



Women, Ecology, and Oral Tradition in Javanese Coastal Communities

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran in shaping the cultural life of the community in Bakaran Village through a qualitative field-based approach. Data were collected through interviews, observation, and oral narratives, and analyzed using a descriptive-interpretive method with a focus on the interconnections between material elements, cultural practices, and gender roles. The findings show that elements such as fire, ash, sacred water sources, and animals play an important role in the construction of collective memory, village origins, and local moral values. These elements are not only interpreted symbolically but are also embedded in everyday social practices, including rituals, taboos (pamali), and the tradition of Mubeng Punden. In addition, women play a significant role not only through their symbolic association with Nyi Ageng Bakaran, but also through their active involvement in batik production, which serves as a source of household income. The batik tradition reflects the continuity of ancestral narratives through women's labor while simultaneously demonstrating its adaptation within the contemporary local economy.

A. INTRODUCTION

Bakaran Village in Pati, Central Java, constitutes a living cultural landscape closely associated with the enduring narrative of the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran. This legend functions as a manifestation of ecological cosmology formed through the intra-action among the female body, natural elements, and cultural practices. In this context, the relationship between humans and the environment is not hierarchical, but rather one of material entanglement. The agency of Nyi Ageng Bakaran emerges through her attachment to active elements of the landscape. Furthermore, Nyi Ageng Bakaran, also known as Nyai Ageng Danowati, is recognized as a female figure who transmitted batik-making knowledge from the Majapahit Empire milieu to local residents after settling in Bakaran (Supriyadi et al., 2024). Her presence demonstrates that women have played an active role in the transmission of skills, the management of local resources, and the formation of the community's cultural identity.

Traces of ecological practice are also articulated through material regulations, such as the prohibition

against selling cooked rice and the taboo against using chicken as ritual offerings. These rules are understood as a direct legacy of Nyi Ageng Bakaran, governing food sovereignty and the economic order of the village. Such regulations illustrate that spiritual values within local tradition operate in tandem with ecological rationality, particularly through the wise management of food resources and the community economy for the sustainability of collective life. This aligns with Nicholas (2019) argues that indigenous perspectives and values enrich collective knowledge about the world.

This local condition becomes increasingly relevant amid the global crisis of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene marks an era of excessive human domination (hyperhumanism), which has triggered ecosystem degradation, climate change, and the loss of biodiversity. Malm & Homborg (2014) argue that the Anthropocene began with the Industrial Revolution, when humans modified Earth systems on a large scale, particularly through climate change, which became one of the most hazardous Holocene boundary violations. Consequently, the Anthropocene signals refugia, as nature demonstrates the consequences of human

actions, such as extreme weather and climate affecting daily socio-economic activities (Jon, 2020).

The challenges of the Anthropocene may be examined through the framework of material feminism and new materialism as developed by Iovino & Oppermann (2014), which integrates feminism and new materialism. This perspective emphasizes that the body and the environment are living entities endowed with active agency. Human beings are no longer positioned as singular and superior entities, while nature is recognized as material capable of interacting with and influencing the world. Within this framework, gender is understood not merely as a social construct, but as a material experience deeply entangled with ecology. This approach offers a critical alternative to anthropocentrism by positioning nature and the body as active participants within the interconnected web of life.

Several previous studies are relevant to this research. First, Brinkman (2022) study, *Who Is At The Centre? Gikuyu Ogres, Oral Narrative and Posthuman Thinking*, demonstrates that Gikuyu oral narratives in Africa represent an awareness of the dangers posed by disturbances to forces beyond human control. Second Barcz (2015) study, *Posthumanism and Its Animal Voices in Literature*, explores animal voices in literature to demonstrate a model of human non-domination over narrative. Third, Iovino (2012) study, *Material Ecocriticism: Matter, Text, and Posthuman Ethics*, emphasizes that landscapes, water, and natural objects possess the capacity to store memory and generate meaning. From this perspective, natural elements such as soil, fire, and water may be interpreted as ecological actors that carry collective narratives and ethics.

