Ritual, Resistance, and Rights: The Balia Healing Practice and Indigenous Policy Challenges in Palu, Indonesia

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bentuk marginalisasi struktural dan hak terhadap praktik penyembuhan tradisional Balia yang dijalankan oleh masyarakat adat Kaili di Sulawesi Tengah pascabencana gempa dan likuefaksi tahun 2018. Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah untuk memahami bagaimana kebijakan pemulihan dan relokasi pascabencana berdampak terhadap keberlanjutan warisan budaya takbenda masyarakat adat. Menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif dan wawancara mendalam di dua lokasi terdampak, yaitu Petobo dan Donggala Kodi. Analisis tematik mengungkap empat temuan utama: (1) hilangnya ruang sakral akibat relokasi menyebabkan desakralisasi praktik ritual; (2) tidak adanya perlindungan hukum eksplisit terhadap hak budaya dalam dokumen resmi seperti Rencana Aksi Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi (BNPB); (3) ketiadaan representasi komunitas adat dalam perumusan kebijakan; dan (4) ketidakpastian hukum yang mendorong pelaksanaan ritual secara tersembunyi. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa hak-hak budaya seringkali terpinggirkan dalam struktur hukum nasional, meskipun telah diakui dalam norma internasional. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi empiris baru dari kawasan Asia Tenggara dalam kajian inclusive disaster governance, serta menekankan urgensi reformulasi kebijakan pemulihan yang lebih peka budaya dan partisipatif. Dengan memetakan hubungan antara penyembuhan tradisional, eksklusi hukum, dan kekerasan struktural, studi ini menyoroti pentingnya reformasi hukum dan desain kebijakan yang mengakui epistemologi spiritual komunitas adat.

Kata kunci: Balia; hak masyarakat adat; warisan budaya; tata kelola bencana; pemulihan pascabencana.

Abstract

This study explores the structural marginalisation and rights concerning the traditional Balia healing practice as conducted by the indigenous Kaili community in Central Sulawesi following the 2018 earthquake and liquefaction disaster. The primary aim is to understand how post-disaster recovery and relocation policies have impacted the continuity of indigenous intangible cultural heritage. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through participatory observation and in-depth interviews in two affected areas: Petobo and Donggala Kodi. Thematic analysis revealed four key findings: (1) the loss of sacred spaces due to relocation has led to the desacralisation of ritual practices; (2) there is a lack of explicit legal protection for cultural rights in official documents such as the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Action Plan (BNPB); (3) the absence of indigenous community representation in policy formulation; and (4) legal uncertainty has forced the practice of rituals into secrecy. These findings underscore how cultural rights are frequently marginalised within national legal structures, despite being acknowledged by international norms. This study offers new empirical insight from Southeast Asia into the field of inclusive disaster governance and emphasises the urgency of reformulating recovery policies to be more culturally sensitive and participatory. By mapping the interrelations between traditional healing, legal exclusion, and structural violence, this research highlights the need for legal reform and policy design that recognise the spiritual epistemologies of indigenous communities.

Keywords: Balia; indigenous rights; cultural heritage; disaster governance; post-disaster recovery.

Introduction

Indigenous communities in Indonesia currently face serious challenges due to the rapid pace of social, ecological, and political change over the past few decades. Their traditional knowledge encompassing agricultural systems, kinship structures, and healing practices such as the Balia ritual of the Kaili people in Central Sulawesi is increasingly marginalised by industrial expansion, legal-formal pressures, and culturally insensitive development policies (Hadiprayitno 2017; Rumpia 2024). Balia is a traditional healing system that integrates spiritual values, ecological harmony, and communal solidarity.

