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## HARMONY, HEALING, AND SPIRITUALITY TOURISM: WESTERN TOURISTS ENGAGEMENT WITH MELUKAT RITUALS IN BALI

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### ABSTRACT

Bali has emerged as a leading global destination for spiritual and wellness tourism, attracting Western travelers in search of personal transformation and inner healing. Among its distinctive cultural practices is the Balinese purification ritual, known as melukat, which employs sacred water as a medium for spiritual cleansing. This study explores the interaction between Western tourists and Balinese spiritual practices, with a particular focus on how melukat is experienced and interpreted within a cross-cultural context. A qualitative research design was adopted, utilizing in-depth interviews and participant observation conducted at selected sacred sites and wellness centers across Bali. The collected data were analyzed thematically to identify key patterns related to tourists' motivations and processes of meaning-making. The findings reveal four primary motivations driving participation: (1) the desire to escape the pressures of modern life, (2) the search for authentic spiritual experiences, (3) the pursuit of holistic healing, and (4) a fascination with the perceived harmony of Balinese culture. At the same time, the study indicates that many participants reinterpret melukat through individualistic and psychological frameworks, often distancing the practice from its original religious and cosmological significance. Rather than representing a straightforward process of commodification, these interactions reflect a dynamic process of cultural adaptation and transformation. In this process, local communities actively engage with tourism while striving to preserve the core values of their spiritual traditions. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on spiritual tourism by offering a cross-cultural perspective on the reinterpretation of sacred rituals within global tourism contexts. It also underscores the importance of balancing tourism development with cultural preservation to ensure the long-term sustainability and authenticity of Bali's cultural heritage.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the global tourism landscape has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from mass tourism toward more meaningful, experience driven by travel. One of the most prominent developments with this shift is the rise of spiritual and wellness tourism, wherein individuals travel not solely for leisure, but also for purposes of self-discovery, healing, inner reflection and transformation. This phenomenon reflects broader changes in contemporary society, particularly within Western contexts, where traditional religious institutions are increasingly being supplemented or in some cases replaced by individualized and personalized forms of travel.

Within this global trend, Bali has emerged as one of the world's most prominent destinations for spiritual tourism. Often referred to as the "Island of the Gods," Bali is widely perceived as a place of peace, balance, and spiritual authenticity. Its rich cultural heritage, deeply rooted in religious practices and harmonious relationships between humans, nature, and the divine, offers a unique environment for spiritual experiences. Among the various practices available, purification rituals locally known as *melukat* have gained particular attention among international visitors, especially Western tourists. The *melukat* ritual involves the use of sacred water as a medium for spiritual cleansing, symbolizing the removal of negative energies and the restoration of inner balance. Traditionally, this practice is embedded within the religious and cultural framework of Balinese Hinduism, where purification is not merely a personal act but part of a broader cosmological and communal system. However, in the context of contemporary tourism, the ritual has increasingly been reinterpreted and consumed by visitors from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

Previous studies on spiritual tourism in Bali have primarily focused on descriptive accounts of rituals, cultural preservation, or tourism development. While these studies provide valuable insights, there remains a lack of research examining the subjective experiences and motivations of Western tourists who participate in purification rituals. More importantly, limited attention has been given to how these tourists interpret the meaning of purification through their own cultural and psychological frameworks.

This gap is particularly important in the context of cross-cultural interaction. Western tourists often come from societies characterized by individualism, secularism, and high levels of psychological stress. In contrast, Balinese spirituality emphasizes communal harmony, ritual practice, and a holistic worldview integrating the physical and metaphysical realms. The encounter between these differing perspectives raises critical questions about how traditional rituals are understood, transformed, and potentially commodified within global tourism.

Despite the growing body of literature on spiritual tourism in Bali, existing studies have largely focused on descriptive analyses of rituals, cultural preservation, and tourism development, with limited attention to the subjective and interpretive dimensions of tourist experiences. In particular, there is a significant lack of empirically grounded, cross-cultural research that examines how Western tourists reinterpret Balinese purification rituals (*melukat*) through their own socio-cultural frameworks shaped by individualism, secularization, and psychological stress. While prior research acknowledges the increasing participation of international visitors in sacred practices, it rarely explores how these engagements transform the original religious meanings of the rituals or how tourists construct personal spiritual significance outside the traditional Balinese cosmology. Furthermore, insufficient attention has been given to the tension between authenticity and commodification, especially in understanding whether such practices represent genuine spiritual engagement or are reconfigured as consumable experiences within the global tourism market.