Although material feminism and posthumanist have developed rapidly, the majority of existing studies remain focused on Western contexts, particularly Europe and North America. Meanwhile, cultural practices grounded in oral traditions across the Nusantara have received comparatively limited attention through these perspectives. Critiques of the universalism of Western feminism have highlighted the importance of considering local contexts in understanding women's social constructions and lived (Mohanty, 1984; Oyèwùmí, 1997). Therefore, this study not only enriches local documentation but also seeks to present an alternative Southeast Asian cosmology, potentially expanding the horizons of material ecocriticism and ecological feminism.

Based on this background, this study examines the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran in order to address this gap by analyzing the relationships between body, materiality, and cultural practices within the Nusantara context. Rather than viewing natural elements merely as symbolic background, this study emphasizes how material elements are integrated into social life through oral narratives, ritual practices, and everyday activities within the community. This study also explores how women's roles are constructed both through symbolic representation and through their practical involvement in sustaining cultural and ecological relations. Accordingly, this study formulates two research

questions: (i) how are the relationships between body, gender, and nature constructed in the narrative of Nyi Ageng Bakaran? and (ii) how can feminist new materialism be understood through the lived cultural practices surrounding this figure?

B. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic case study with a narrative inquiry approach to examine how the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran is interpreted and practiced in contemporary community life. A qualitative design was selected to explore and understand the meanings constructed by individuals or groups arising from social issues (Creswell J. W. & Creswell J. D., 2018). Furthermore, field research and narrative analysis were employed to bridge the relationship between oral tradition and ecological practices in Bakaran Village, Juwana. Narrative inquiry was used to analyze oral traditions concerning Nyi Ageng Bakaran, while interviews and observation were used to examine their contemporary social meanings. This study was conducted in Bakaran Wetan and Bakaran Kulon Villages, Juwana, Central Java, with the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran as its object of study. This location was selected because it preserves a local legendary narrative that remains embedded in the community's collective memory and whose values continue to be recognized in everyday life.

This study utilizes both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data consisted of oral narratives of the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran and in-depth interviews with five purposively selected key informants. These included one *juru kunci* (site custodian), two senior batik artisans, one village elder/community leader, and one long-term local resident. They were selected because of their recognized knowledge of village history, oral tradition, batik production, and customary norms related to the legend. Given the exploratory case-study design, these participants were considered information-rich cases capable of providing in-depth cultural insights rather than statistical representation (Patton, 2015). Meanwhile, the secondary data were obtained from documents and scholarly sources relevant to the legend under study.

Data were collected through observation and interviews. Qualitative interviews were chosen to provide an understanding of knowledge constructed within specific contexts through meaning-making and interpretation (Edwards & Holland, 2020). In addition, data were gathered through direct nonparticipant observation. This technique was selected because it facilitates the collection of narratives from a particular group and provides access to forms of knowledge that may not have been previously recognized (Ciesielska et al., 2017). Observational findings were recorded in field notes as a systematic documentation instrument throughout the observation process.

Data were analysed using the interactive technique of Miles et al., (2014), which involves data collection, data presentation, and drawing conclusions.

The data condensation stage involved organizing oral versions of the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran, interview transcripts, field notes, and observational records from Bakaran Wetan. Data were collected from three primary sources: oral narratives concerning village origins and *pamali* (customary prohibitions), in-depth interviews with key informants, and field observations of material sites and community social practices. All data were subsequently transcribed, organized, and repeatedly reviewed to identify recurring patterns of meaning.

The analytical stage was conducted through open coding of elements relevant to the research focus, such as fire, ash, water, the female body, batik labor, territorial claims, and *pamali*. These initial codes were then grouped into broader themes. The first theme focused on the relationship between body, gender, and nature in the figure of Nyi Ageng Bakaran, particularly how the female body is narrated in relation to physical labor, environmental knowledge, and natural elements such as fire, ash, and water. The second theme focused on the manifestation of feminist new materialism, namely how women's agency appears through decision-making, resource management, productive labor, and the continuing symbolic authority of a female figure within the local community.