However, since the 2018 earthquake, tsunami, and liquefaction disaster in Palu, Sigi, and Donggala, the practice of Balia has come under severe pressure both physically, due to community relocation, and symbolically, due to the disruption of cultural and spiritual spaces essential to the ritual (Allokendek and Ellisa 2022; Timbang et al. 2023). Reports from the Central Sulawesi Disaster Management Agency (BPBD) and post-disaster studies indicate that rehabilitation and relocation processes have largely ignored the cultural dimensions of indigenous communities, including the erasure of sacred spaces previously used for Balia ceremonies (Minarno, Sinamo, and Rilansari 2025; Usman et al. 2023). Balia practitioners in Petobo and Donggala Kodi report that since the relocation, rituals can only be conducted in private due to social pressure and the lack of recognition from local authorities (Timbang et al. 2023). Yet, local knowledge such as Balia has proven to contribute significantly to post-disaster community resilience, as evidenced by the integration of similar practices into disaster risk reduction strategies in Mentawai (Karnoto, Purwanto, and Budiaman 2025).

This phenomenon reflects the dominance of technocratic and homogenised policy frameworks, which have yet to fully recognise indigenous communities as equal political and epistemological subjects (Bettinger, Fisher, and Miles 2014; Nerenberg 2019). As such, the marginalisation of Balia represents not only the loss of local cultural heritage but also infringes upon the rights to health, land, cultural identity, and participatory development as guaranteed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Côté et al. 2024).

Research on traditional knowledge and indigenous healing practices has expanded rapidly across disciplines, particularly in cultural anthropology, public health studies, and human rights law. Broadly speaking, the existing literature can be categorised into three major themes.

First, studies on the spiritual and social dimensions of traditional healing highlight that such practices are not merely therapeutic but encompass spiritual meaning, ecological interdependence, and social

cohesion. Struthers and Eschiti (2005), Portman and Garrett (2006), and Mark and Lyons (2014) demonstrate that indigenous healing unites body, mind, and spirit through holistic approaches rooted in indigenous worldviews. The medicine wheel model in Canadian Indigenous cultures symbolises the balance between emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual dimensions (Awashish and Beaulé 2025). Mainguy et al. (2013) stress the spiritual transformation involved in indigenous healing, while McKinley (2024) emphasises its role in preserving cultural resilience against colonial legacies. Several scholars advocate collaboration between traditional healers and biomedical practitioners as a foundation for culturally grounded health policies (Hatala 2008; Tremblay and Ellington 2022).

Second, in the field of law and human rights, the protection of traditional knowledge (TK) faces structural obstacles. Modern legal systems, based on individualistic intellectual property rights, often fail to align with the collective and intergenerational character of TK. Hossain and Ballardini (2021) and Okediji (2019) highlight the weak legal protection for indigenous communities against the commodification of local knowledge. Some countries, such as Ecuador and India, have developed sui generis legal systems more suited to collective rights (Alberto and Quishpi 2023; Bath and Prasad 2025). However, principles such as Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), as enshrined in UNDRIP and the Nagoya Protocol, have not been effectively implemented in Indonesia (Tomlinson 2019; Yakovleva et al. 2023). The lack of formal recognition of Balia in regional policy frameworks reflects a persistent gap between international norms and national law.

Third, integrating local knowledge into modern healthcare systems has become a strategic agenda for community-based health development. Studies such as Marsh et al. (2015), Posern-Zieliński (2022), and Dalal (2014) show that hybrid approaches combining conventional medicine with traditional healing improve service effectiveness and strengthen community trust. Intercultural health models at Makewe Hospital (Chile)

and interface schemes in Guatemala provide successful examples of contextual collaboration (Hitziger et al. 2017; Torri 2012). However, structural challenges remain significant. Subedi (2024) identifies funding disparities and biomedical dominance in health systems across developing countries. The absence of legal frameworks for epistemological justice exacerbates this condition. In Indonesia, medical pluralism and intercultural health lack strong regulatory foundations, resulting in practices like Balia being unrecognised both institutionally and legally.