This study aims to address the limited cross-cultural understanding of how Balinese spiritual practices, particularly *melukat*, are interpreted and experienced by Western tourists beyond dominant narratives of commodification. Specifically, the research seeks to examine how Western participants construct meaning around *melukat* within their own cultural and psychological frameworks, and how these interpretations interact with the original religious and cosmological values embedded in Balinese spirituality.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the dynamic relationship between global tourism and local spiritual traditions by identifying tourists' motivations, exploring processes of meaning-making, and assessing how local communities negotiate authenticity while engaging with the demands of spiritual tourism. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of cultural adaptation, transformation, and sustainability in the context of Bali's spiritual tourism development.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Western tourists' engagement with Balinese spiritual practices is deeply shaped by their socio-cultural background, particularly conditions of stress, individualism, and secularization. As argued by John Urry (1990), modern tourism functions as a form of escape from the pressures and routines of industrialized life, where individuals seek temporary relief from psychological stress and structured environments. This motivation is further reinforced by the dominance of individualistic values identified by Geert Hofstede (1980), in which personal autonomy, self-fulfillment, and subjective well-being are prioritized over collective obligations.



At the same time, processes of secularization, as discussed by Peter L. Berger (1967) and Charles Taylor (2007), have reduced the authority of institutional religion in Western societies, encouraging individuals to seek alternative and personalized forms of spirituality. As a result, non-Western destinations such as Bali are increasingly perceived as spaces of authenticity, holistic healing, and spiritual depth. In this context, Balinese rituals particularly melukat are reinterpreted not merely as religious obligations but as experiential practices that fulfill psychological and spiritual needs.

This interaction between Western tourists' expectations and local traditions generates a dynamic process of commodification. Drawing on the classical concept of commodification introduced by Karl Marx and further developed in tourism studies by Dean MacCannell (1976), cultural and spiritual practices are transformed into economic goods and staged experiences. Rituals may be simplified, standardized, or packaged to meet tourist expectations, illustrating the process of "staged authenticity."

Moreover, within the framework of the experience economy proposed by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore (1999), tourism increasingly emphasizes immersive and transformative experiences, further accelerating the commodification of spirituality. However, commodification should not be understood solely as cultural degradation. In the Balinese context, local communities actively negotiate these transformations through indigenous philosophical frameworks such as Tri Hita Karana, which emphasizes harmony between humans, nature, and the divine. As highlighted by Stephen Lansing (1991), Balinese cultural systems are adaptive and resilient, capable of integrating external influences while maintaining internal balance.

This suggests that commodification is not a linear process but a selective and negotiated transformation shaped by local agency. Cross-cultural interpretation plays a crucial role in shaping the meaning of these practices. According to Clifford Geertz (1973), culture is a system of symbols and meanings that must be interpreted within specific contexts. Western tourists, influenced by individualism and secularism, tend to interpret Balinese rituals in psychological terms such as healing, self-discovery, and emotional release while local communities maintain their religious and cosmological significance.

This divergence can be further understood through Herbert Blumer's (1969) concept of symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes that meaning is constructed through social interaction. At the same time, the boundary between sacred and profane, as articulated by Émile Durkheim (1912), becomes increasingly blurred within tourism contexts, where sacred rituals are simultaneously revered and commodified.

The personal outcomes of spiritual tourism participation can be explained through theories of transformation and well-being. Abraham Maslow (1943) highlights self-actualization as a key human motivation, while Carol D. Ryff (1989) conceptualizes well-being as encompassing psychological growth, purpose, and self-acceptance. In tourism studies, Jack Mezirow (1991) emphasizes transformative learning, where meaningful experiences reshape individual perspectives. Additionally, mindfulness and deep engagement, as discussed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994), contribute to states of inner peace and psychological balance. Thus, spiritual tourism generates not only experiential satisfaction but also profound personal transformation.