In the final stage, these themes were interpreted by connecting narrative data, interview findings, and field observations. Validation was conducted through source triangulation by comparing statements across informants, material evidence such as the *Sumur Belik* of Nyi Ageng Bakaran, and available local historical records. Through this process, the study generated an understanding of the entanglement of body, gender, and nature in the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran, while also demonstrating how values associated with feminist new materialism are manifested within the local cultural context of Bakaran society.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Relationship between Body, Gender, and Environmental Agency in the Figure of Nyi Ageng Bakaran

The representation of the body and nature in the story of Nyi Ageng Bakaran may be interpreted more deeply through a co-constitutive approach. An approach grounded in the view that the human body and nature do not exist as separate entities, but mutually shape and generate meaning for one another. Within this legend, the body of Nyi Ageng Bakaran is not merely presented as a biological entity, but also as a ritual body and a cosmic body containing spiritual, ecological, and cultural dimensions. Her body is closely connected with natural elements such as forests, water, fire, and other environmental forces. According to Braidotti (2016), posthuman thought advances a critical consensus also found in many feminist theories: there is no such thing as a pure or original "humanity." Rather, humanity is always in the process of becoming through mutually constitutive relations. The body and nature in the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran reflect how each

element is interconnected and forms an integrated unity of life. This perspective is consistent with the notion of "entangled agencies" in material ecocriticism, which emphasizes that body, gender, and nature are not separate entities, but are interwoven in shaping ecological and spiritual experience (Neimanis et al., 2015).

Nature does not merely function as a backdrop, but plays a significant role in the spiritual and social life of the main figure. Forests, fire, water, and ash emerge as elements closely connected to the journey of Nyi Ageng Bakaran. In the oral narratives of the Bakaran community, the opening of the area by Nyi Ageng Bakaran is often associated with the burning of the forest, which later became the origin of the name "Bakaran."

A group of people travelled west to clear land. Along the way, Ki Dalang Becak died, leaving Nyi Danowati and Ki Dalang Dukut. During clearing, Nyi Danowati felt her strength was weak, resulting in limited output. She then proposed burning dry debris. The next day, the black residue (langes) marked land ownership. From this, the area was named Bakaran, while the small land belonging to Ki Dalang Dukut was called Dhukuh Alit (Interview PB, 16 July 2025).

According to local accounts, the area where the community now resides originally consisted of forest land that was cleared and transformed into a settlement by Nyi Ageng Bakaran. She is said to have considered that if she had used the same method as Ki Dukut, the land that could be opened would have been more limited due to constraints of labor. Therefore, she chose an alternative strategy by burning the forest after first observing the direction of the wind. The ash produced by the burning was then used as a marker of the territory that became her domain, and the area was subsequently named Bakaran.

The burning practice described in this narrative may be interpreted as a measured form of land clearing, undertaken with consideration of wind direction and the intended use of space for settlement. In many agrarian communities, such practices are recognized as part of local ecological knowledge in land management (Seko et al., 2024). This differs from exploitative deforestation practices, which often emerge from the misuse of environmental governance authority (Hoang & Kanemoto, 2021; Perumal et al., 2021).

In Bakaran Wetan, memories of the opening of the settlement continue to be preserved through the tradition of *Mubeng Punden* during wedding ceremonies. *Mubeng Punden* (circumambulating the ancestral shrine) is a customary practice in which the bride and groom circle the *punden*. In one stage of the procession, burned *merang* as a symbolic reminder of the village's origins, recalling the clearing of the forest through fire (Maghfuri, 2020). This illustrates how local culture interprets natural elements, such as fire and ash, as integral components in the formation of identity, habitation, and communal values.

Furthermore, the element of water is embodied in the sacred well known as *Sumur Belik* of

Nyi Ageng Bakaran. This well is regarded as the first structure established by Nyi Ageng Bakaran and is said to have been constructed from red bricks. As a result, local people maintain a belief that houses should not be built using red bricks as a form of respect toward Nyi Ageng Bakaran.

In the past, some members of the community constructed houses using red bricks. However, the occupants reportedly experienced recurring illnesses. Eventually, most residents shifted to building houses using white bricks (BS, interview 16 July 2025).

The prohibition against the use of red bricks indicates that symbolic meanings are attached by the community to specific building materials. Red bricks are not understood merely as construction materials, but are associated with collective memory of the initial structure built by Nyi Ageng Bakaran and with expressions of respect toward ancestral figures.

The well is used as an irrigation source to support the batik production process. Nyi Ageng Sabirah is also described as engaging in daily activities such as bathing, cooking, and washing.