This research seeks to fill a gap in the literature on the recognition and protection of traditional healing knowledge through a rights-based approach, particularly within the context of regional policy in Indonesia. The focus is on the Balia practices of the Kaili community in Central Sulawesi, which have yet to be formally acknowledged in legal and health service frameworks. Using a qualitative methodology and the theoretical lens of epistemological justice, this study aims to explore the spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions of Balia, and to evaluate the extent to which these practices are accommodated or marginalised in post-disaster policies in Palu. Furthermore, the study investigates the legal and structural barriers hindering the integration of local knowledge, including the absence of FPIC implementation and regulatory support for epistemic justice. It aims to formulate a conceptual model for the protection of traditional knowledge that is participatory, contextual, and applicable to local policy-making.

This study is based on the argument that the marginalisation of Balia is not due to the absence of medical value, but rather to epistemological inequality and the weakness of legal protections that discredit local knowledge. Formal recognition through the framework of epistemological justice, alongside the implementation of FPIC, is expected to strengthen the position of Balia within local health systems, particularly in post-disaster contexts. By examining the relationship between legal protection, cultural integration, and service effectiveness, this research seeks to demonstrate that the inclusion of traditional knowledge can foster a more just, contextual, and community-accepted healthcare system.

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to investigate post-disaster governance and the cultural rights of indigenous communities practising Balia healing in Petobo and Donggala Kodi, Central Sulawesi. The unit of analysis consists of local indigenous practitioners and community figures who continue Balia practices following the 2018 earthquake and liquefaction. The methodological approach is intended to deeply explore the socio-cultural dynamics, legal uncertainty, and policy gaps affecting intangible cultural heritage in the context of disaster recovery. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with key informants (healers, traditional elders, and community leaders), participatory observation during community interactions, and document analysis of relevant policy frameworks such as the 2019 BNPB Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Action Plan and reports by the Central Sulawesi Indigenous Forum. Fieldwork was conducted between January and March 2024, using semi-structured interview guides and detailed field notes. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and meanings in the data, allowing the synthesis of empirical findings with theoretical frameworks concerning cultural rights and inclusive recovery governance.

Results and Discussion

1. Balia as a System of Healing Knowledge

During field observations in Petobo and Donggala Kodi, it was noted that Balia practices persist despite being conducted in secrecy. In several residents' homes, ritual preparations could be observed, including offerings such as yellow rice, free-range chicken, betel leaves, and other symbolic items placed at certain locations deemed sacred. At night, the faint sound of traditional instruments (small gongs and drums) could be heard from houses conducting the rituals, signalling the commencement of the spiritual invocation phase. In one procession, a group of elderly women were seen sitting in a circle, reciting customary prayers as part of the Nosunggilama

Pamula stage-an early phase of Balia involving chants and the harmonisation led by a Notepu (ritual leader).

In an in-depth interview, a Balia practitioner (initial AY, Petobo, 2024) explained: *"Balia is not just a ceremony; it's our way of healing the body, mind, and our relationship with nature. Sometimes people come not because they are physically ill, but because their life feels 'heavy'... we help them find inner peace so they can begin to recover."*

Meanwhile, a customary leader residing in Kapiroe village but regularly participating in Balia rituals in Donggala Kodi stated that the practice could only be conducted by a Topoke, a healer who has established a spiritual connection with the Makaombo (guardian spirits). *"A Topoke is not just someone who knows the chants. They must have encountered the Makaombo. Without that, Balia can go wrong."* (Customary Leader, Kapiroe Village, 2024)

These findings reinforce global literature that views traditional community-based healing not merely as biomedical, but as a holistic epistemological system integrating body, mind, spirit, and nature (Lichtenstein, Berger, and Cheng 2017; Struthers and Eschiti 2005). Similar practices have been documented among the Dimasas in India and the Bapedi in South Africa, where spiritual rites, ecological elements, and orally transmitted knowledge converge (Semenya and Potgieter 2014). Even in contexts such as Norway and Bangladesh, traditional healing persists in response to limited access to healthcare services and as an expression of cultural identity (Haque et al. 2018; Langås-Larsen et al. 2018).

