



THE LEGITIMACY OF KELIAN ADAT IN ECOLOGICAL CONSERVATION IN SEMBIRAN VILLAGE, TEJAKULA DISTRICT, BULELENG REGENCY, BALI

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Abstract

This study examines the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* in ecological conservation within Sembiran Village Tejakula District, Buleleng Regency, Bali. The study is motivated by the institutional transformation of customary villages following the enactment of Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 on Customary Villages, which has generated a process of negotiation between the *ulu apad* governance system and the leadership of the Kelian Adat in environmental governance. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research draws on in-depth interviews with the Kubayan, Kelian Adat, customary leaders, and community members (*krama desa*), complemented by participant observation, an examination of customary law (*awig-awig*), customary documents, and relevant legal regulations. The data were analyzed interpretively by integrating Weber's theory of legitimacy and Bourdieu's theory of social practice. The findings reveal that the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* is not derived from administrative authority but from collective recognition reproduced through customary law (*awig-awig*), customary assemblies (*paruman*), and ritual practices embedded within the *lungguh Krama Neggak* system. This legitimacy provides the institutional foundation for managing sacred areas, customary forests, natural springs, land-use regulation, and the enforcement of customary prohibitions as mechanisms of ecological conservation. The study concludes that the ecological sustainability of the Bali Aga community depends on the enduring legitimacy of customary institutions, which enables local values to be negotiated with state regulations while preserving the social and symbolic authority of customary leadership.

Keywords: *Kelian Adat*; legitimacy; Bali Aga community; ecological conservation; *awig-awig*.

1. Introduction

Sembiran Village, located in Tejakula District, Buleleng Regency, Bali, is one of the oldest Bali Aga villages that has preserved its customary governance system, social organization, and religious traditions dating back to the pre-Majapahit period. The village has long attracted the attention of archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians due to the continuity of its cultural traditions, which are evidenced by Ancient Balinese inscriptions, the *ulu apad* governance system, its traditional settlement pattern, and a wide range of ritual practices that remain actively maintained today (Ardika, 2013; Lansing, 2006). Unlike most customary villages Bali, whose institutions have undergone gradual transformation, Sembiran continues to maintain a customary governance structure based on the *lungguh krama neggak* system, a leadership arrangement founded on seniority within the customary community and long-standing ritual service. This system not only regulates social relations among community members but also governs spatial management, sacred sites, agricultural land, and natural resources, thereby providing the institutional foundation for the village's ecological sustainability.

Within the Bali Aga community, the relationship between humans and the environment is embedded in a cosmological worldview that regards nature as a sacred entity whose balance must be preserved. Consequently, the management of living space is guided not merely by economic considerations but is legitimized through customary law (*awig-awig*), religious rituals, and inherited religious values transmitted across generations. From this perspective, ecology within customary communities extends beyond environmental conservation,



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representing instead a manifestation of the harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and the transcendental realm. Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that the effectiveness of traditional environmental governance in Bali largely depends on the presence of customary institutions possessing both social and religious legitimacy to enforce collective norms (Lansing, 2006; Warren, 2013; Roth & Sedana, 2015). Accordingly, ecological sustainability within the Bali Aga community cannot be separated from the effectiveness of customary leadership as the principal institution governing both social and ecological life.

This institutional landscape underwent significant transformation following the enactment of Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 on Customary Villages. While the regulation strengthened the legal recognition of customary villages, it also introduced a greater degree of institutional bureaucratization through the establishment of administrative leadership structures. In Sembiran, the implementation of this regulation resulted in the emergence of the *Kelian Adat*, who functions alongside the centuries-old *ulu apad* system. Field observations indicate that the coexistence of these two leadership domains has fundamentally reconfigured customary governance, particularly with respect to the distribution of authority between the *Kubayan*, as the traditional leader, and the *Kelian Adat*, as the administrative leader. This institutional reconfiguration has become a defining feature of the socio-religious dynamics experienced by the Sembiran community over the past decade.

The transformation has extended beyond organizational restructuring to influence the governance of the village's ecological landscape. Field findings reveal that the expanding administrative authority of the customary village officials have affected decision-making processes concerning spatial planning, ritual implementation, the management of sacred areas, and policies related to the village landscape. Simultaneously, changes have occurred in the function of the *Paduluan* within the *ulu apad* system, accompanied by increasing ritual bureaucratization and shifting relationships between the community and customary institutions. These developments demonstrate that the transformation of customary leadership has generated not only socio-religious changes but also significant implications for ecological conservation within Sembiran as a Bali Aga cultural landscape.

Field observations further indicate that these transformations intensified with the emergence of proposals to divide Sembiran village in 2019, which resurfaced in 2021. The proposal generated divergent views among customary members regarding the ideal institutional structure, the legitimacy of customary leadership, and the authority to govern customary territory. One customary leader explained that the establishment of the *Kelian Adat* was primarily a consequence of government policy, whereas the *ulu apad* system continued to be regarded as the fundamental pillar of customary life because of its inherited historical, religious, and social legitimacy. This perspective suggests that the legitimacy of customary leadership in Sembiran is constructed not solely through formal legal recognition but, more importantly, through the community's collective acknowledgment of authority rooted in tradition and ritual practice. These findings are consistent with previous dissertation research, which demonstrates that the institutional recognition of dual leadership domains has reinforced the role of the *Kelian Adat* as the administrative leader without diminishing the legitimacy of the *Kubayan* as the holder of traditional authority.