The well was formerly used as an irrigation source for the batik-making process (PB, Interview, 16 July 2025).

This indicates that the well plays an important role in sustaining local productive activities. In this context, water is not merely understood as a natural resource, but as an integral part of household economic practices and everyday life.

Subsequently, the well gradually came to be known as the *Sumur Sumpah* (Oath Well). This transformation is associated with the story of Joko Sunyono, which continues to live within the community's collective memory. The well thus underwent a shift in meaning, becoming a symbolic space endowed with socio-cultural power. The community believes that the well represents the stance of Nyi Ageng Bakaran in rejecting falsehood, and it is therefore used as a medium for affirming honesty and verifying oaths (Karim et al., 2023).

The story of the *Sumur Sumpah* (Oath Well) begins when Joko Suyono came to propose marriage to Nyi Danowati. However, Nyi Danowati suspected that Joko Suyono had previously been involved with another woman. Therefore, she set a condition: he had to build nine wells in a single night. In the end, Joko Suyono was able to construct only eight wells. To complete the number, he falsely claimed that the well belonging to Nyi Danowati was also his creation, thereby making a total of nine. Nyi Danowati did not immediately accept this claim, and the two then took an oath by drinking water from the well as proof of truthfulness. Ultimately, Joko Suyono was unable to bear the weight of the oath and died.

Historically, the community used the well to swear oaths to determine right and wrong, with the belief that any guilty party would die after drinking from it. In 1963, the village

government closed the well to prevent its use for oaths, but the water remained available for medicinal purposes (PB, interview 16 July 2025).

Community beliefs regarding water in Bakaran are manifested through concrete social practices. The *Sumur Sumpah* (Oath Well) was once used as a local mechanism for conflict resolution. In this context, water is not understood merely as a natural element, but as a moral medium that gains social legitimacy within community life. Although the practice of water-based oaths was later prohibited by the village authorities due to concerns over potential harm or casualties, belief in the water's efficacy persists within traditional healing practices. This finding indicates that water occupies an important position in the interrelation between belief systems, health practices, and social order within the Bakaran community.

The community believes in the power of the well through the *Buka Luwur* ritual (removal and replacement of the cloth covering the sacred site), which is performed every 10th day of the month of Sura. The *luwur* is used to cover the well to prevent misuse of its water, and it is replaced annually on the 10th of Sura. During the ritual, the community also carries out the cleaning of the well (*nguras sumur*). The old *luwur* is replaced with a new one, and the well water is purified (Meitasari, 2009). The final rinse water is collected in a jug and distributed among participants. The community believes that drinking this water brings blessings. This practice indicates that the well water is not understood merely as a material resource, but also carries social, spiritual, and cultural meanings in community life. Through this ritual, water plays a role in fostering communal solidarity, maintaining relationships with ancestors, and strengthening the community's connection with its surrounding environment.

Figure 1. *Sumur Belik*



Source: Personal Documentation

Next, the animal element. Nyi Ageng Bakaran had a rooster. This animal was her beloved companion and held an important role in her life, which led the community to refrain from using chickens as offerings during *selamatan* ceremonies (Meitasari, 2009). Nyi Ageng's rooster was named Jago Luriksana.

She enjoyed cockfighting not merely for entertainment, but as an art form resembling the strategy and skill of soldiers in battle. She raised a unique rooster named Jago Luriksana. The name derives from lurik and sana. Sana referring to a blend of reddish-grey and brown colors. Thus, Nyi Ageng Bakaran's rooster displayed a striped pattern of reddish-grey combined with brown (PB interview, 16 July 2025).

Naming the rooster affirms recognition of its identity. This aligns with N. Anderson (2022), who emphasizes that human-animal relations should be framed within ethical responsibility, acknowledging animal's feelings, vulnerabilities, and roles within the broader web of life.

Nyi Ageng Bakaran enjoyed cockfighting. In this context, the animal reflects a form of cross-species social contract. The rooster's courage mirrors that of its owner, and the outcome of the fight represents not only physical victory but also a wager on honor, spirituality, and community harmony. Geertz (1973) describes cockfighting in Bali as an expression and dramatization of social values such as status and prestige. The rooster is more than an animal, its strength and bravery embody the owner's reputation and dignity. In local tradition, roosters are raised not merely for consumption but as symbols of power, courage, and even spiritual communication. Sanjatmiko (2021) notes that cockfighting in rural Java often serves as a cosmological mechanism for interpreting fortune, power, and moral equilibrium.