Table 1. Ritual Stages of Balia

Ritual Stage	Main Activities	Spiritual Purpose
Nompairomu	Initial preparation and ritual procedures	Establishing spiritual readiness and aligning intentions among the

		healer (Topoke), the patient (Tomadua), family, and ancestors
Mompesule manu	Slaughtering of a chicken by a Sando to determine the continuation of the ritual	Spiritual consultation to seek guidance from ancestral spirits via signs from nature
Nompangende Joa	Offering food to specific places (e.g., under a tree, accompanied by chants)	Symbolic release of negative energy and harmonisation with nature and spirits
Nosore Vayo	Returning to the sacred space after releasing negativity	Reintegrating with the sacred space, bringing spiritual renewal
Nombangu Tava Kayu	Construction of the Tava Kayu	Symbolises the connection between the Kaili people and nature
Nangande ka ada	Communal eating using traditional Kaili dishes (excluding moringa, per ritual taboos)	Reaffirming ties with ancestors and community through a sacred meal
Nosunggilama Pamula	Recitation of chants and prayers by a Notepu	Sacred communication with ancestral spirits for blessings and protection
Sakaya noisi	Filling of the Sakaya (ritual boat)	Preparing the Sakaya to carry away negative energy

Nompopolivo Sakaya	Preparing for the ritual boat's departure with chants and arrangements	Facilitating the symbolic release of afflictions to the cosmos
Noavesaka Sakaya	Releasing the Sakaya into the sea	Letting go of the patient's negative energy
Nosore Vayo	Returning again to the sacred ritual site	Spiritual readiness to receive healing
Nodungganaka Tava Kayu	Returning the Tava Kayu to nature	Honouring balance by returning natural elements to the earth
Niporo ri Vamba	Applying the Tava Kayu to the patient in a cleansing ritual	Channelling healing energy from nature to the body through water and plant elements
Nangande ka ada no kaupuna	Closing communal meal	Expressing gratitude, restoring social bonds, and reaffirming spiritual relationships
Nosunggilama Kaupuna	Collective prayer for the patient, family, participants, and ancestors	Strengthening collective spiritual ties and seeking blessings for all involved

Based on observations and interviews, Balia remains alive within the social fabric of Petobo and Donggala Kodi, albeit conducted discreetly. The symbolic arrangement of offerings in sacred spaces, the traditional music accompanying nocturnal rituals, and the presence of elderly women in

Mompo rituals all point to the deep integration of healing, spirituality, and cultural heritage. Statements by both Balia practitioners and customary leaders indicate that healing involves not only physical and psychological dimensions but also relational harmony with nature and ancestral spirits.

From the empirical findings, four key patterns emerge in Balia as a system of healing knowledge. *First*, Balia is preserved through discreet yet sustained practice, reflecting the community's adaptive strategies in resisting modernisation and stigmatisation. *Second*, symbolic and spiritual elements dominate: offerings, traditional music, and customary prayers function as mediating tools for communication with the Makaombo (guardian spirits), believed to influence life balance. *Third*, the authority of traditional healers (Topoke) is grounded in spiritual legitimacy, where healing ability is not only ritualistic knowledge but must be sanctioned through mystical experience. *Fourth*, healing encompasses physical, psychological, and ecological dimensions, as reflected in the Mompo–Pagampo–Pangura ritual sequence, which integrates body, soul, and nature.

These findings demonstrate that Balia is not merely an alternative medical practice but a local epistemology-an integrative system of spiritual wisdom, ecological relations, and social cohesion. Balia thus plays a vital role in addressing holistic healing needs, particularly in post-disaster areas where health systems and cultural identity are under strain.