From the perspective of political sociology, legitimacy constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for the sustainability of any system of authority. Weber (1978) argues that traditional legitimacy derives from society's belief in customs and traditions transmitted across generations. Within the Bali Aga community, such legitimacy is manifested through the capacity of customary leaders to perform ritual obligations, enforce customary law (*awig-awig*), mediate conflicts, and maintain the balance between human beings, nature, and sacred forces. Consequently, the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* should not be understood merely as a product of state legal recognition but rather as the outcome of continuous negotiation between formal authority and the culturally embedded legitimacy that has long existed within the community.



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Previous studies on Sembiran have primarily focused on archaeology, Bali Aga history, the *ulu apad* system, socio-religious transformation, and changes in customary institutions (Ardika, 2013; Lansing, 2006; Subawa et al., 2018; Suadnyana, 2024). While these studies have made substantial contributions to understanding the dynamics of Bali Aga society, they have generally approached changes in customary leadership as issues of organizational transformation. Limited attention has been given to examining how the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* influences ecological conservation practices, particularly following the emergence of dual customary authority resulting from the implementation of Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019. Yet, the effectiveness of environmental governance within customary communities depends largely on the extent to which the community recognizes and accepts the authority responsible for enforcing customary norms.

Addressing this gap, the present study conceptualizes the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* as a form of social, symbolic, and religious capital that underpins ecological conservation in Sembiran. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasized institutional restructuring, this article examines how leadership legitimacy is produced, negotiated, and reproduced through everyday social practices, enabling customary environmental governance to endure despite increasing state intervention. By doing so, this study not only advances scholarship on the Bali Aga community but also offers a broader theoretical perspective on the relationship between customary leadership legitimacy, institutional transformation, and ecological sustainability within the context of customary villages in Bali.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on customary leadership in Bali has evolved from classical anthropological studies that conceptualize the customary village as a socio-religious institution whose functions extend far beyond those of a local administrative entity. The customary village serves as a locus for the reproduction of cultural values, the performance of religious rituals, the management of natural resources, and the regulation of social order within the community. From this perspective, customary leadership derives its legitimacy from the community's collective recognition of the leader's capacity to sustain the interconnected relationship between human beings, ancestors, and the natural environment. Geertz (1980) argues that authority in Balinese society is constructed through symbols, rituals, and cultural representations, while Lansing (2006) demonstrates that the effectiveness of Bali's traditional institutions depends largely on their ability to integrate ecological and religious dimensions into community governance.

Recent scholarship has further reconceptualized the legitimacy of customary leadership as a dynamic social construct rather than a fixed or inherited attribute. Studies of customary villages in Bali indicate that the legitimacy of customary leaders is continuously reproduced through their consistent enforcement of customary law (*awig-awig*), their ability to mediate communal conflicts, their leadership in ritual practices, and their capacity to maintain public trust in customary institutions. Accordingly, legitimacy is derived not only from tradition itself but also from the continual reproduction of social practices that receive collective recognition. This perspective extends Weber's (1978) concept of traditional legitimacy by emphasizing that customary authority is sustained through ongoing social validation rather than inherited tradition alone.

Within Balinese customary communities, the legitimacy of customary leadership is closely associated with the existence of customary law (*awig-awig*) as the normative framework governing both social relations and ecological stewardship. Numerous studies have shown that customary law (*awig-awig*) regulates not only communal life but also the protection of sacred sites, the management of customary forests, the utilization of water resources, spatial planning, and mechanisms for imposing sanctions on environmental violations. A study published in the *Journal of Bali Studies* on the conservation of the Bali Starling in the Nusa Penida Islands demonstrates that conservation outcomes are influenced not merely by government regulations but, more importantly, by the legitimacy of customary law (*awig-awig*) that commands broad community compliance.



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When customary norms possess strong social legitimacy, community adherence tends to be considerably higher than conservation initiatives that rely solely on formal state regulations (Sudaryanto et al., 2019).

Similar findings emerge from an ecolinguistic study of the customary law (*awig-awig*) of Tenganan Pegringsingan, which identified numerous lexical expressions referring to protected flora and fauna embedded within customary legal texts (Umiati, 2020). The study illustrates that customary norms function not merely as local legal instruments but also as vehicles for transmitting traditional ecological knowledge, thereby cultivating collective environmental awareness across generations. Consequently, ecological conservation within Bali Aga communities is sustained through the internalization of cultural values and linguistic practices that are legitimized and reinforced by customary institutions.

Studies on traditional ecological knowledge likewise demonstrate that Bali Aga communities possess sophisticated ecological knowledge systems grounded in the harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. These values are manifested in the management of customary forests, natural springs, agricultural land, and sacred landscapes that have been preserved across generations. The long-term sustainability of these environmental resources depends not only on the ecological knowledge held by community members but also on the capacity of customary institutions to reproduce these norms through ritual practices, cultural education, and mechanisms of social regulation. From this perspective, customary leadership constitutes the principal institutional actor in strengthening the socio-ecological resilience of Bali Aga communities (Qodim, 2023).

Unlike most customary villages in lowland Bali, Sembiran retains a distinctive institutional structure based on the *ulu apad* system, in which customary leadership is organized through the *lungguh krama neggak* system. Under this arrangement, leadership legitimacy is not acquired through administrative election but is gradually established through social recognition, genealogical succession, and sustained ritual service. However, the institutional landscape of Sembiran has undergone significant transformation following the enactment of Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 on Customary Villages, which was subsequently followed by the establishment of the *Kelian Adat* as the administrative representative of the customary village. Field research indicates that this institutional transformation has produced two coexisting domains of authority: the *Kubayan*, who embodies traditional legitimacy, and the *Kelian Adat*, who exercises administrative legitimacy. The coexistence of these leadership domains has generated continuous negotiation over authority in ritual governance, social organization, spatial planning, and environmental management (Suadnyana, 2025).