The rooster is regarded as a favored animal of Nyi Ageng Bakaran. This belief has led the community to refrain from using chickens as offerings (*sesaji*) during *selamatan* rituals at the ancestral shrine (*punden*) (Meitasari, 2009).

The chicken is regarded as a favored animal of Nyi Ageng Bakaran. Consequently, in selamatan rituals at the ancestral shrine (punden), the community does not use ayam ingkung as ritual offerings (BG, Interview, 16 July 2025).

Nyi Ageng Bakaran had an attendant known as Kaji. She instructed the preparation of the chicken, but due to a misinterpretation, the animal was instead slaughtered (Interview, PB, 16 July 2025).

The prohibition of using chickens as ritual offerings indicates that animals are not merely perceived as objects of ritual consumption, but are attributed affective and symbolic value within the local cosmology. The chicken functions as a medium of remembrance of the close relationship between Nyi Ageng Bakaran and the living beings within her surrounding environment.

2. Feminist New Materialism: The Role of Body, Gender, and Environment in the Figure of Nyi Ageng Bakaran

Ecological posthumanism offers a critique of anthropocentric worldviews by rejecting the rigid separation between humans as subjects and nature as objects. Within this perspective, nature is understood as an active material process that continuously shapes shared life (Barad, 2007). This viewpoint is relevant for interpreting the Bakaran community through the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran, which demonstrates the relationship between humans and the environment. Humans do not appear as the sole controllers of ecological change, but rather as part of a dynamic and agential biospheric network (Sullivan & Malkmus, 2016).

This relationship may also be understood through feminist new materialism, which situates female identity within its interconnectedness with the material world. This approach shifts attention away from the notion of the autonomous individual toward relationality, namely the idea that women's bodies and experiences are co-constituted through soil, water, living space, energy, and other surrounding element (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014). In this context, the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran may be read as a narrative of a woman deeply engaged with land, water sources, and the continuity of the community. The figure of Nyi Ageng Bakaran can therefore be understood as an intersection of women's roles, an ethic of care, and ecological practices preserved within the community's collective memory.

Nyi Ageng Bakaran was originally named Nyi Ageng Danowati. She is portrayed as a woman who fled Majapahit to preserve her religious beliefs (Supriyadi et al., 2024).

Nyi Danowati served as a court official in Majapahit. Around 1478, in the 15th century, Majapahit fell and Islam spread. As a Hindu-Buddhist adherent, she sought refuge in a place distant from Majapahit (B, interview 14 July 2025).

The story begins with the fall of Majapahit, conquered by the Demak kingdom, which sought to expand its Islamic domain at the end of the 15th century (Purwadi, 2005). During her flight, Nyi Bakaran reached the I forest. The toponym "Juwana," derived from the *druju* tree, highlights how plants actively shape place identity and the communities within it.

Nyi Danowati and her siblings opened land for settlement. The story recounts that Nyi Danowati, along with her three siblings who had fled Majapahit (Ki Dalang Becak, Ki Dalang Dukut, and Kek Truno) traveled westward. Upon reaching a particular area suitable for settlement, they planned to occupy it. However, the land was a swamp densely populated with druju trees, whose thorny trunks, leaves, and flowers made the site cumbersome to inhabit. Consequently, they decided not to settle there. The area later became

known as *Juwana*, meaning “the druju that exists” (PB, interview 16 July 2025).

Murdoch (2005) argues that environmental heterogeneity, including geography and ecological sustainability, is crucial for understanding the complexity of human–nature relations. The toponym *Juwana* reflects a tangible manifestation of multispecies relations, showing how humans and nonhumans co-construct and shape the identity of a place.

The forest is closely associated with Nyai Ageng Danowati. This representation is consistent with ecofeminist motifs that regard forests as spaces of care and empowerment for women, while reinforcing the interconnection between gender and environmental issues (Sinha & Ali, 2024). The forest was subsequently transformed into a village, where Nyai Ageng Danowati chose to reside. The settlement was named Bakaran Village because it originated from wood, leaves, and branches that were burned (Alaimo, 2010). Thus, human capacity emerges through its interconnectedness with the material world.