In the Balinese context, the transformation of spiritual practices cannot be understood without reference to Tri Hita Karana, a foundational philosophical framework that emphasizes harmony between the divine (parahyangan), human relationships (pawongan), and the natural environment (palemahan). This concept guides how local communities manage and adapt cultural practices, including rituals such as melukat. Rather than viewing commodification as purely exploitative, Tri Hita Karana frames tourism as a process that must maintain spiritual, social, and environmental balance.

Finally, the tension between commodification and authenticity remains central to understanding spiritual tourism. While commodification transforms rituals into consumable products, authenticity is not necessarily lost. As argued by Erik Cohen (1988) and Ning Wang (1999), authenticity is a dynamic and socially constructed concept, where even commodified experiences can be perceived as meaningful by tourists. Therefore, the interaction between Western tourists and Balinese spirituality represents a complex process in which sacred practices are simultaneously experienced, reinterpreted, commodified, and culturally negotiated within the global tourism landscape.

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, phenomenological research design to investigate how Western tourists interpret and construct meaning around the Balinese purification ritual (melukat) within a cross-cultural context. This approach is particularly suited to addressing the research gap concerning the limited understanding of how sacred rituals are reinterpreted beyond commodification narratives. By focusing on lived experiences, the study captures how participants negotiate, internalize, and transform the spiritual significance of melukat through their own cultural and psychological frameworks.

Fieldwork was conducted at selected spiritual tourism locations in Bali that represent both traditional and contemporary contexts of melukat practice: (i) sacred water temples, such as Tirta Empul, where rituals are embedded in religious and cosmological systems, and (ii) yoga and wellness centers in Ubud and surrounding areas, where melukat is often integrated into global wellness practices. These sites were intentionally chosen to enable comparison between ritual contexts and to examine how meaning shifts across different settings.

Participants were Western tourists from Europe, North America, and Australia who had directly experienced melukat. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure relevance to the research objectives, with the following criteria: (i) non-Indonesian (Western background), (ii) prior participation in a melukat ritual, and (iii) willingness to reflect on and articulate their experiences. Approximately 25 participants were recruited, which allowed for in-depth exploration and was sufficient to achieve thematic saturation, particularly in identifying patterns of motivation and cross-cultural reinterpretation.

Data were collected through two complementary methods to capture both articulated meanings and observed practices: In-depth semi-structured interviews (30–60 minutes, conducted in English), focusing on: (i) motivations for participation, (ii) expectations prior to the ritual, (iii) lived emotional and spiritual experiences, and (iv) personal interpretations of the ritual's meaning. Special attention was given to how participants framed melukat in relation to their own belief systems. Participant observation during purification rituals and related activities, with emphasis on: (i) behavioral engagement, (ii) interactions with priests, guides, or facilitators, and (iii) the extent to which participants followed or adapted ritual procedures. This method provided critical contextual insight into the interaction between local practices and tourist behaviors.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to uncover patterns of motivation, meaning-making, and cultural reinterpretation. The process involved: (1) transcription of interviews, (2) iterative reading and familiarization, (3) coding of significant statements, (4) development of thematic categories, and (5) interpretive analysis across cultural contexts. Particular emphasis was placed on identifying how participants reframe melukat—whether as spiritual, psychological, therapeutic, or symbolic—and how these interpretations align with or diverge from its original religious meanings.

To ensure rigor and credibility, the study employed: (i) triangulation of interviews and observations to validate findings, (ii) member checking to confirm interpretive accuracy with participants, and (iii) thick description to provide rich, contextualized accounts of both experiences and settings. These strategies strengthen the study's ability to capture nuanced cross-cultural dynamics.

Ethical standards were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Participants provided informed consent prior to involvement, anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and participation remained voluntary with the option to withdraw at any stage. Cultural sensitivity was also prioritized, particularly in observing and interpreting sacred rituals within their local context.

#### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organized to address the research objectives through a triangulated analysis of data derived from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and contextual interpretation of ritual settings. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of (1) tourists' motivations, (2) psychological and spiritual drivers, (3) cross-cultural meaning-making and reinterpretation of melukat, (4) the influence of Balinese spirituality on lived experience, and (5) the dynamic relationship between authenticity and commodification.

##### 4.1 Tourism as Escape and Embodied Psychological Healing (RQ1 & RQ2)

Triangulated findings indicate that Western tourists' participation in melukat is strongly linked to the pressures of modern life, including stress, burnout, and emotional disconnection. Interview data consistently highlight motivations such as the need for "release," "clarity," and "inner peace." These narratives are reinforced by observational data, which show participants engaging in rituals with visible emotional intensity such as prolonged immersion in holy water, silent reflection, and non-verbal expressions of relief. This convergence between what participants say (interviews) and what they do (observations) strengthens the validity of the finding that melukat functions as both symbolic escape and embodied psychological healing. In line with Urry (1990), Bali is constructed as a space of escape; however, the findings extend this perspective by demonstrating that the ritual operates as a performative and affective practice through which tourists actively process emotional burdens.

##### 4.2 Individualism and Cross-Cultural Reconstruction of Meaning (RQ2 & RQ3)

The triangulated analysis reveals that tourists reinterpret melukat through individualistic and subjective frameworks. Interview responses emphasize personal transformation and self-healing, while observational data show that participants often modify ritual sequences, rely on guides for simplified explanations, or selectively engage with certain stages of the ritual. These patterns indicate that meaning is not derived solely from the ritual's original religious structure but is actively reconstructed through the participants' cultural lenses. This directly addresses Research



Question 3 and the study's central objective of understanding cross-cultural reinterpretation. Consistent with Hofstede (1980), the findings reflect how individualistic cultural backgrounds shape the appropriation of collective religious practices into personalized spiritual experiences. Importantly, triangulation reveals a gap between ritual form and interpreted meaning: while participants physically follow the ritual process, their interpretations are often detached from its cosmological foundations. This confirms that reinterpretation occurs not at the level of practice alone, but at the level of meaning-making.

#### **4.3 Secularization and the Emergence of Hybrid Spirituality (RQ2 & RQ4)**

The findings further demonstrate that tourists' engagement with melukat is shaped by broader processes of secularization. Interview data show that many participants do not identify strongly with institutional religion, yet express a desire for spiritual connection. Observations at both temples and wellness centers reveal that melukat is frequently integrated into non-religious settings, such as yoga retreats, where it is framed in universal or therapeutic terms. This triangulation highlights how Balinese spirituality is both encountered and transformed. Drawing on Berger (1967) and Taylor (2007), the findings suggest that participants engage in selective appropriation rather than full cultural adoption. Contextual differences between sacred temple sites and wellness centers further reinforce this point: while temples maintain ritual structure and symbolism, wellness spaces reinterpret melukat as part of a global spirituality discourse. As a result, a form of hybrid spirituality emerges one that blends Balinese concepts (purification, harmony, sacred water) with Western psychological and self-development narratives. This directly addresses Research Question 4 by showing how Balinese spirituality influences, but does not fully determine, tourists' experiences.

#### **4.4 Commodification, Accessibility, and Negotiated Authenticity (RQ5)**

Triangulated findings also reveal that melukat is increasingly embedded within tourism infrastructures. Interview data indicate that participants often access rituals through organized packages or guided experiences, while observations confirm the presence of structured procedures, time schedules, and mediating actors such as guides or facilitators. In line with MacCannell (1976), these patterns reflect elements of staged authenticity, where rituals are adapted to meet tourist expectations. However, triangulation complicates a purely critical interpretation. While the ritual may be simplified in certain contexts, observational data show that core symbolic elements such as the use of holy water, prayer gestures, and temple spaces are generally preserved. This suggests that commodification operates alongside preservation. Rather than erasing authenticity, tourism creates layered forms of authenticity, where meaning is co-produced through interaction between hosts and guests. Thus, authenticity becomes relational and negotiated, rather than fixed.

