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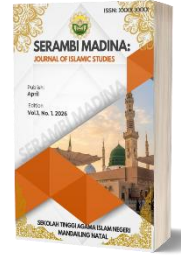
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Symbolism, Space, and Social Connectedness in the Nggowo Lemah Tradition: Revisiting the Logic of Local Culture

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Abstract

This study examines the cultural meanings, psychological functions, and transformative dynamics of the *nggowo lemah* tradition in the context of residential relocation among Javanese communities in three villages, Calungan (Deket Subdistrict), Beru (Sarirejo Subdistrict), and Candisari (Sambeng Subdistrict), Lamongan Regency, East Java. Employing a qualitative approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews, direct observation, and interpretive analysis of informants' lived experiences. The findings indicate that *nggowo lemah* is practiced as an adaptive, household-based cultural practice centered on the symbolic act of bringing a handful of soil from the former home to the new residence. This tradition serves a strong emotional function, particularly in fostering a sense of security, maintaining spatial continuity, and reinforcing attachment to the place of origin, without relying on formal religious legitimacy. The study also reveals a generational shift, in which younger groups tend to abandon the practice due to more pragmatic life orientations, making its continuity highly dependent on its social and emotional relevance within contemporary society. Overall, this research underscores *nggowo lemah* as a cultural practice that functions as a psychosocial transition mechanism in the process of adapting to new living spaces, while contributing empirically and conceptually to Javanese cultural studies through the documentation and analysis of small-scale domestic practices that have received limited scholarly attention.

Keywords: Nggowo Lemah; Javanese Culture; Social Change

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menelaah makna budaya, fungsi psikologis, serta dinamika transformasi tradisi *nggowo lemah* dalam konteks perpindahan rumah pada masyarakat Jawa di tiga desa, yaitu Calungan (Kecamatan Deket), Beru (Kecamatan Sarirejo), dan Candisari (Kecamatan Sambeng), Kabupaten Lamongan, Jawa Timur. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode wawancara mendalam, observasi langsung, serta analisis interpretatif terhadap pengalaman hidup para informan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *nggowo lemah* dipraktikkan sebagai praktik domestik yang bersifat adaptif, dengan penekanan pada tindakan simbolik membawa segenggam tanah dari rumah lama ke rumah baru. Tradisi ini memiliki fungsi emosional yang kuat, terutama dalam membangun rasa aman, menjaga kontinuitas ruang, dan memperkuat keterikatan dengan lingkungan asal, tanpa berlandaskan legitimasi keagamaan formal. Hasil penelitian juga mengungkap adanya pergeseran generasional, di mana kelompok muda cenderung meninggalkan praktik ini karena orientasi hidup yang lebih praktis, sehingga keberlanjutannya sangat bergantung pada relevansi sosial dan emosional dalam konteks masyarakat modern. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa *nggowo lemah* merupakan praktik budaya yang berfungsi sebagai mekanisme transisi psikososial dalam proses adaptasi terhadap ruang baru, sekaligus memberikan kontribusi empiris dan konseptual bagi kajian budaya Jawa melalui dokumentasi dan analisis praktik domestik kecil yang selama ini jarang mendapat perhatian dalam studi akademik.

Kata Kunci: Nggowo Lemah; Budaya Jawa; Perubahan Sosial

INTRODUCTION

Javanese culture is widely recognized for its richness in symbols and rituals that shape how people interpret life, their relationship with nature, and significant transitions within the human life cycle (Indra & Salikurrahman, 2024; Khusni, 2025). Within various cultural practices, land frequently functions as a fundamental symbol representing origin, identity, and genealogical connectedness within Javanese society (Bernanda et al., 2025). Cultural beliefs emphasizing the importance of spatial continuity and inner tranquility (*tentrem*) have contributed to the persistence of symbolic actions—both in public rituals and domestic practices—despite the pressures of modernization and increasingly rapid social mobility (Lestari et al., 2025). One such practice is the tradition of *Nggowo Lemah*, a custom of bringing a handful of soil from one's former home when relocating. This practice is still found in several villages in Lamongan Regency, East Java. For the communities who observe it, soil is not merely a physical object but embodies an emotional experience tied to a space long inhabited (Nuraini & Suprayitno, 2021). In this context, moving house is understood not only as a physical relocation but also as an inner transition that requires a form of

emotional affirmation. Bringing soil from the former home is perceived as helping individuals maintain continuity of experience and cultivate a sense of comfort upon entering a new environment.