Nyi Danowati changed her name to Nyi Ageng Siti Sabirah as a form of disguise. Her flight may be interpreted as an expression of material agency, in which the body is understood not as a passive object but as an active site of resistance. She opposed the authority of the Majapahit Kingdom by escaping from its political center. Nyi Ageng Danowati’s movement to the *Druju* forest signifies a transition from the palace space governed by power to a new environment that enabled the reconfiguration of relations among women, the environment, and social life. This act also demonstrates resistance to structures of authority that sought to restrict her mobility. Nyi Ageng’s agency emerged not through direct confrontation, but through strategies of survival, spatial displacement, and the creation of a new social order beyond the center of power.

Nyi Ageng Sabirah developed batik-making skills during her service as a palace attendant in the Majapahit Empire. She subsequently continued the craft she had mastered and brought this batik tradition to Bakaran Village.

“*Soga*” refers to brown motifs, which are a hallmark of Bakaran batik. Any motif rendered in this style becomes distinctly Bakaran (IT, interview 26 May 2023).

These motifs were adapted and further developed from Majapahit Empire batik patterns. This batik is characterized by its dark coloration, commonly referred to as *soga*, and reflects adaptations of both central Javanese (*aliran tengahan*) and coastal (*pesisiran*) stylistic motifs.

In its early development, Batik Bakaran used dyes derived from natural materials (Figure 2). The materials employed included kayu terogan for coloring agents, akar kudu to produce a brownish-sawo matang hue, and the bark of the tingi tree to generate brown tones (Suyikno, Bain, & Suharso, 2016).

Bakaran batik is notable for sogas (brown) shades, dark blue called wedelan, and

combinations of dark blue with sawo matang (ripe sapodilla brown). Recent technological innovations have expanded the range of colors available (PB, interview 16 July 2025).

The use of these materials demonstrates the existence of local knowledge regarding natural resources and their specific properties in producing particular colors. This indicates that ecological knowledge has been integrated into the community’s everyday life, including in the process of batik-making.

Figure 2. Natural Dyes of Batik Bakaran



Source: Personal Documentation

Figure 3. Motifs of Batik Bakaran



Source: Personal Documentation

Moreover, ecological knowledge is also embedded in the motifs of Batik Bakaran, which are inseparable from the journey of Nyai Ageng Bakaran and the natural conditions of Bakaran Village. The motifs (Figure 3) taught by Nyai Ageng Bakaran include Majapahit-style batik patterns such as Danliris, Gringsing, Kawung, Sida Mukti, Padhas Gempal, and others. The Danliris motif is associated with the geographical conditions of the Pati region, which has a tropical climate. The Manggaran motif is inspired by coconut blossoms that grow abundantly in areas such as Dukuhseti and Tayu. These two areas are recognized as centers of coconut cultivation and seedling production, particularly *kopyor genjah* coconuts. Meanwhile, the Blebak Lung motif is inspired by creeping plants found during the early land-clearing period in the *Juwana* area. Local people refer to this plant as *druju*, a shrub species with leaves and fine thorns around its stem (Nihayah & Purwanto, 2022)

The motifs of Batik Bakaran continue to undergo innovation up to the present day. These innovations remain grounded in the philosophical meanings of the motifs so that local cultural values are not lost amid the currents of commercialization (Maulana & Hajar, 2025). One contemporary design is

Mina Tani motif. Mina Tani is the official slogan of Pati Regency, namely Pati Bumi Mina Tani. The word Mina means fisheries or water reflecting the abundance of fishery resources, while Tani denotes agricultural livelihood and farming activities. The Mina Tani motif is represented through depictions of local products found in Pati Regency, such as rice, cassava, corn, peanuts, and milkfish (*ikan bandeng*) (Nihayah & Purwanto, 2022).