Previous studies on Sembiran have primarily examined Bali Aga history, the *ulu apad* system, socio-religious dynamics, ritual transformation, and institutional changes within traditional communities. Although these studies have provided valuable insights into how the Sembiran community has adapted to modernization and state regulation, they have not explicitly examined the relationship between changes in the legitimacy of customary leadership and ecological conservation practices. Yet, empirical evidence suggests that the redistribution of authority between the *Kubayan* and the *Kelian Adat* has influenced spatial planning policies, the management of sacred areas, the bureaucratization of ritual practices, and transformations of the village landscape, all of which bear directly upon ecological sustainability.

Drawing on this body of scholarship, it is evident that discussions of customary leadership in Bali have evolved from a primary concern with institutional structures toward broader issues of legitimacy, governance, and community-based environmental conservation. Nevertheless, the relationship between the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* and ecological conservation within Bali Aga communities, particularly following the implementation of Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019, remains insufficiently explored. This gap provides the central point of departure for the present study. This article argues that ecological conservation in Sembiran is determined not merely by the existence of customary law (*awig-awig*) by the state, but more fundamentally by the social, cultural, and religious legitimacy through which the *Kelian Adat* exercises authority. By conceptualizing legitimacy as a



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form of symbolic capital that is continuously produced and reproduced through everyday social practices, this study offers a new perspective on the interrelationship between customary leadership, institutional transformation, and ecological sustainability within Bali Aga communities.

3. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

3.1 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using an intrinsic case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* in ecological conservation within the Bali Aga community of Sembiran Village, Tejakula District, Buleleng Regency, Bali. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the legitimacy of customary leadership is a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by cultural meanings, social practices, and power relations that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement. The intrinsic case study design was selected because Sembiran represents a distinctive case as one of the oldest Bali Aga communities that continues to preserve the *ulu apad* governance system while simultaneously undergoing institutional transformation following the implementation of Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 on Customary Villages. These characteristics make Sembiran an appropriate case for examining how the legitimacy of customary leadership is negotiated and sustained amid institutional change and ecological conservation.

The study was conducted in Sembiran based on several academic considerations. The village continues to maintain the traditional *ulu apad* leadership structure, possesses customary law (*awig-awig*) that governs both social relations and ecological management, and has experienced an ongoing negotiation of authority between the Kubayan and the Kelian Adat following regulatory reforms affecting customary villages. These conditions provided a valuable context for examining the interrelationship between the legitimacy of customary leadership, community social practices, and environmental governance grounded in local wisdom.

Research participants were selected using purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling. These techniques enabled the selection of individuals possessing extensive knowledge of customary governance, ritual practices, and the management of village natural resources. The principal participants included the *Kelian Adat*, *Kubayan*, members of the *Paduluan*, the *Bendesa Adat*, Hindu religious leaders, community leaders, customary village administrators, and customary members who actively participated in ritual ceremonies, customary assemblies (*paruman*), and the management of customary territories. Participant recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, that is, when additional data no longer generated new categories or analytical insights.

Data were collected through four complementary techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, document analysis, and a review of relevant literature. Participant observation involved attending customary assemblies (*paruman*), customary ceremonies, the management of sacred sites, natural resource management activities, and everyday interactions between community members and the village's ecological landscape. This approach enabled the researcher to observe how the legitimacy of customary leadership is enacted through collective practices, symbolic actions, and ritual performances, dimensions that could not be fully captured through interviews alone.

In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations concerning the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat*, changes in the customary governance structure, the implementation of customary law (*awig-awig*), decision-making processes, and ecological conservation practices. All interviews were conducted with participants' informed consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim to facilitate systematic coding and data interpretation. Document analysis included the customary law (*awig-awig*) of Sembiran, *paruman* decisions, customary village archives, Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 on Customary Villages, the Decree of the Customary Village Council of Bali Province No. 116/SK-K/MDA-PBali/XI/2020, and other institutional documents concerning



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changes in the customary governance structure. These documents were examined to identify changes in customary norms, the distribution of authority, and regulations governing ecological spaces. Secondary data were also obtained from scholarly articles, books, research reports, and academic publications concerning Bali Aga communities, customary leadership, traditional ecological knowledge, and cultural ecology, which provided the conceptual basis for interpreting the empirical findings.

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through source triangulation, method triangulation, and time triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from the *Kelian Adat*, *Kubayan*, community leaders, and customary members.. Method triangulation was conducted by comparing evidence derived from interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, while time triangulation involved repeated data collection at different periods to verify the consistency of participants' responses. In addition, member checking was undertaken with several key participants to validate the researcher's interpretations of the empirical data, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analytical process began with open coding of interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials to identify preliminary themes related to leadership legitimacy, customary authority, customary law (*awig-awig*), and ecological conservation practices. These initial codes were subsequently refined through axial coding to establish conceptual relationships among categories and to explain how the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* is produced and reproduced in environmental governance. Finally, the findings were interpreted through the analytical lenses of Weber's theory of traditional legitimacy, theories of customary leadership, and the concept of traditional ecological knowledge, in order to explain how social, symbolic, and religious legitimacy is continuously reproduced through customary practices and contributes to the ecological sustainability of Sembiran.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives: Weber's theory of traditional legitimacy, Bourdieu's theory of social practice, and the concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Together, these frameworks provide an integrated analytical lens for examining how the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* is constructed, reproduced, and exercised in sustaining ecological conservation practices within the Sembiran community.

Weber's theory of traditional legitimacy (1978) serves as the primary framework for understanding that the authority of the *Kelian Adat* is derived not merely from administrative or legal recognition, but more fundamentally from the community's collective acceptance of customary values, ritual obligations, and traditions transmitted across generations. In the context of Sembiran, the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* is understood as a form of socially recognized authority that is continually reinforced through the implementation of customary law (*awig-awig*) leadership in ritual activities, the ability to mediate community interests, and a sustained commitment to maintaining the harmonious relationship between the community, customary institutions, and the natural environment.