Moreover, the Balia practice is revealed not simply as an individual healing mechanism but as an integral part of the community's cultural and social resilience after disaster. The presence of ritual elements, local spirituality, and the role of figures such as Topoke confirm that traditional healing holds dual functions: psychological recovery and the reconstruction of communal identity. This aligns with global studies that stress the importance of holistic recovery approaches that integrate body, spirit, and social environment (Lichtenstein, Berger, and Cheng 2017; Struthers and Eschiti 2005). In Indonesia, similar patterns have been observed in

community-based recovery efforts in Yogyakarta and Nusa Tenggara, where local belief systems and ritual practices underpin social resilience (Manalu, Soesilo, and Seda 2017; McWilliam 2008).

These findings underline the urgent need to recognise traditional knowledge as a critical component of inclusive post-disaster recovery strategies, rooted in local wisdom and cultural continuity.

2. Balia and the Imbalance in Post-Disaster Policy

Field observations and interviews conducted in Petobo and Donggala Kodi indicate that, following the 2018 earthquake and liquefaction disaster, government recovery policies have not fully accommodated local knowledge systems such as the *Balia* healing practice. Communities continuing to practise *Balia* lack legal space and institutional support to sustain these traditions. In an interview, a customary leader in Taripa (2023) noted: *"After the earthquake, people were confused... it wasn't just homes that were lost, but also sacred places. But in the relocation programme, there was no consideration for sacred sites or permission for us to hold Balia rituals." (Customary Leader, Petobo, 2024)*

Another interview with a displaced female resident revealed: *"We used to have a place here for ceremonies. But after relocation, we didn't know where to go. If we hold Balia in public, it might be considered against the rules." (Resident, Petobo, 2024)*

An analysis of the official *Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Action Plan for Central Sulawesi* (BNPB, 2019) shows a strong focus on physical infrastructure and conventional healthcare services, with no reference to the existence or support of culturally based healing knowledge. Records from the *Central Sulawesi Customary Forum* (2021) further confirm the lack of substantial indigenous representation in the recovery policy-making process.

This situation reflects what has also been documented in global literature: that indigenous knowledge is frequently excluded from formal post-disaster frameworks, despite its significant potential for fostering community resilience and psychosocial recovery (Mweta and Juma 2020; Polymenopoulou 2018; Quinn, Williamson, and Gibbs 2022).

Table 2. Comparison Between Indigenous Community Needs and Government Policy Elements

Aspect	Needs of Indigenous Communities	Government Policy Response
Ritual Space	Sacred locations for conducting Balia rituals	Not provided in the relocation scheme
Psychosocial Support	Holistic, culturally rooted healing approaches	Standard medical-psychological intervention model
Community Involvement	Inclusion of customary leaders in policy formulation	Minimal; no formal representation

Field findings suggest that the post-disaster recovery policies following the 2018 Central Sulawesi earthquake and liquefaction have not adopted an inclusive approach toward local knowledge systems particularly traditional healing practices such as Balia. Relocated residents experienced not only material loss but also symbolic and spiritual displacement, due to the absence of recognition for sacred spaces in relocation schemes. Interviews reveal that Balia, which requires specific sacred locations and cosmological relationships with territorial spirits, has been obstructed by formal regulations that fail to acknowledge cultural practices as integral to the recovery process.

Table 2 further illustrates the disparity between the needs of indigenous communities and the content of government recovery policy. For example, the need for ritual space as a medium for collective healing is not addressed in the spatial planning of relocation programmes; culturally rooted holistic healing is replaced with standard medical-psychological models; and indigenous community participation in policy design remains symbolic, without substantive engagement. This imbalance demonstrates clear cultural exclusion (Polymenopoulou 2018) and the poor integration of indigenous knowledge in disaster policy frameworks (Bow and Quinnell 2002; Mweta and Juma 2020), which may in turn intensify collective trauma and hinder long-term community resilience.

From observations, interviews, and document analysis, four key patterns emerge in the relationship between Balia and post-disaster recovery policy in Central Sulawesi:

Structural Exclusion of Local Knowledge: Although Balia serves a central role in collective healing among affected communities, it is not formally recognised in the rehabilitation and reconstruction policy documents (BNPB, 2019). This aligns with Maldonado's (2016) findings that disaster policies often overlook cultural diversity and impose homogenised frameworks rooted in modern science.