Batik Bakaran should not be understood merely as an artistic artifact, but as the product of material intra-action. Natural elements collaborate with the bodies of batik artisans to record the community's ecological knowledge. Material agency operates technically through the resist-dyeing method. *Malam* (*lilin batik*) plays an active role in limiting the spread of color in order to create patterns. Moreover, the shift from natural dyes to synthetic dyes due to limitations in raw materials demonstrates that the physical properties of materials actively shape artisans' technical choices as well as the visual outcomes of the batik. In this regard, Bennett (2010) argues that matter is not merely a passive object, but possesses thing-power, namely the capacity of material objects to generate effects within particular relational assemblages. Accordingly, *malam* (*lilin batik*), cloth, and dyes may be understood as material elements that actively participate in shaping the production process and the continuing development of Batik Bakaran up to the present day.

Nyi Ageng Bakaran transmitted batik-making skills to women through patient guidance, ranging from techniques for holding the *canting* to the precision required in applying motifs onto cloth.

Previously, Nyi Danowati served as a palace officer responsible for managing the royal heritage buildings and the production of soldiers' clothing, which involved batik work. She was skilled in batik and subsequently shared this knowledge with the surrounding community (PB, interview 16 July 2025).

The women who were trained in batik-making subsequently continued to develop Batik Bakaran after the passing of Nyi Ageng Bakaran. In earlier times, Batik Bakaran was produced through highly traditional processes using conventional tools such as the *canting*, *lilin* (*malam*), and natural dyes that depended on available environmental resources; consequently, the production process required a relatively long period of time (Rohmah, Kusuma, & Rohilie, 2017).

The attachment of Batik Bakaran to traditional production methods and natural pigments constitutes a tangible form of sustainable cultural-ecological practice. Dependence on natural resources indirectly integrates the community's economic interests with the conservation of local biodiversity. Batik artisans consciously preserve local flora in order to ensure the continued availability of dye materials.

Traditionally, the coloring process relied on roots, trees, leaves, bark, pohon jambal, pohon tingi, and indigo leaves. Cantings were made with handles from cassava stems and

kangkung sabrang (Interview IT, 26 May 2023).

Production tools, such as the *canting* made from cassava stalk bases (*bonggol ketela*), represent the functional utilization of residual natural materials. The longer production duration required for natural dyeing also serves as a material control mechanism, allowing ecological systems time to regenerate. As processors of natural resources, women batik artisans contribute to maintaining ecological balance through the use of traditional knowledge and local wisdom, thereby fostering environmental sustainability without damaging ecosystems (Mulyati et al., 2024).

Figure 4. Canting



Source: Personal Documentation

Until the present time, Bakaran Village has become one of the centers of Batik Bakaran production, consisting of numerous micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) as well as household-based industries. Many residents of Bakaran Village engage in batik production as their primary livelihood (Fitranto, 2015). Many women in Bakaran Village are involved in the batik industry as part of household economic activities as well as independent enterprises, indicating a significant level of economic participation for women within the village's social life. The batik industry in Bakaran Village is able to absorb a considerable female workforce.

Usually, the ones who assist in batik production are local mothers. The work is flexible and can be done from their own homes" (Interview IT, 16 July 2025).

In addition to their roles as homemakers, women also participate as workers in the batik sector. Female batik artisans in Bakaran Wetan and Bakaran Kulon are generally over 40 years old. Most of them have acquired batik-making skills through intergenerational transmission, learning from parents or older community members (Ristiana, 2017).

Women generally play a role in household-scale batik production, while marketing activities are typically carried out by men (Haqiqi, 2019). This pattern indicates a gendered division of labor between domestic and economic spheres. The involvement of women demonstrates that they function not only as domestic workers but also as key contributors to household income through the batik industry. This system reflects a dual role undertaken by women,

namely domestic responsibilities alongside batik craftsmanship. Such conditions are closely related to the social roles of women in rural settings, which are often intertwined with family obligations, cultural practices, and customary life within the community (Widigdo, 2010).

The marketing of Batik Bakaran reflects a well-developed local economy that has expanded into national markets with relatively high demand. This is evidenced by the increasing number of Batik Bakaran entrepreneurs and the expansion of distribution networks to major cities (Rohmah, Kusuma, & Rohilie, 2017). Several Batik Bakaran artisans have frequently received orders from various cities and are able to compete with other well-known batik-producing regions such as Solo, Yogyakarta, Pekalongan, Kudus, and Lasem. Moreover, its market reach has extended internationally, including to the United States and Canada. The widening of market access contributes to the improvement of artisans' welfare, as most batik producers have experienced an increase in income. Batik Bakaran MSMEs not only absorb local labor but also function as a driving force in the economic development of the surrounding community.