In Javanese culture, soil plays a significant role as a symbol of stability, memory, and origin (Kiftiyah, 2020). This is evident in various rituals such as *Tedhak Siten*, *Sedekah Bumi*, and the burial of the placenta, all of which position soil as a medium connecting humans, space, and the course of life (Putri et al., 2023; Soleh et al., 2023; Sulazis, 2024). However, unlike large-scale public rituals, *Nggowo Lemah* is a domestic practice carried out within the family sphere without formal ceremonial structures or customary legitimation. Precisely because of its simple and personal nature, this tradition is analytically significant, as it demonstrates how small-scale actions can mediate emotional experiences during spatial transitions. More broadly, this practice may be understood as a symbolic mechanism that enables individuals to sustain emotional connectedness to their former home while adapting to a new environment.

Despite this, the tradition of *Nggowo Lemah* remains largely undocumented in academic scholarship. Existing studies on soil within Javanese culture tend to focus on communal rituals or major ceremonies, while small domestic practices such as carrying a handful of soil during relocation have received little scholarly attention (Priambadi & Nurcahyo, 2018). Meanwhile, studies on residential mobility in the social sciences generally address issues such as urbanization, relocation, or home-making processes, rather than the symbolism embedded in local traditions (Damayanti et al., 2025; Sabitha, 2022; Siagian et al., 2023). Furthermore, there has been no significant attempt to link the cultural symbolism of soil with processes of psychological adaptation within the framework of *place attachment*, even though attachment to place has been shown to influence how individuals respond to spatial change (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). This gap constitutes an important research opportunity, opening avenues for both theoretical and empirical contributions.

Although the practice of *nggowo lemah* is recognized and still performed by some rural Javanese communities, no written sources or historical documentation have been identified that clearly indicate when this tradition first emerged. Field findings suggest that knowledge of *nggowo lemah* is transmitted orally and domestically within family contexts, resulting in the absence of formal archival records. This condition indicates that the practice likely developed gradually within the context of agrarian Javanese society, where experiences of relocation are addressed through domestic practices that help preserve emotional continuity and comfort. Thus, the emergence of this tradition is better understood as the product of a long-

term cultural process responding to emotional and social needs, rather than as a practice originating from a single historical event or institutional framework.

Accordingly, this study offers novelty by employing an ethnographic approach combined with symbolic analysis and the framework of *place attachment* to examine the practice of *Nggowo Lemah*. This approach enables the researcher to explore not only how the practice is performed, but also how soil is interpreted within the context of residential mobility. In doing so, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of domestic traditions in shaping experiences of spatial transition.

Based on this phenomenon, the study seeks to address several questions: how do communities understand the tradition of *Nggowo Lemah*? What symbolic meanings are attached to the act of carrying soil? And how does this practice function in assisting individuals through processes of spatial transition? The objectives of this research are to describe the patterns of *Nggowo Lemah* practice, to explicate its symbolic meanings, and to analyze its social and psychological functions for individuals and families undergoing residential relocation. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of Javanese cultural studies, scholarship on domestic symbolism, and the broader literature on *place attachment* within the Indonesian context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study examines the domestic practice of *Nggowo Lemah* as a minor tradition within Javanese culture and explores the symbolic meaning of soil in the context of residential relocation. Based on a review of the literature, five relevant publications were identified that address the dynamics of cultural symbolism, local rituals, and the transformation of traditions in contemporary Javanese society.