To explain how this legitimacy is enacted and reproduced in everyday social life, this study draws upon Bourdieu's theory of social practice (1990). The concepts of *habitus*, *field*, and *symbolic capital* are employed to analyze how customary values are reproduced through collective practices, including paruman (customary assemblies), ritual performances, the enforcement of customary law (*awig-awig*), and the governance of customary territories. Within this framework, the *Kelian Adat* is conceptualized as an actor endowed with symbolic capital in the form of customary authority, ritual knowledge, and community trust, enabling the exercise of leadership through social recognition rather than formal coercive mechanisms.



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The concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge is employed to explain that ecological conservation is rooted in the cumulative body of local knowledge transmitted through customary institutions, collective experience, and the religious practices of the community (Berkes, 2018). This ecological knowledge is embedded in customary law (*awig-awig*), village spatial organization, the management of sacred sites, and various ritual practices that regulate the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. In this study, TEK provides the conceptual foundation for understanding that ecological conservation in Sembiran is not driven solely by environmental considerations but is also sustained through the social and religious legitimacy embedded within customary institutions.

The integration of these three theoretical perspectives enables this study to examine the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* across two interrelated dimensions. Weber's theory of legitimacy explains the source of customary leadership authority, while Bourdieu's theory of social practice elucidates the processes through which this legitimacy is produced and reproduced through collective social action. The concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge further demonstrates how such legitimacy contributes to the continuity of ecological conservation practices. Through this integrated framework, the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* is understood not merely as the basis of social acceptance of customary leadership, but also as a form of symbolic capital that sustains community-based environmental governance grounded in local wisdom within Sembiran.

4. Results and Discussion

Sembiran is one of the Bali Aga communities located in Tejakula District, Buleleng Regency, Bali, that continues to preserve the *ulu apad* customary governance system as the foundation of its social organization. Unlike most customary villages in Bali, which have adopted leadership structures in accordance with Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 on Customary Villages, Sembiran retains its traditional leadership arrangement based on the *lungguh krama neggak* system, in which leadership succession is determined by customary seniority and ritual service. The persistence of this governance system makes Sembiran an important empirical setting for examining the dynamics of customary leadership legitimacy amid the ongoing institutional transformation of customary villages in Bali.

The findings indicate that the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* is derived not merely from formal administrative recognition as the head of the customary village, but from a broader social process involving adherence to customary law (*awig-awig*), the ability to lead ritual activities, maintain social harmony among customary members, and regulate the community's relationship with the village's ecological landscape. In practice, this legitimacy is continuously negotiated alongside the *ulu apad* system, which has historically remained the principal source of symbolic authority within Bali Aga society. Consequently, the customary leadership structure in Sembiran illustrates an ongoing interaction between traditional legitimacy and formal administrative legitimacy, both of which shape the governance of the customary village.

Field observations and interviews further reveal that ecological conservation is not perceived by the community merely as an environmental management activity but as an integral component of customary and religious obligations. These obligations are enacted through the implementation of customary law (*awig-awig*), customary assemblies (*paruman*) the management of sacred sites, the protection of natural springs, and a wide range of rituals associated with the village's ecological landscape. Within this context, the *Kelian Adat* functions as a mediator who connects customary norms, community interests, and the implementation of formal government policies, thereby ensuring the continuity of ecological practices despite ongoing social and institutional transformation.

Drawing upon these findings, the discussion is organized around four interrelated themes: (1) the construction of the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* within the customary governance system of Sembiran; (2) the



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reproduction of legitimacy through social practices and the implementation of customary law (*awig-awig*); (3) the role of the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* in ecological conservation grounded in local ecological knowledge; and (4) the dynamics of customary leadership legitimacy in response to institutional transformation following the implementation of Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 on Customary Villages. These themes are examined through Weber's theory of traditional legitimacy, Bourdieu's theory of social practice, and the concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge to explain how the legitimacy of customary leadership contributes to ecological sustainability within the Bali Aga community of Sembiran.

4.1 The Legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* in the Transformation of the Customary Governance System in Sembiran

The institutional transformation of customary governance in Sembiran demonstrates that changes in organizational structure have not displaced the sources of legitimacy embedded within the *ulu apad* system. Prior to the implementation of Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 on Customary Villages, community governance was conducted entirely through the *ulu apad* system, with the *Kubayan* serving as the highest customary authority under the *lungguh krama neggak* succession system. Leadership within this system is neither acquired through elections nor administrative appointments but evolves through a gradual process of customary service determined by marriage sequence and ritual seniority (Reuter, 2005; Subawa et al., 2018).

Institutional change began when the Customary Village Council of Bali Province issued Decree No. 116/SK-K/MDA-PBali/XI/2020, formally recognizing two complementary leadership structures in Sembiran: the *Kubayan*, representing the *ulu apad* system, and the *Kelian Adat*, serving as the administrative leader of the customary village in accordance with Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019. Rather than replacing the traditional leadership structure, this institutional arrangement established a complementary distribution of authority. The *Kubayan* retained responsibility for ritual affairs, the implementation of *dresta*, and customary governance, while the *Kelian Adat* assumed responsibility for administrative affairs and institutional relations with government authorities.

Field findings indicate that community members do not perceive these two leadership structures as competing forms of authority but rather as an institutional adaptation to regulatory change. As one *Kubayan* explained:

"The *Kelian Adat* is now recognized as the head of the customary village under government regulations. However, all customary decisions concerning *dresta*, ritual ceremonies, and the social life of the customary members continue to be discussed collectively in the customary assemblies (*paruman*). No decision is made without respecting the *ulu apad* system." (Interview with the *Kubayan* of Sembiran, 15 May 2025).