Spiritual Dislocation of Indigenous Communities: The loss of sacred ritual spaces caused by relocation has disrupted the cosmological dimension of Balia practices. The absence of spatial-cultural considerations in recovery planning has severed the connection between healing and the spiritual landscape. Similar patterns have been reported by Mweta and Juma (2020), who emphasise that post-disaster relocation often displaces not just people but also their ties to spiritual and historical landscapes.

Imbalanced Participation in Policy-Making: Local communities, including customary leaders, were not substantively involved in formulating recovery policies. The lack of representation has led to

inadequate accommodation of the specific needs of indigenous groups. This reflects patterns of exclusion in disaster governance highlighted by Polymenopoulou (2018) and Ngulube et al. (2024), where cultural rights and community-based resilience are frequently ignored in planning processes.

Subtle Resistance Through Hidden Continuation of Balia: Despite lacking legal recognition, the community continues to practise Balia in secrecy, as a form of spiritual healing and cultural affirmation. This persistence demonstrates the adaptability of local knowledge, echoing Quinn et al. (2022), who argue that community-based healing practices often survive even under major disruption such as natural disasters.

These findings suggest that the exclusion of local knowledge from post-disaster policy is not merely a technical oversight, but rather a form of structural inequality in recognising alternative epistemologies. The absence of Balia from formal recovery frameworks illustrates the state's failure to construct culturally sensitive responses. This supports Polymenopoulou's (2018) critique that cultural rights are often neglected within disaster risk management paradigms. Moreover, the marginalisation of indigenous peoples from decision-making processes weakens long-term recovery outcomes, as recovery strategies fail to reflect the values and needs of affected communities (Ngulube, Tatano, and Samaddar 2024). On the other hand, as noted by Quinn et al. (2022), healing from collective post-disaster trauma requires culturally grounded and community-based approaches that have been proven effective in building resilience.

Therefore, integrating traditional knowledge such as Balia into post-disaster recovery policy is not only culturally relevant, but also strategically significant for strengthening the social and emotional resilience of affected communities.

3. Legal Gaps and Indigenous Cultural Rights

Field observations in Petobo and Donggala Kodi reveal the existence of structural and legal gaps in the recognition and protection of the traditional Balia healing practice in the aftermath of the 2018 earthquake and liquefaction disaster. The relocation of residents to newly designated housing areas has severed the indigenous community's connection to their sacred landscape. Ritual spaces that were once integral to the Balia tradition are now absent, forcing the practice to be conducted discreetly.

"We perform Balia in secret-not because we're doing it wrong, but because we're afraid it might be seen as illegal or cause problems in the relocation area." (Balia Practitioner, 2024)

This concern reflects the ambiguous legal status of Balia within the current post-disaster policy structure. The lack of legal and institutional mechanisms to protect and sustain this cultural practice creates uncertainty for the indigenous community. *"Balia is a legacy. But who protects it now? In the village office or in the shelters, we don't know who to talk to if we want to hold a ceremony."* (Customary Leader, Petobo, 2024)

An analysis of the Central Sulawesi Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Action Plan (BNPB, 2019) found no explicit clauses safeguarding the cultural rights of indigenous peoples. Similarly, records from the Central Sulawesi Customary Forum (2021) confirm the absence of indigenous representation in the formulation of recovery policies. These findings indicate a lack of legal protection for local cultural heritage, despite the important role of Balia in community psychosocial recovery.

This aligns with Quinn, Williamson, and Gibbs (2022), who argue that collective healing in post-disaster contexts is inseparable from local belief systems. However, as Polymenopoulou (2018) notes, cultural rights are often absent from national legal frameworks, despite being explicitly recognised in international human rights norms. Zin, Ismail, and Hanifa

(2024) also highlight that the global Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) framework tends to overlook intangible cultural heritage in its policy focus. Pyke and Wilton (2020) emphasise the need for inclusive disaster governance that transcends technocratic paradigms and respects cultural diversity.