First, the study by Pranoto and Marselius (2024), entitled "*Sedekah Bumi Tradition as Local Wisdom of Coastal Javanese Society: Exploring the Human–Nature Relation through the Psychological Construct of Gratitude and the Ecocentrism Paradigm*," employs qualitative methods, including participant observation and in-depth interviews, grounded in the frameworks of local wisdom, ecocentrism, and the psychology of gratitude. The findings indicate that the *Sedekah Bumi* ritual functions as a collective mechanism for expressing gratitude, strengthening social cohesion, and reinforcing human–nature relationships. The ritual also enables coastal communities to respond to environmental and economic pressures in culturally meaningful ways (Pranoto & Tondok, 2024).

Second, Hariyanto (2024), in the study "*A Case Study of Tedhak Siten Traditional Ceremony*," utilizes a qualitative case study approach, collecting data through

interviews, visual documentation, and analysis of ritual texts, based on performance theory and ritual semiotics. The results reveal that the stages of the *Tedhak Siten* ritual—including the symbolic act of stepping on the ground—serve socio-cultural functions as markers of life transitions and as pedagogical mechanisms for cultural identity formation. This domestic ritual provides a sense of continuity and reinforces communal identity (Hariyanto et al., 2024).

Third, Annisa (2024), in "*Tedhak Siten: Its Existence and Cultural Values (Performance Studies Perspective)*," applies a descriptive qualitative method grounded in performance studies, incorporating field observation, interviews, and textual analysis of ceremonial scripts. The findings show that the symbolic elements of *Tedhak Siten*, including physical interaction with the soil, convey important social messages and cultural pedagogy. The performative dimension of the ritual facilitates the transmission of values to subsequent generations and strengthens collective attachment to cultural space and place (Annisa, 2024).

Fourth, Prayitno et al. (2021), in the article "*Place Attachment and Agricultural Land Conversion for Sustainable Agriculture in Indonesia*," employ a quantitative analytical method using field surveys and statistical analysis, based on the theory of *place attachment*. The study demonstrates that individuals' emotional attachment to land or place significantly influences decisions regarding land conversion. Such attachment is rooted in identity meanings and collective experiences, explaining why symbolic practices related to land tend to persist despite economic pressures or spatial transformations (Prayitno et al., 2021).

Fifth, Qing et al. (2022), in "*Stay in Risk Area: Place Attachment, Efficacy Beliefs and Evacuation/Relocation Intention*," apply a quantitative survey method to populations in disaster-prone areas, utilizing the frameworks of *place attachment* and the Protective Action Decision Model (PADM). The findings reveal that place attachment reduces the tendency to relocate even under conditions of risk; attachment, mediated by efficacy beliefs, explains emotional resilience and adaptive decision-making. This suggests that symbolic objects (e.g., soil from one's place of origin) play a role in strengthening inner resilience and influencing intentions either to remain or to adapt (Qing et al., 2022).

From these five studies, two major research trajectories can be identified: qualitative approaches emphasizing ritual symbolism and socio-cultural functions (e.g., *Sedekah Bumi*, *Tedhak Siten*), and quantitative psychosocial approaches highlighting the role of *place attachment* in decisions related to relocation or land conversion. This analysis reveals several research gaps relevant to the present study. First, there is a lack of empirical and integrated research documenting small-scale

domestic practices such as *nggowo lemah* (bringing a handful of soil when moving house). Second, few studies combine performance/ritual semiotic approaches with *place attachment* frameworks to explain how minor symbolic objects (such as a handful of soil) function as mediators between cultural traditions and psychological mechanisms of adaptation.

These gaps form the basis of this study's novelty. By examining *nggowo lemah* in depth within the Lamongan context through an integrated approach combining symbolic ritual analysis and the framework of *place attachment*, this research seeks to provide both theoretical and empirical contributions to the understanding of domestic traditions and emotional resilience in the process of residential relocation within Javanese society.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with an ethnographic approach to understand the practice of *Nggowo Lemah* as it is perceived, performed, and interpreted by communities in Lamongan Regency. This approach is chosen to enable the researcher to explore lived experiences, symbolic meanings, and the socio-cultural context surrounding the practice through direct engagement in the field.

The research was conducted in three villages selected as primary data collection sites: Calungan Village in Deket District, Beru Village in Sarirejo District, and Candisari Village in Sambeng District. These locations were chosen based on the presence of communities that continue to recognize and practice the *Nggowo Lemah* tradition when relocating. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: individuals who have performed the *Nggowo Lemah* practice, those who possess knowledge of its procedures, or community figures who have a comprehensive understanding of the tradition.