This statement indicates that institutional transformation has not diminished the legitimacy of traditional leadership. Instead, legitimacy continues to be reproduced through the customary assemblies (*paruman*), which serves as the principal arena for collective deliberation and consensus-building within the community. A similar perspective was expressed by the *Kelian Adat*, who emphasized that his authority is understood not as a replacement for the *Kubayan*, but as an institutional adaptation to contemporary administrative requirements.

"We manage the administrative affairs of the customary village in accordance with government regulations, but every policy concerning customary matters and sacred areas is decided collectively with the *Kubayan* and the *ulu apad* leadership. Without such collective agreement, the community would not recognize the decision as customarily legitimate." (Interview with the *Kelian Adat* of Sembiran, 18 May 2025).



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These accounts demonstrate that the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* is derived not solely from formal legal recognition but also from the community's collective acceptance. From Weber's (1978) perspective, this reflects the predominance of traditional legitimacy, whereby authority is accepted because it is rooted in inherited customs, shared values, and long-standing social traditions. Accordingly, legal recognition alone is insufficient to establish the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat*; such authority must also be validated through the customary mechanisms that continue to regulate social life within the community.

The findings further suggest that traditional legitimacy is continually negotiated alongside the legal-rational legitimacy introduced through state policy. Although Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 provides the formal legal basis for the establishment of the *Kelian Adat*, its implementation in Sembiran has been carefully adapted to the *ulu apad* system, which has served as the foundation of community organization for centuries. Consequently, state regulation has not displaced the traditional governance structure but has instead accommodated local *dresta*, resulting in a hybrid model of customary leadership that combines administrative governance with enduring customary authority.

Interviews with community leaders reinforce this interpretation. One customary leader explained that the establishment of the *Kelian Adat* has strengthened institutional relations between the customary village and government agencies without diminishing the authority of the *Kubayan* as the custodian of ritual life.

"The community continues to respect the *Kubayan* as the customary leader, while the *Kelian Adat* manages administrative affairs and relations with the government. They have different responsibilities, but their roles complement one another."

(Interview with a community leader in Sembiran, 20 May 2025).

These findings differ from studies that portray state regulation of customary villages as a primary factor contributing to the erosion of traditional authority (Smith, 2007). The case of Sembiran demonstrates that the legitimacy of customary leadership has not shifted linearly from traditional authority toward legal-rational authority. Rather, legitimacy has been continuously renegotiated through institutional adaptation while preserving the symbolic authority of the *ulu apad* system. This interpretation is consistent with Reuter's (2005) observation that Bali Aga communities possess a remarkable capacity to adapt to institutional change without abandoning the foundational principles of their traditional social organization. Accordingly, the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* in Sembiran emerges from the interaction between formal state recognition and the social legitimacy derived from *dresta*, *awig-awig*, and the community's collective acceptance. This legitimacy not only underpins the effectiveness of customary leadership in governing social life but also constitutes the institutional foundation for ecological conservation practices within the Sembiran community.

4.2 The Reproduction of Legitimacy through *Awig-awig*, Rituals, and *Paruman*

The findings demonstrate that the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* in Sembiran extends beyond formal recognition as the administrative leader of the *customary village*. Rather, it is continuously reproduced through recurring social practices embedded in the everyday life of the community. This process of legitimacy reproduction operates through three interrelated mechanisms: the enforcement of customary law (*awig-awig*), the performance of customary rituals, and the deliberative processes conducted through customary assemblies (*paruman*). Together, these practices constitute the social arena in which the authority of the *Kelian Adat* is both reaffirmed through collective recognition and continually evaluated by the customary community.



Figure 1. *Paruman* Activities in Sembiran Village

Source: Lestawi's Documentation (2025).

Awig-awig serves as the normative framework governing social relations among customary members, village spatial governance, the utilization of natural resources, and the protection of areas considered religiously significant. In practice, customary law (*awig-awig*) is understood not merely as a written legal code but as a moral framework whose legitimacy derives from its intergenerational transmission and its continual enactment in everyday life. This is evident in decision-making concerning the use of customary land, changes in land use, and the designation of sacred spatial boundaries, where customary provisions are consistently prioritized before administrative considerations are taken into account. As explained by the *Kelian Adat* of Sembiran:

"Issues concerning customary land, development projects, or the use of village areas cannot be decided unilaterally. We always refer to the customary law (*awig-awig*) first, and then discuss the matter in the customary assemblies (*paruman*). If a proposal contradicts customary law (*awig-awig*), we will not implement it, even if it is administratively permissible." (Interview with the *Kelian Adat* of Sembiran, 18 May 2025).

This statement demonstrates that leadership legitimacy is not derived from personal authority but from adherence to a normative system collectively recognized by the community. From Bourdieu's (1990) perspective, such practices represent the reproduction of *habitus*—collective dispositions that guide social action without requiring explicit codification. In this sense, customary law (*awig-awig*) functions not only as a mechanism for reproducing ecological values but also as a source of symbolic capital that reinforces the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* as a leader entrusted with upholding customary mandates.

The reproduction of legitimacy also occurs through customary rituals associated with the village's ecological landscape. These rituals are understood not merely as religious obligations but also as social mechanisms that strengthen the community's relationship with forests, natural springs, customary cemetery, and other sacred spaces. Through active participation in these ritual cycles, the *Kelian Adat* gains recognition as a mediator linking the interests of the community, ancestral spirits, and the natural environment. As explained by the *Jero Kubayan* of Sembiran:



"Rituals are not performed only for the temples. Every place that is essential to the life of the village must be maintained through ceremonial observances. If these places are no longer respected, the community will lose its moral boundaries in utilizing nature."
 (Interview with the Kubayan of Sembiran, 15 May 2025).