Table 3. Discrepancies Between Indigenous Cultural Rights and Post-Disaster Policy Frameworks

Rights-Based Aspect	Field Realities	Policy Support
Right to cultural ritual	Practised in secrecy due to fear of being deemed illegal	Not recognised in BNPB policy documents
Access to sacred space	No allocated ritual sites in resettlement areas	Not included in reconstruction planning
Participation in policymaking	No involvement in policy formulation	No formal indigenous representation

Based on these data, it is evident that the Balia practice faces both structural and cultural pressure due to the absence of legal recognition within the post-disaster recovery framework. Community concerns about conducting open rituals reflect the lack of strong legal guarantees for cultural rights. Beyond the loss of sacred space, the absence of formal channels for voicing cultural needs deepens the community's sense of marginalisation. This is manifested in the covert nature of current Balia performances, carried out without institutional legitimacy.

Four main tendencies can be identified:

1. Desacralisation of space and symbols as a consequence of sacred landscape loss due to relocation.

2. Lack of explicit legal protection, which renders Balia vulnerable and unsupported as a recognised cultural practice.
3. Absence of substantive participation, revealing the weak mainstreaming of indigenous rights within disaster governance.
4. Institutional void, exacerbating legal uncertainty in the continuation of traditional healing rituals.

These findings demonstrate that traditional healing practices such as Balia face not only cultural marginalisation but also structural disconnection due to the absence of legal support. The legal uncertainty experienced by the Kaili indigenous community reflects the state's weak guarantees for cultural rights during emergency and recovery periods. This situation not only endangers the continuity of cultural practices but also undermines the role of Balia as a mechanism for collective trauma recovery.

This section contributes to the literature on inclusive disaster governance by underscoring the urgency of recognising cultural rights within national legal systems. The absence of policy support for Balia illustrates a significant disconnect between international norms protecting intangible cultural heritage (Zin, Ismail, and Hanifa 2024) and national policies that remain technocratic and exclusionary (Pyke and Wilton 2020). In the context of Indonesia, these findings provide a compelling argument for reformulating DRR policies to be more responsive to the collective rights of indigenous peoples and the preservation of local knowledge systems.

5. Discussion: Balia and the Gaps in Post-Disaster Governance

This study finds that the traditional healing practice of *Balia* among the Kaili indigenous community has faced significant structural and cultural pressure in the aftermath of the 2018 Palu earthquake and liquefaction. The key findings indicate that the relocation of residents to new housing areas has directly led to the loss of sacred spaces and the absence of legal recognition for *Balia*. In this context, the ritual has been practised covertly as a form of adaptation and resistance to a technocratic legal and recovery

framework. The lack of indigenous involvement in policy formulation exacerbates the structural exclusion experienced by the community. Despite lacking legal legitimacy, *Balia* continues to be practised as a mechanism of collective recovery. These four core findings highlight a fundamental gap between the cultural needs of local communities and the formal structure of recovery policies, underscoring the urgency of inclusive approaches that integrate cultural rights into post-disaster governance.

This gap stems from the lack of legal recognition of cultural rights within the state structure. Relocation to new sites was not accompanied by recognition of the customary spaces and practices intrinsically tied to particular landscapes. This has resulted in both symbolic and physical desacralisation of *Balia*, now carried out in secrecy due to legal uncertainty and fear of criminalisation (Nainggolan 1978). The absence of legal and institutional channels further entrenches the marginalisation of indigenous communities, who do not know where or to whom to turn when seeking to hold traditional ceremonies.