Data collection techniques included observation and in-depth interviews. Observation was conducted to capture detailed aspects of behavior, situational context, and social interactions that may not emerge during interviews. In-depth interviews were carried out in a semi-structured manner to explore participants' personal experiences, motivations for performing the practice, the symbolic meanings they attribute to it, and the transformations of the practice over time.

Data analysis was conducted in three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and refining interview transcripts, field notes, and observational records to identify information relevant to the research focus. Data display was organized into categories and themes that reflect patterns of meaning, as well as the social and psychological functions of the *Nggowo*

Lemah practice. These themes were used to examine the relationship between informants' experiences, the symbolic significance of the soil carried, and the adaptive processes they undergo during residential relocation.

Conclusion drawing was carried out by identifying patterns emerging from the findings and aligning them with the research objectives. To ensure accuracy and consistency, data triangulation was applied by comparing observational findings with interview data, as well as by reviewing field notes and assessing the consistency of information across informants. Through these procedures, a comprehensive understanding of the *Nggowo Lemah* practice is obtained.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Practice Space and Local Variation: Forms, Patterns, and Contexts of *Nggowo Lemah* in Three Villages

Field findings from Calungan, Beru, and Candisari villages reveal that the practice of *nggowo lemah* exhibits a relatively consistent core pattern despite being implemented in different social contexts. Across all three villages, residents bring a small amount of soil from their former home prior to relocating. This soil is then placed in the exterior area of the new house, typically in the front yard, near the entrance, or at a corner of the house that is easily accessible. This general pattern recurs in narratives from diverse informant profiles—ranging from housewives and older generations to community figures—indicating that the tradition possesses an established regularity and is widely accepted.

The practice is carried out in a simple manner, without formal ritual elements or an organized ceremonial structure. Informants across the three villages consistently emphasized that *nggowo lemah* is not a formal ceremony but rather a family habit performed spontaneously. This is reflected in the way informants describe its implementation. A woman in Calungan explained, "I just take a little soil and put it in front of the new house—that's it." (WP-C1, 2025) This statement illustrates the common understanding that the act requires no specific guidelines, involves no offerings, and does not follow a prescribed sequence of steps. A similar interpretation was expressed by an elder in Beru, who stated, "There is no ceremony; it is simply an old people's habit." (SD-B2, 2025) Such expressions indicate that the community does not perceive this practice as a customary rite requiring the involvement of specific figures or formal symbolic legitimation. Instead, it occurs organically through intergenerational transmission within the household sphere.

Informants' narratives further indicate that *nggowo lemah* is understood as an inherited habit passed down from previous generations, often referred to as "parental teachings" or "the practices of the elders." References to ancestors in this context do not point to a specific historical period but rather function as a source of cultural authority that legitimizes the practice socially. The tradition persists through intergenerational transmission within families and domestic collective memory, rather than through formal customary institutions. Thus, the roots of *nggowo lemah* lie in the continuity of lived experience and mechanisms of value transmission, underscoring its role as a form of domestic cultural heritage within Javanese society.

Nevertheless, technical variations are observed across the villages, though these are practical rather than conceptual in nature. In Calungan, most residents place the soil directly on the ground without any container, influenced by the presence of spacious yards and relatively loose soil conditions. In contrast, some residents in Beru place the soil in small plastic bags before positioning it in a corner of the yard, particularly when the new house is still undergoing preparation and the outdoor area is not yet fully arranged. In Candisari, placing the soil near the entrance is relatively common, especially among younger families who interpret this location as the point of entry into a new spatial environment. Despite these differences, such variations do not alter the core structure of the practice, indicating its adaptability to the domestic needs of each household.

Field observations also show the absence of involvement from customary leaders, religious authorities, or village officials in carrying out the practice. There are no written or oral guidelines regulating its timing, procedures, or accompanying symbolic elements. Nor is there any evidence of communal ceremonies involving neighbors or extended kin in a formal manner. The entire process takes place within the private domain of the household. This suggests that *nggowo lemah* constitutes a household-based cultural practice—one that does not operate within a formal communal customary structure but instead emerges from the routines of everyday family life. The social structure of the three villages, which lack strong ritual-based customary institutions, further supports the formation of this domestic pattern.