#### **4.5 Cultural Negotiation and Local Agency (RQ5)**

A key insight emerging from triangulation is the active role of local communities in managing the interface between spirituality and tourism. Interviews with participants, combined with observations of priest-led rituals and guided interactions, indicate that local actors maintain authority over ritual procedures while adapting communication to international audiences. Drawing on Lansing (1991), this reflects the resilience of Balinese cultural systems. The application of Tri Hita Karana is evident not only as a philosophical concept but as a lived framework guiding how rituals are shared without losing their sacred core. Observations show clear spatial and procedural boundaries such as designated areas for prayer and purification—which help protect the integrity of the ritual. Triangulation confirms that commodification is selectively negotiated: elements that facilitate access (e.g., explanation, organization) are accepted, while core ritual structures remain intact. This reinforces the argument that local communities are active agents in shaping tourism, rather than passive recipients.

#### **4.6 Theoretical Contribution**

By integrating evidence across interviews, observations, and contextual analysis, this study offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding spiritual tourism as a process of cross-cultural interaction and co-construction of meaning. The triangulated findings demonstrate that melukat is simultaneously experienced as psychological healing, reinterpreted through individualistic frameworks, and sustained through local cultural resilience. Extending Urry (1990), MacCannell (1976), Hofstede (1980), Berger (1967), Taylor (2007), and Lansing (1991), the study shows that spiritual tourism cannot be reduced to a linear process of commodification. Instead, it is a dynamic field in which motivation, meaning, and authenticity are continuously negotiated. This reinforces the central research contribution: sacred rituals such as melukat are not simply consumed by global tourists, but are actively reinterpreted and co-produced within a cross-cultural context, allowing them to remain both meaningful and resilient in the face of tourism development.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study demonstrate that Western tourists' engagement in melukat rituals reflects a complex process of cross-cultural meaning-making, rather than merely a form of participation in spiritual tourism. In line with

the research objectives, the study shows how tourists construct personal interpretations of melukat, shaped by their own cultural, psychological, and experiential frameworks, while simultaneously interacting with the ritual's original religious and cosmological meanings.

A central finding reveals that participation is primarily motivated by the desire to cope with pressures associated with modern life, including stress, burnout, and emotional disconnection. Within this context, Bali is perceived as a space for healing, transformation, and spiritual renewal. However, these motivations are not formed in isolation; they are influenced by global imaginaries that frame Bali as an "authentic" spiritual destination, thus shaping both expectations and experiences.

More importantly, the study identifies a clear process of reinterpretation, in which melukat is understood through individualized and often psychological perspectives. Many participants frame the ritual in terms of emotional release, self-reflection, or therapeutic healing, rather than as a practice embedded in Balinese Hindu cosmology. This finding directly addresses the research gap by demonstrating how sacred rituals are translated across cultural boundaries and re-signified in ways that reflect contemporary forms of spirituality.

At the same time, the findings highlight a dynamic interaction between global tourism and local spiritual traditions. While the reinterpretation of melukat may create distance from its original meanings, it does not simply result in commodification. Instead, it reflects an ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation, in which local actors continue to engage with tourism while maintaining core spiritual values and ritual structures. This suggests that Balinese communities are not passive recipients of tourism pressures but active agents in shaping how their traditions are represented and experienced.

The study also underscores that the broader appeal of Bali lies in its holistic philosophy of harmony, particularly the principle of Tri Hita Karana, which emphasizes balance between humans, nature, and the divine. This worldview provides a cultural framework that both attracts global tourists and supports the resilience of local spiritual practices within a rapidly evolving tourism landscape.'

From a theoretical perspective, these findings contribute to the literature by reframing spiritual tourism as a multidimensional process involving motivation, reinterpretation, and cultural negotiation, rather than a unidirectional process of commodification. Empirically, the study offers insight into how Western tourists selectively engage with and transform local spiritual practices, while also revealing the capacity of local communities to sustain the integrity of their traditions.

Overall, the interaction between Western tourists and Balinese spiritual practices can be understood as a dynamic and evolving relationship, in which meaning is continuously constructed, adapted, and negotiated across cultural contexts. This highlights the importance of developing tourism approaches that balance experiential demand with the preservation of cultural and spiritual authenticity.

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