral inheritance. A leader must also gain trust from the people through daily actions and responsibility. Sometimes there are differences of opinion between elders and younger members regarding rituals, technology, and relations with outsiders. We discuss these matters carefully because maintaining harmony is very important. The community respects the Pupuhu Adat, but leadership also requires listening to criticism and adapting to social changes without losing the values inherited from our ancestors." (Suhya Sukmana, personal communication, June 2024).

These statements demonstrate that indigenous leadership within Sunda Wiwitan is dynamic rather than static. The authority of the Pupuhu Adat depends not only on sacred lineage but also on the ability to negotiate social change, maintain legitimacy, and manage internal tensions. Therefore, the Sunda Wiwitan community of Kampung Susuru should not be romanticized as a completely harmonious indigenous society. Instead, it represents a living cultural institution continuously shaped by struggles over authority, identity, and adaptation in contemporary Indonesia.

3.7 Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the leadership of Pupuhu Adat within the Sunda Wiwitan community should not be viewed solely as a harmonious instrument of cultural preservation, but rather as a complex indigenous governance system shaped by spirituality, historical resistance, social negotiation, and power dynamics. Earlier studies often characterize indigenous leadership as collective, egalitarian, and community-centered (McCall, 2020). However, evidence from Susuru Hamlet demonstrates that the authority of Pupuhu Adat functions not only to strengthen cultural cohesion, but also to exercise symbolic control over legitimacy, spiritual interpretation, and social compliance within the community. The hereditary succession system practiced in Sunda Wiwitan represents a form of traditional legitimacy rooted in ancestral lineage and sacred authority. Leadership is transmitted through the descendants of Prince Madrais and sustained through the symbolic continuity of spiritual ancestry. This arrangement reinforces communal trust, as authority is regarded not merely as political leadership, but as a sacred mandate connected to ancestral teachings (*karuhun*). Nevertheless, the hereditary model also centralizes authority within a restricted genealogical circle. Although deliberation and consensus are formally emphasized, decision-making power remains concentrated among the Pupuhu Adat and senior customary elites. These conditions suggest that indigenous governance is not free from hierarchy and unequal power relations. As argued by Corntassel (2012), indigenous resurgence should avoid romanticizing traditional authority without critically examining internal power structures within indigenous communities.

Furthermore, the existence of the *rengrengan* structure illustrates how authority in Sunda Wiwitan operates through layered social mechanisms rather than through a purely charismatic leadership model. Positions such as *Ais Pangampih*, *Girang Pangaping*, *Paniten*, and *Candoli* function as intermediaries who translate spiritual authority into everyday governance practices. These actors maintain communication between local *wareh* communities and the central customary authority in Cigugur. However, this organizational structure also reveals the presence of surveillance and disciplinary mechanisms within the indigenous system. Routine reporting practices concerning followers' activities, social conditions, illnesses, and ritual participation demonstrate that customary leadership does not merely preserve tradition but also regulates community behavior through moral supervision. In this context, authority operates not only through spiritual reverence but also through social monitoring that reinforces conformity to customary norms.

The findings also suggest that tensions and contestations exist beneath the narrative of communal harmony often associated with indigenous societies. The historical experience of forced religious conversion during the New Order era created internal fractures within the Sunda Wiwitan community, particularly between members who converted to Catholicism and those who maintained indigenous beliefs. Although interreligious coexistence in Susuru Hamlet is currently presented as harmonious, the process of religious return experienced by several figures, including Juhri in the 1980s, indicates that identity negotiation remains an ongoing social

process rather than a fully resolved condition. This demonstrates that indigenous identity is continuously reconstructed through historical pressures, political marginalization, and social adaptation. Therefore, portraying Sunda Wiwitan leadership solely as a stable and harmonious cultural institution risks oversimplifying the lived realities of indigenous communities facing structural discrimination and internal transformation.