These findings indicate that ritual practices function as an important mechanism for reproducing local ecological knowledge through the community's collective experience. As Berkes (2018) argues, Indigenous ecological knowledge is transmitted not only through formal learning but also through rituals, symbols, and recurring cultural practices. The legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* in Sembiran is therefore strengthened through active participation in preserving the continuity of these customary practices.

The customary assemblies (*paruman*) constitutes another important social arena in which the legitimacy of customary leadership is continuously reproduced. Strategic decisions concerning spatial planning, the use of customary land, tourism development, and proposals for the division of the customary village are all deliberated through collective consultation involving the *ulu apad* leadership, the *Kelian Adat*, the *Kubayan*, and representatives of the customary members. Consequently, the legitimacy of collective decisions derives not solely from the authority of individual leaders but from deliberative processes grounded in collective consensus. This dynamic became particularly evident in discussions concerning land-use conversion that have emerged in recent years. As one community leader explained:

"When community members sell land to outsiders, it is not automatically prohibited. However, we always discuss the potential consequences for the village through the customary assemblies (*paruman*). Our concern is not only economic benefit, but also the protection of the customary cemetery, temples, customary roads, and other places that possess sacred *value*." (Interview with a community leader in Sembiran, 20 May 2025).

This account illustrates that the customary assemblies (*paruman*) functions as a field in which social, economic, and ecological interests are negotiated. Within Bourdieu's (1990) theory of social practice, the field is understood as the arena in which social actors mobilize different forms of capital to acquire recognition and influence. In Sembiran, the *Kelian Adat* possesses symbolic capital derived from customary knowledge, ritual experience, and community trust, enabling the leader to guide deliberative processes toward decisions that safeguard the collective interests of the village.

The findings further indicate that the continual reproduction of legitimacy has become increasingly important as Sembiran faces the pressures of modernization, particularly the expansion of land-use conversion, the growth of agro-tourism investment, and renewed proposals for the division of the customary village. These developments have affected not only patterns of land ownership but also the capacity of customary institutions to preserve the ecological values that have historically guided village governance.

The development of an agro-tourism area adjacent to the village cemetery provides a clear example of how the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* is tested in practice. Although the investment generated economic opportunities for local residents, the construction of a boundary wall extending beyond customary limits provoked community opposition because it conflicted with local cosmological beliefs regarding the sanctity of the funerary landscape. In this situation, the dispute was resolved not solely through formal legal procedures but through the customary assemblies (*paruman*) jointly led by the *Kelian Adat* and the *Kubayan*, thereby ensuring that the resulting decision retained broad social legitimacy and community acceptance.

Overall, the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* in Sembiran can be understood as the outcome of an ongoing process of social reproduction sustained through the enforcement of customary law (*awig-awig*), the performance of customary rituals, and deliberative decision-making in the customary assemblies (*paruman*). Together, these



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practices cultivate a collective habitus that preserves customary values while simultaneously generating the symbolic capital upon which the *Kelian Adat* exercises leadership. From Bourdieu's perspective, legitimacy is not an inherent attribute of office but a social resource that is continually produced, reproduced, and validated through practices that are collectively recognized, repeated, and accepted by the community. Accordingly, the ability of the *Kelian Adat* to maintain authority depends fundamentally on the continual reproduction of customary values in everyday practice, particularly in responding to changes in spatial governance, investment, and institutional transformation. This ongoing reproduction of legitimacy ultimately constitutes the institutional foundation for the sustainability of customary environmental governance, which is examined further in the following section on the role of the *Kelian Adat* in ecological conservation in Sembiran.

4.3 The Legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* in Ecological Conservation in Sembiran

Ecological conservation in Sembiran is not determined solely by the availability of natural resources but by the continuity of the customary institutional system that governs the relationship between people, space, and the environment. Within the Bali Aga community, ecological space is understood as part of a cosmological order that simultaneously encompasses religious, social, and historical dimensions. Consequently, the management of forests, natural springs, customary land, and sacred sites is inseparable from the customary authority exercised jointly by the *Kelian Adat* and the *ulu apad* leadership structure. The findings demonstrate that the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* acquires practical significance through its ability to ensure that every form of land use remains consistent with customary law (*awig-awig*) and the decisions reached through customary assemblies (*paruman*), thereby maintaining a balance between economic interests and ecological sustainability.

Geographically, Sembiran is situated on the northern slopes of Bali's coastal highlands overlooking the northern coastline. These environmental conditions have historically encouraged the community to develop an ecological adaptation system that regards forests, natural springs, and agricultural land as an integrated living landscape. This historical relationship is documented in the historical chronicles of Sembiran, which recount the arrival of *Rahyangta Kandyawan* and his followers from Medang, who cleared forests, established agricultural fields and rice terraces, and performed *caru* purification rituals before utilizing the newly opened land. This historical narrative suggests that the creation of new productive spaces was always preceded by religious legitimization, indicating that the use of natural resources was never viewed solely as an economic activity but as an act carrying moral and cosmological responsibilities. These findings are consistent with the work of Lansing (2006) and Hauser-Schäublin (2003), both of whom demonstrate that ecological landscapes in Bali are constructed through reciprocal relationships among ritual practices, social organization, and natural resource management.