The findings also indicate that the absence of *nggowo lemah* does not result in social sanctions, conflict, or structural consequences for individuals or their communities of origin. Informants noted that the practice is optional and depends on the beliefs and comfort of each family. Some residents who did not perform *nggowo lemah*—whether due to forgetfulness, time constraints, or a lack of perceived necessity—did not experience any social repercussions from either family members

or the surrounding community. However, several informants reported a subjective sense of unease or incompleteness when the practice was not carried out, particularly during the early stages of inhabiting a new house. This suggests that the absence of *nggowo lemah* has primarily personal and emotional implications, rather than collective or ecological ones.

The shared core pattern observed across the three villages indicates several important points. First, the tradition does not depend on collective authority but rather on family-based knowledge transmitted informally. Second, the uniformity of the practice suggests that the values underpinning it are understood as part of the “normative conduct of relocating a home,” rather than as a ritual obligation with explicit spiritual consequences. Third, the flexibility of technical variations across villages demonstrates that the tradition is not a closed system but an adaptive practice responsive to changing residential contexts.

In conclusion, the pattern of *nggowo lemah* practice in Calungan, Beru, and Candisari can be understood as a simple, flexible domestic tradition that is not bound by communal regulations. It operates as part of the relocation process, symbolically marking the transition of space through the act of carrying soil from the place of origin. This consistent yet non-rigid structure illustrates that *nggowo lemah* is sustained through family habit and functions as a cultural marker of spatial transition, even in the absence of formal ritual elements or institutionalized sacredness.

Soil Symbolism and Place Attachment: Reinterpreting Representations of Identity, Origin, and Sense of Security

Interview findings across the three villages indicate that community members who continue to practice *nggowo lemah* provide relatively similar explanations for carrying soil from their former homes. Informants’ accounts generally emerged spontaneously when they were asked to recount their experiences of residential relocation. None of the informants referred to customary regulations or religious injunctions that mandate the practice. Instead, they consistently described it as an inherited habit, “learned from parents” and passed down across generations.

For instance, an elderly resident in Calungan explained that she brought soil because she felt that a part of herself “moved along” with it. She remarked, “*Rasane kaya ora ninggal sak kabeh - It feels as if I am not leaving everything behind.*” (WL-C3, 2025) This statement was articulated after she described her former home as the place where she raised her children and spent most of her life. Similarly, in Candisari, another informant stated, “*Supaya ana kenangane, ora ilang begitu saja - So that the memories*

remain and do not simply disappear," (WP-S1, 2025) indicating that the act functions as a means of preserving memory rather than fulfilling a ritual obligation.

An examination of informants' explanatory patterns indicates that the meaning of *nggowo lemah* does not derive from magical beliefs or formal ritual structures, but rather from individuals' emotional experiences of their former homes. Informants do not refer to any supernatural power attributed to the soil; instead, they emphasize an inner, affective bond with a place long inhabited. In their narratives, the former home is portrayed as a space dense with lived experience: a site of family formation, of significant life events, and of identity construction. Collectively, these accounts demonstrate that soil is not perceived as a sacred object, but as a symbol representing the experiences and memories embedded in the former dwelling. Thus, emotional meaning emerges primarily from personal experience rather than from any specific cultural or religious doctrine.

The meanings articulated by informants align closely with the concept of *place attachment* as proposed by Yi-Fu Tuan (1977). Tuan emphasizes that place should not be understood merely in physical terms, but as a space imbued with experience, memory, and emotion (Tuan, 1977). When informants express that carrying soil allows them to feel that they have "not entirely left" their former home, this reflects the notion of continuity of place, whereby individuals maintain a sense of familiarity and emotional stability despite spatial relocation (Gabe & Lestari, 2018).