Indonesia's recovery framework-as reflected in the *Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Action Plan* (BNPB, 2019) and corroborated by the *Central Sulawesi Customary Forum* (2021) remains centralised and technocratic, leaving no room for substantive participation from indigenous communities. Theoretically, these findings support Polymenopoulou's (2018) argument that cultural rights are often excluded from national legal systems, despite being recognised in international norms. Likewise, Quinn, Williamson, and Gibbs (2022) emphasise that the continuity of local belief systems is vital for collective post-disaster healing. When legal frameworks fail to integrate these cultural dimensions, structural exclusion arises, compounding social trauma.

This study offers a novel contribution by presenting a locally grounded case study based on field data from Petobo and Donggala Kodi. Unlike previous research that focuses on cultural rights theory or global

contexts, this research illustrates how intangible cultural heritage such as *Balia* is subjected to structural pressure within Indonesia's recovery policy. It expands the body of knowledge on inclusive disaster governance, particularly in the underrepresented Southeast Asian context (Zin, Ismail, and Hanifa 2024). Moreover, the empirical approach through interviews and direct observation-bridges the gap between theoretical discussions of cultural rights and the technocratic practices dominant in public policy (Pyke and Wilton 2020).

The social implications of these findings are considerable. When the right to sacred space and customary ritual is not acknowledged, indigenous communities are forced to marginalise their own cultural identity in order to conform to a legal structure that is unreceptive to pluralism. Historically, the marginalisation of *Balia* continues a pattern of asymmetrical relations between the state and indigenous peoples, wherein the state fails to recognise indigenous communities as primary actors in public policy. Ideologically, the exclusion of *Balia* from formal policy reflects the dominance of modern developmental epistemologies that neglect local knowledge rooted in spirituality and social cohesion.

The primary contribution of this research is to advocate for the recognition of *Balia* as a community-based resilience mechanism. This practice carries not only symbolic value but also provides a psychosocial healing structure essential for social reconstruction following a disaster. On the other hand, when practised covertly, *Balia* becomes functionally constrained, producing legal ambiguity, the risk of horizontal conflict, and increasing distrust in state institutions. Legal uncertainty weakens not only the legitimacy of *Balia*, but also the effectiveness of government programmes.

Policy recommendations arising from this study include:

1. Revising national policy documents such as the RARR to explicitly guarantee the cultural rights of indigenous communities;

2. Providing ritual spaces within resettlement areas;

3. Strengthening the participation of customary leaders within recovery policy structures;

4. Drafting specific regulations to protect cultural practices in disaster contexts; and

5. Training government officials in cultural sensitivity.

These measures align with the principles of inclusive disaster governance and international norms on cultural rights (Zin, Ismail, and Hanifa 2024), and hold the potential to reduce disparities between the state and indigenous communities in post-disaster governance.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the traditional Balia healing practice among the Kaili indigenous community has been subjected to structural pressures in the aftermath of disaster, primarily due to the absence of legal recognition and the lack of access to sacred spaces within resettlement areas. Four key findings emerge: the desacralisation of ritual space and symbols; legal uncertainty; the exclusion of customary participation in recovery policy; and institutional voids in post-disaster governance. These conditions reflect a form of structural exclusion from indigenous cultural rights and affirm that collective post-disaster healing cannot be separated from local belief systems.

The primary academic contribution of this research lies in presenting empirically grounded, local case study data that enrich the discourse on inclusive disaster governance by highlighting the often-overlooked dimension of intangible cultural heritage within technocratic recovery policy frameworks. The study also broadens the understanding of the need to integrate cultural rights and indigenous community

participation into disaster policy reform in Indonesia, while reinforcing the argument for locally rooted, values-based approaches in public policy.

However, this study is limited in its geographic scope and timeframe, as data collection was restricted to two locations and a single observation period. Moreover, it has not yet addressed broader political and economic dimensions that also influence post-disaster policy. Future research is recommended to expand the geographical coverage, include a wider range of indigenous communities, and explore the interaction between state actors, donor agencies, and civil society in shaping culturally grounded recovery policies.

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