Field observations further reveal that the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* is most clearly manifested in the governance of areas designated as sacred spaces within the village. According to the *Awig-awig* of Sembiran Customary Village (2022), temple precincts, the customary cemetery, forested areas associated with the *Kahyangan Desa* and several natural springs are classified as protected areas that cannot be used freely by community members. The use of these spaces is permitted only for customary and ritual purposes following approval through the customary assemblies (*paruman*). This provision demonstrates that the protection of sacred spaces is not merely symbolic but constitutes a concrete mechanism for conserving ecologically significant areas. This finding is supported by an interview with I Ketut Rapat Arsana (5 March 2025), who stated:

"Every piece of land in the village has its own boundaries and designated function. Not every place can be used for personal interests. Sacred areas, certain dry agricultural lands, natural springs, and even the pathways leading to the temples must be preserved because they are part of our ancestral heritage. It is the responsibility of the *Kelian Adat* to ensure that these rules continue to be observed."



This statement indicates that the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* is not derived from administrative authority but from the community's recognition of the leader's capacity to safeguard the spatial order inherited from previous generations. From the perspective of political ecology, such social recognition represents a form of community-based environmental governance that has proven more effective in sustaining natural resources than approaches relying solely on formal state regulation (Ostrom, 1990; Berkes, 2018).

The customary forest constitutes another important domain through which the legitimacy of customary leadership is exercised. In Sembiran, the forest is understood not merely as a vegetated area but as a life-supporting landscape closely connected to the preservation of water resources, the regulation of the local microclimate, and the continuity of customary rituals. Consequently, any extraction of timber or conversion of forest land requires prior approval from the customary village. Rather than making unilateral decisions, the *Kelian Adat* brings such matters before the customary assemblies (*paruman*), where they are deliberated collectively. This process also functions as an instrument of social accountability, as all customary members are able to understand the considerations underlying each decision.

The findings further indicate that the protection of natural springs occupies a central position within Sembiran's customary governance system. Natural springs are regarded not only as sources of life but also as sacred places; consequently, activities that may contaminate these areas are explicitly prohibited under customary law (*awig-awig*). *Sukerta Pamitegep*, Article 30, prohibits the disposal of household waste, livestock carcasses, and wastewater into rivers or onto the property of other community members. This provision demonstrates that water conservation has long been embedded within customary norms, predating contemporary concepts of environmental conservation.



Figure 2. Community Ritual Worship in Sembiran
Source: Lestawi's Documentation (2025).



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Within this framework, the *Kelian Adat* serves as the institutional actor responsible for ensuring the consistent implementation of these customary norms. In an interview, Wayan Sukardi (28 August 2025) explained that violations involving sacred sites, natural springs, or customary forests are perceived not merely as breaches of village regulations but as disruptions to the overall balance of the community.

"When someone damages a sacred place or pollutes a natural spring, the community does not see it simply as breaking a rule. It is regarded as disturbing the balance of the entire village. That is why such matters are always resolved through customary mechanisms."

This statement illustrates that the effectiveness of environmental governance in Sembiran rests upon the moral legitimacy possessed by the *Kelian Adat*. Community compliance emerges from a shared awareness of customary values rather than from the threat of administrative sanctions alone. This finding reinforces Berkes' (2018) argument that the success of community-based conservation depends fundamentally on the presence of local institutions enjoying a high degree of social legitimacy.

Another important mechanism for ecological conservation concerns customary restrictions governing the ownership and use of village land. *Awig-awig* of Sembiran Customary Village, *Palet V*, Article 27, stipulates that customary service land may not be transferred or sold to individuals outside the customary members of Sembiran because such land is regarded as essential for sustaining the *Kahyangan Desa*. This provision demonstrates that regulating land ownership serves not only to preserve communal identity but also as a long-term strategy for maintaining the ecological integrity of the village landscape.

The study further reveals that increasing economic pressures and the expansion of external investment have resulted in the transfer of portions of community land to non-residents. This development has created new challenges for the *Kelian Adat* in maintaining ecological legitimacy. Under these circumstances, the authority of the *Kelian Adat* can no longer depend solely on the enforcement of customary law (*awig-awig*) but must also rely on building collective consensus through the customary assemblies (*paruman*) ensuring that the community's economic aspirations do not compromise the long-term sustainability of the village environment. Consequently, the legitimacy of customary leadership continues to be reproduced through its capacity to balance adaptation to social and economic change with the preservation of ecological values transmitted across generations.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* in ecological conservation does not operate through formal mechanisms of state authority but through the integration of symbolic authority, customary law (*awig-awig*), ritual practices, and the community's collective recognition. Sacred sites, customary forests, natural springs, and various customary prohibitions constitute the principal arenas in which this legitimacy is enacted in everyday life. These findings underscore that the success of ecological conservation in Sembiran is inseparable from the continuity of customary institutions capable of integrating religious, social, and ecological dimensions into a coherent system of community-based environmental governance.

4.4 Negotiating Legitimacy in the Context of State Regulation

The enactment of Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 on Customary Villages marked a significant transformation in the institutional governance of customary villages across Bali. The regulation formally recognizes the customary village as a legal entity with the authority to govern its own affairs while introducing a more systematic organizational structure oriented toward modern administrative governance (Government of Bali Province, 2019). In Sembiran, however, the implementation of this regulation did not replace the long-established *ulu apad* system. Instead, it created a new arena in which the traditional legitimacy embodied by the *Kubayan* is continuously negotiated alongside the formal legitimacy vested in the *Kelian Adat*.