This form of attachment can also be understood through the concept of *place-memory* as articulated by Edward Casey (1996), which emphasizes how personal memory is often embedded in the materiality of place (Casey, 1993). Soil taken from the yard, courtyard, or specific points within the former living environment carries traces of lived experience that are affectively recognized and internalized by individuals (Ola & Kroon, 2020).

At a more reflective level of interpretation, this symbolic meaning may be brought into dialogue with religious texts as an interpretive horizon. The Qur'an refers to soil as the origin of human creation, as stated in QS. al-An'ām [6]:2, which portrays soil as an existential medium in the process of human becoming. This verse does not function as a normative legitimation of the *nggowo lemah* practice; rather, it serves as a symbolic framework that enriches the understanding of human attachment to soil as a source of origin, memory, and continuity of being. In this way, juxtaposing phenomenological perspectives on place with Islamic cosmological reflection enables a productive engagement between text and context without displacing the empirical foundation of the study.

From the perspective of symbolic anthropology, the act of carrying soil can also be interpreted through the ideas of Edmund Leach (1976) and Victor Turner (1967), who argue that symbols in cultural practices often function as mediating devices linking personal experience with broader socio-cultural structures (Leach, 1976; Turner, 1967). Soil, as a fundamental symbol across many cultures, is frequently associated with notions of origin (*rootedness*), genealogical connectedness, and existential stability (Prasanti & Sjafirah, 2017).

Within this framework, *nggowo lemah* functions as a symbolic bridge, carrying elements of past experience to be “planted” in a new spatial context. This relationship does not emerge from explicit cultural doctrine, but rather from the way people experience and internalize the home as an extension of the self.

Furthermore, the field findings are consistent with Edward Relph’s (1976) notion of *placelessness*, which may arise when individuals encounter unfamiliar environments (Relph, 1976). Many informants described their new homes as initially feeling “empty,” “quiet,” or “not yet comfortable to inhabit.” In such conditions, the act of bringing soil from the previous residence is understood as a means of reducing feelings of estrangement and fostering psychological comfort. Notably, none of the informants attributed ritual or apotropaic functions to the soil; instead, their explanations were predominantly psychological, emphasizing feelings of calmness and an increased ease of adaptation.

At the cultural level, this meaning is also closely linked to the Javanese cultural logic that prioritizes inner tranquility (*tentrem*) in the face of major life transitions. Several studies indicate that Javanese communities frequently employ simple symbols as a way of regulating emotions and maintaining inner balance (Brilyandio, 2021; Woodward, 2010). The field findings reveal a similar pattern: soil is not utilized as a spiritual medium, but rather as a symbolic device to stabilize emotional states when entering a new environment. The manner in which participants articulate this practice suggests that relocating to a new home is perceived not merely as a physical activity, but as a psychological transition that necessitates symbolic adjustment.

An analysis of generational differences reveals an intriguing transformation of meaning. Older generations, who have long resided in their original homes, demonstrate a deeper sense of place attachment and tend to interpret *nggowo lemah* as a form of experiential continuity. In contrast, younger generations exhibit more flexible interpretations. While they do not entirely abandon the tradition, their level of attachment appears to diminish. As one community figure in Beru noted, “*Anak-anak saiki yo ora mikir sing ngono-ngono* -Younger people today no longer think in such

terms.” (TM-B1, 2025) Nevertheless, some still regard *nggowo lemah* as part of familial identity and a form of respect for ancestors, even if they do not always feel compelled to practice it directly. Thus, the meaning of the tradition is not lost, but rather reconfigured in response to changing lifestyles and generational orientations.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the meaning of *nggowo lemah* is rooted in the community’s emotional experience of the former home and is reinforced by cultural understandings that emphasize the importance of maintaining inner tranquility during periods of transition. This meaning intersects with theories of place attachment and the concept of place continuity, which explain how symbolic elements—such as soil—can facilitate spatial transitions. Accordingly, *nggowo lemah* embodies emotional, psychological, and cultural dimensions of meaning, while generational shifts indicate not a disappearance, but a gradual attenuation in its intensity.