In addition, modernization has significantly influenced the transformation of indigenous leadership practices. The adoption of digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp groups by customary leaders illustrates the adaptive capacity of Sunda Wiwitan governance in responding to contemporary technological change. This finding supports Alfian's (2024) argument that indigenous belief systems are dynamic rather than static cultural remnants. Nevertheless, modernization also introduces new challenges to hereditary leadership structures. Younger generations who are increasingly exposed to formal education, democratic discourse, and digital networks may begin questioning authority systems based exclusively on lineage and sacred legitimacy. As a result, the Pupuhu Adat must continuously negotiate between maintaining ancestral traditions and responding to contemporary expectations regarding participation, inclusivity, and transparency. The role of Pupuhu Adat in environmental preservation and cultural sustainability also requires deeper analytical interpretation. The study indicates that Sunda Wiwitan teachings emphasize harmony between humans, nature, and spirituality through concepts such as *ngaji badan*, *ngaji rasa*, and *ngaji amal*. These principles encourage ecological awareness and moral responsibility toward the environment. However, the contribution of indigenous leadership to environmental sustainability should not be generalized romantically without examining concrete practices and institutional limitations. Environmental ethics within Sunda Wiwitan are primarily embedded in ritual obligations, agricultural traditions, and customary prohibitions concerning land use. Yet, the study found limited evidence regarding formal environmental governance mechanisms capable of addressing larger ecological challenges such as land commodification, industrial expansion, or state-driven development projects. Consequently, while indigenous spirituality contributes symbolically to ecological consciousness, its practical effectiveness in confronting structural environmental crises remains constrained by broader political and economic forces.

The contribution of the Pupuhu Adat to the global discourse on cultural preservation must be examined through a critical and multidimensional perspective. The survival of Sunda Wiwitan reflects a remarkable form of cultural resilience in the face of religious homogenization, modernization, and long-standing state marginalization. Traditional ceremonies such as Seren Taun serve not only as sacred spiritual rituals, but also as collective expressions of indigenous identity that strengthen communal memory, reinforce social cohesion, and preserve ancestral values across generations (Kurnia, 2014). Nevertheless, the growing public visibility of indigenous traditions through tourism, academic studies, and cultural heritage programs has also created new challenges. Indigenous spirituality may become commodified and transformed into cultural objects for external consumption, resulting in tensions between preservation and commercialization. In this context, the Pupuhu Adat embodies a dynamic indigenous governance system shaped by continuous negotiation among ancestral authority, state intervention, modern social change, and internal community relations. The leadership structure within Sunda Wiwitan therefore cannot be understood as entirely harmonious or oppressive, but rather as an adaptive institution responding to evolving historical and contemporary pressures. More broadly, the role of the Pupuhu Adat illustrates how indigenous communities maintain cultural continuity, protect customary authority, and negotiate sovereignty amid global socio-political transformations and homogenizing influences.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that indigenous leadership within the Sunda Wiwitan community is not merely an administrative structure, but a culturally embedded system of spiritual authority, customary governance, and social continuity. The Pupuhu Adat functions simultaneously as guardian of ancestral teachings, ritual leader, mediator of social relations, and protector of collective identity. The findings reveal that leadership legitimacy in the Sunda Wiwitan community is constructed through hereditary succession, cultural recognition, and adherence to ancestral values rather than through formal political mechanisms. This system enables the community to preserve spiritual traditions, customary law, and ecological harmony amid contemporary social change and increasing external pressures on indigenous belief systems. The study contributes theoretically to indigenous leadership scholarship by demonstrating how customary authority operates through interconnected spiritual, cultural, and communal dimensions. It also enriches ethnographic studies on indigenous religion in Indonesia by providing contextual insight into the lived experiences and organizational structure of Sunda Wiwitan communities in Cigugur. Furthermore, the article contributes to contemporary discussions on customary authority by illustrating how indigenous leadership remains adaptive and socially relevant despite modernization and state-centered governance structures.

Nevertheless, this research has several limitations. The study is geographically limited to the Sunda Wiwitan community in Cigugur and therefore cannot fully represent the diversity of indigenous leadership practices across other Sunda Wiwitan communities in West Java. Methodologically, the ethnographic approach relied primarily on interviews and participant observation within a limited period of fieldwork, which may not capture broader historical transformations or internal community variations. Future studies should undertake comparative research across indigenous communities, examine gender and generational dynamics in customary leadership, and explore how indigenous authority negotiates contemporary political, legal, and digital challenges in Indonesia.

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