The findings indicate that the implementation of this regulation did not diminish the authority of the *Kubayan* as the ritual leader within the *lungguh krama neggak* system. Rather, the community developed a complementary distribution of authority. The *Kubayan* continues to oversee customary affairs related to customary traditions (*dresta*), ritual practices, and decisions concerning the village's cosmological values, whereas the *Kelian Adat* performs administrative functions, manages institutional relations with government agencies, and administers the legal affairs of the customary village as mandated by Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019. As explained by the *Kelian Adat*:

"Government regulations define the administrative structure of the customary village, but customary life in Sembiran cannot be separated from the *ulu apad* system. Every important decision is still discussed collectively with the *Kubayan* and other customary leaders so that it is considered legitimate both under customary law and administrative regulations." (Interview with the *Kelian Adat* of Sembiran, 18 May 2025).

This statement demonstrates that leadership legitimacy in Sembiran is not established through the dominance of a single institutional structure but through an ongoing process of negotiation that produces a functional division between traditional and administrative authority. From Weber's (1978) perspective, this situation represents the interaction between traditional authority and legal-rational authority. Traditional legitimacy remains the primary source of community acceptance of customary leadership, while legal-rational legitimacy provides the formal legal basis for the relationship between the customary village and the state administrative system.



Figure 3. Agrotourism Development in Sembiran

Source: Lestawi's Documentation (2025).

This negotiated legitimacy becomes particularly evident in decision-making processes concerning land use, changes in land ownership, tourism development, and proposals for the subdivision of the customary village. From an administrative perspective, these processes require formal approval from the *Kelian Adat* as the official representative of the customary village. Socially and culturally, however, such decisions gain legitimacy only



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after they have been deliberated through the customary assemblies (*paruman*), involving the *Kubayan* and other members of the *ulu apad* leadership structure. A community leader explained:

"People accept a decision only after it has been agreed upon in the customary assemblies (*paruman*),. The *Kelian Adat* signs the administrative documents, but the substance of the decision comes from collective deliberation in accordance with customary law." (Interview with a community leader in Sembiran, 20 May 2025).

This finding indicates that the customary assemblies (*paruman*) functions as an institutional arena where the demands of state regulation are negotiated alongside the customary norms embedded within the community. Accordingly, the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* depends not only on the formal authority granted by the state but also on the ability to build consensus with the *Kubayan* and the customary members.

The negotiation of legitimacy becomes increasingly critical as Sembiran faces growing investment pressures and changes in land use. The expansion of agrotourism, the increasing conversion of agricultural land, and the transfer of land ownership to individuals from outside the customary village present new challenges to the sustainability of the village's ecological landscape. According to interview findings, community members acknowledge that these developments have generated economic benefits, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic by creating employment opportunities for local residents. At the same time, however, they have also introduced new concerns, including alterations to the boundaries of the customary cemetery, accelerated conversion of agricultural land, and the reduction of ecological spaces that were previously managed collectively by the customary community.

In this context, the *Kelian Adat* acts as a mediator who balances development interests with the ecological principles embedded in the customary law (*awig-awig*). Every proposed change in land use is evaluated with careful consideration of sacred sites, ritual pathways, natural springs, and the ecological functions of the village landscape. Consequently, the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* extends beyond administrative authority and functions as a social institution that guides development in accordance with customary values.

The customary law (*awig-awig*) of Sembiran further reinforces this process of negotiation. Several provisions explicitly prohibit the sale of customary service land to individuals outside the customary members, require land to be used according to its designated function, forbid the use of sacred areas for private purposes, and prohibit the pollution of rivers and the village environment (*Awig-awig of Sembiran Customary Village*, 2022). These provisions demonstrate that environmental governance in Sembiran is sustained not only by state regulations but also by customary norms that derive their authority from social and religious legitimacy.

The ability of the *Kelian Adat* to ensure the effective implementation of the customary law (*awig-awig*), represents an expression of the symbolic capital possessed by customary leaders. This symbolic capital is derived from the community's collective recognition of the *Kelian Adat's* capacity to balance development objectives, environmental sustainability, and the continuity of customary traditions (Bourdieu, 1990). Legitimacy, therefore, should not be understood as an attribute attached to an administrative office but rather as a social resource that is continuously reproduced through practices recognized and accepted by the community.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the implementation of Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 has not weakened customary institutions in Sembiran. On the contrary, the regulation has encouraged a process of institutional adaptation in which traditional and formal forms of legitimacy operate synergistically in governing community life. This synergy constitutes a key factor in sustaining customary-based environmental governance because decisions concerning ecological spaces continue to be grounded in customary assemblies (*paruman*), the enforcement of customary law (*awig-awig*), and the recognition of the symbolic authority of both the *Kubayan* and the *Kelian Adat*. Accordingly, the success of ecological conservation in Sembiran depends not only on the



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existence of formal regulations but also on the capacity of customary institutions to negotiate social change without undermining the legitimacy that has been cultivated throughout the long history of the Bali Aga community.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the legitimacy of the *Kelian Adat* in Sembiran constitutes the fundamental basis for ecological conservation, grounded in the community's collective recognition of customary law (*awig-awig*), customary assemblies (*paruman*), ritual practices, and the customary leadership system. This legitimacy is not static but is continuously reproduced through social practices that integrate religious values, customary norms, and the governance of ecological spaces, thereby ensuring the long-term protection of sacred sites, customary forests, natural springs, and customary land amid ongoing social transformation.

The implementation of Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 on Customary Villages has not displaced the authority of customary leadership. Instead, it has generated a process of negotiation between the *ulu apad* system and the administrative leadership of the *Kelian Adat*. Within this context, the effectiveness of environmental governance is determined less by formal administrative authority than by the strength of social and symbolic legitimacy. These findings underscore that the success of community-based ecological conservation in Sembiran depends on the capacity of customary institutions to reproduce ecological values through everyday social practices. Accordingly, strengthening customary institutions should be regarded as a fundamental prerequisite for sustaining the ecological resilience of the Bali Aga community amid the continuing dynamics of state regulation and modernization.

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