Cultural Logic Behind Tradition: Socio–Psychological Functions, Collective Rationality, and Generational Transformation

The socio–psychological function of the *nggowo lemah* tradition within the communities of Calungan, Beru, and Candisari becomes particularly evident when families undergo residential relocation as a transitional experience requiring a sense of stability. Many informants described that bringing a handful of soil helps create a feeling of safety and continuity, especially for family members who maintain strong emotional attachments to their former home. One informant explained, “*Biar anak-anak merasa kaya tetap nyambung karo omah lawas* - So that the children feel as if they are still connected to the old house.” (IB-C2, 2025) This statement underscores that the primary function of the practice lies not in religious symbolism or formal customary obligation, but in its capacity to sustain a sense of continuity with past experiences when entering a new space.

From a psychological perspective, the role of soil can be understood through the concept of a *security blanket* in transitional psychology, namely a simple object that provides comfort when individuals face environmental change (Nurlia & Nurasiah, 2017). Winnicott (1971) suggests that individuals tend to maintain symbolic connections with familiar spaces to facilitate smoother processes of adaptation (Winnicott, 1971). Within this framework, soil functions as a form of *transitional reassurance*—not because of any inherent supernatural power attributed to it, but because it symbolically and emotionally bridges the experience of dwelling in the old home with the conditions of the new one.

Beyond its psychological role, this tradition also carries a social dimension reflected in how it is practiced within the family. Field findings indicate that the act of bringing soil is generally decided in a spontaneous and personal manner; however, in practice, it remains embedded within an awareness of the family as a social unit. Several informants acknowledged that they carried soil not solely for themselves, but to help other family members—particularly children—feel more comfortable in the new environment. Thus, this tradition illustrates how a simple symbol can mediate collective adaptation processes within the family without necessitating formal rituals or organized gatherings.

This social function can be further interpreted through Bowen's concept of the *family emotional system*, which emphasizes the role of the family as a stabilizing unit when its members encounter significant transitions (Bowen, 1993). Although *nggowo lemah* is enacted as an individual practice, its impact is communal insofar as it helps the family collectively maintain continuity in values, space, and identity. The practice signifies that relocation does not erase traces of the past, thereby providing a shared emotional grounding for the family as they enter a new environment.

The connection between this tradition and emotional stability also resonates with Beatty's (1999) argument that culture operates as a mechanism for managing affect. Beatty highlights that simple symbolic acts may function as tools for organizing emotions in situations that potentially generate uncertainty (Beatty, 1999). From this perspective, *nggowo lemah* serves as a medium for emotional regulation in the context of relocation—a situation widely recognized in environmental psychology as capable of triggering anxiety, loss, or unfamiliarity. Informants who reported feeling “more settled” or “calmer” when carrying soil indicate that the function of this cultural practice operates through lived experience rather than theological assumptions or ritual structures.

From a religious standpoint, religious leaders interviewed emphasized that this practice constitutes a cultural custom without grounding in Islamic law (*sharī'a*). One religious figure in Calungan, for instance, stated that “it is merely a habit of earlier generations, not an act of worship.” (TA-C4, 2025) Similar statements were expressed by other informants, who asserted that the practice is permissible “as long as it is not believed to possess inherent power.” (TM-B1, 2025) These perspectives demonstrate how the community distinguishes between normative religious teachings and local traditions that primarily serve social and emotional functions.

This phenomenon aligns with Geertz's (1976) classical observation that Javanese society negotiates the boundary between religion and custom through flexible patterns of accommodation. Within his *santri-abangan-priyayi* framework,

Geertz illustrates that cultural practices often occupy an “in-between” space—neither fully religious nor entirely secular—yet remain valued due to their social functions (Geertz, 1976). Such a pattern helps explain how practices lacking explicit theological legitimacy can persist as part of everyday life.

Woodward (1989) further reinforces this finding by demonstrating that the development of Islam in Java has historically involved symbolic dialogue between Islamic teachings and local traditions (Woodward, 1989). Many cultural practices are maintained because they provide structures of meaning that assist communities in managing liminal experiences such as birth, death, or relocation (Maksum et al., 2025). This is reflected in several informants’ remarks that carrying soil is intended to help individuals “feel at home more quickly” in a new residence—an explanation that highlights emotional function rather than theological belief.