Batik Bakaran demonstrates the interconnection between women's embodied labor, the utilization of natural resources, and mutually constitutive cultural practices. In the batik-making process, women play a crucial role in sustaining the relationship between the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran, the local geographical environment, and community identity through their direct engagement with fabric, *malam* (*lilin batik*), and natural materials. Thus, Batik Bakaran illustrates that cultural practices are formed through a continuous relationship among environmental materiality, human labor, and collective memory.

The figure of Nyai Ageng Danowati represents female independence and agency. Characterization in Javanese folklore is closely related to regional mythology that restores both nature and culture (Wessing, 2006). Nyai Ageng Danowati established a place called *Sigit*, which is interpreted as *isine wong angggit*, meaning a gathering of intelligent or thoughtful individuals.

Nyi Danowati is said to have felt insecure, leading her to establish a place called Sigit. The term Sigit is derived from the word singgit or sekat, meaning a partition or boundary (Interview PB, 16 July 2025).

Nyi Danowati built *Sigit* to host community members after the harvest season, where they would watch wayang performances, share meals (*manganan*), and reflect on divine goodness. These gatherings also included discussions on ethical stewardship of nature and social values among the community (Karim et al., 2023).

Practice such as this illustrates the role of women in facilitating social life and sustaining community continuity through forms of care work that are often overlooked in male-centered historical and

economic narratives (Federici, 2012). Nyi Ageng Bakaran serves as an example of a woman who holds social influence in shaping shared spaces and strengthening the role of women within the community.

In addition, the Bakaran community also upholds several teachings attributed to Nyi Ageng Bakaran. The community believes that selling cooked rice is prohibited, as is the use of chicken or *ingkung* in ritual offerings. Historically, the Bakaran community experienced food scarcity, and rice was difficult to obtain. This situation was further exacerbated by the reliance on rain-fed rice fields (*sawah tadah hujan*), which allowed harvests only once a year. In response to these conditions, Nyi Ageng Bakaran is believed to have prohibited the trading of rice within the community.

"In the past, the community was taught agricultural practices. During paceklik, food commodities became expensive. She stated, "ojo adol sego mengko wedi kwalat. Lek e gawe kangelan, ngene iki do ora duwe simpanan" ("do not sell cooked rice, or you may face consequences; if difficulties arise, people will have no reserves") (Interview PB, 16 July 2025).

The Bakaran community's practice of not selling cooked rice in economic activities is interpreted as a form of eco-relational economic embeddedness. Economic practices are shaped by values and customary norms that have been transmitted across generations.

These prohibitions function as mechanisms to maintain the social and ecological balance attributed to the teachings of Nyi Ageng Bakaran. The restriction on selling cooked rice is understood as part of her teaching on communal sharing and as an effort to promote food sovereignty within the Bakaran community. Adherence to these taboos indicates that the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran does not merely exist as an inherited narrative, but continues to be enacted in everyday social practices. For community members who still observe these prohibitions, they are interpreted as expressions of respect toward ancestral figures as well as guiding principles for maintaining social harmony and collective balance.

D. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the legend of Nyi Ageng Bakaran continues to shape the cultural life of the Bakaran community through narratives and practices associated with fire, ash, sacred water sources, and animals. These elements are understood by local people as integral to the village's origins, collective memory, and local moral values. The findings further indicate that women's roles in Bakaran are expressed not only through their symbolic association with the figure of Nyi Ageng Bakaran, but also through their tangible involvement in batik production. In particular, the batik tradition illustrates how ancestral narratives are sustained through women's everyday labor while simultaneously contributing to contemporary household income.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The data were collected from a limited number of informants and have not fully captured differences in interpretation across generations, gender groups, or social strata. Some community members continue to strongly uphold ritual beliefs, whereas others tend to regard them primarily as cultural heritage. In addition, this study has not examined in depth issues of economic inequality, household labor division, or the market challenges faced by women engaged in batik production. Future research may compare Bakaran with other communities that possess legends of female ancestors, or investigate how local traditions are being transformed amid the growth of tourism, commercialization, and environmental change.

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