A similar analytical framework can be drawn from the concept of *‘urf* in Islamic legal theory. Within the tradition of *fiqh*, customary practices (*‘urf*) are recognized as long as they do not contradict fundamental religious principles (Daryanti & Nurjannah, 2021; Wandu, 2018). Classical scholars such as al-Qarāfī argue that *‘urf ṣaḥīḥ* (valid custom) may serve as a legitimate basis for social practices, particularly when it regulates interpersonal relations and fulfills emotional needs without involving prohibited beliefs (Aḥmad ibn Idrīs al-Qarāfī, 1998). Although the religious figures interviewed did not explicitly invoke this terminology, their perspectives are consistent with this principle.

Overall, *nggowo lemah* persists not because of religious legitimation, but due to its function in maintaining emotional and social continuity during residential transitions. The practice exemplifies how Javanese communities negotiate the relationship between religion and custom through flexible cultural processes, allowing local traditions to endure without contradicting Islamic principles.

Generational transformation constitutes a crucial dimension in understanding the dynamics of this tradition. Nearly all informants noted that younger generations rarely perform the practice. Younger individuals—particularly those with higher mobility and more pragmatic life orientations—tend to perceive relocation as a purely functional activity: changing address, organizing belongings, and occupying a new house, without requiring symbolic acts to mark the transition. As one community leader in Beru remarked, “*Anak-anak saiki yo ora mikir sing ngono-ngono* - Young people nowadays no longer think in such ways.” (TM-B1, 2025) This statement indicates a shift in value orientation, wherein younger generations prioritize efficiency and rationality over emotional symbolism.

This transformation can be interpreted through Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus*, defined as a system of dispositions shaped through long-term social experience that structures ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (Bourdieu, 2020). In this context, the habitus of older generations was formed through relatively stable living conditions, strong attachments to land and home, and cultural patterns emphasizing spatial continuity. In contrast, the habitus of younger generations is shaped by modern education, mobility, media exposure, and lifestyles that emphasize flexibility (Anastasya, 2024). This shift in habitus renders traditions once perceived as self-evident less influential in shaping contemporary practices.

From the perspective of anthropological theories of cultural change, this phenomenon reflects a process of *cultural deintensification*, wherein a practice does not disappear entirely but experiences a decline in intensity, frequency, and emotional significance across generations (A'yun et al., 2024). *Nggowo lemah* is not directly rejected; rather, it undergoes a narrowing of its practitioner base, persisting among families who maintain strong attachments to place while gradually fading among more mobile or urban-oriented groups.

In conclusion, the functions of this tradition can be understood across three interrelated dimensions:

1. **Psychological function:** providing a sense of security and continuity of identity when entering a new environment.
2. **Familial social function:** facilitating collective adaptation through symbolic means that stabilize emotional conditions within the family.
3. **Cultural function:** preserving symbolic practices of spatial continuity within Javanese society without requiring ritualistic or religious legitimation.

However, these functions are increasingly challenged by shifting value orientations among younger generations. The persistence of *nggowo lemah* depends largely on its continued relevance in addressing the socio-psychological needs of contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that the practice of *nggowo lemah* in three villages (Calungan, Beru, and Candisari) is maintained as a simple and adaptive domestic custom rather than a formal ritual. Its core pattern involves bringing a handful of soil from the former house, with technical variations concerning its placement. The meaning attached to this practice is primarily emotional and closely related to *place attachment*, understood as an effort to preserve continuity of memory and psychological comfort when entering a new environment. The findings identify three main functions of this

practice. First, at the psychological level, *nggowo lemah* serves as a support mechanism for a sense of security and continuity of place. Second, at the social level, it operates as a collective family mechanism that facilitates the adaptation process of family members during residential relocation. Third, at the cultural level, *nggowo lemah* functions to preserve a symbolic continuity of space despite lacking formal religious legitimation. Furthermore, findings on generational transformation indicate a decline in the intensity of this practice among younger generations, who tend to adopt more pragmatic orientations. As a result, its sustainability largely depends on its continued functional relevance in meeting the emotional and social needs of contemporary communities.

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