

Sacred and Rational Negotiations: The Contestation between *Ulu Desa* and *Prajuru Desa* in Pedawa and Julah, North Bali

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Abstract

This study examines the contestation between *Ulu Desa* (sacred-traditional authority) and *Prajuru Desa* (administrative authority) in the *Bali Aga* villages of Pedawa and Julah, which reflects the ongoing tension between customary governance and state regulation. The research aims to analyze how historical trajectories, regulatory frameworks, and socio-economic transformations have shaped the dynamics between sacred and bureaucratic leadership. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and interpreted with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field as well as Foucault's theories on power and discourse. The findings reveal that, (1) historical practices of surveillance embedded dual forms of discipline ritual and administrative within village governance, (2) the penetration of state mechanisms, particularly through village competitions and regional regulations, gradually displaced sacred legitimacy in favor of bureaucratic authority and (3) socio-economic factors such as migration, education, technology, and financial support further reinforced the dominance of *Prajuru Desa*. Nevertheless, *Ulu Desa* continues to hold symbolic significance as a guardian of cosmological order. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that the contestation between these two institutions illustrates a hybridization of power in Bali Aga society, where tradition and modernity coexist through tension, negotiation, and adaptation.

Keywords: *Bali Aga*; Panopticon; Power Hybridization; State Regulation; Social Transformation

Introduction

The presence of *Ulu Desa* in Bali Aga communities such as Pedawa and Julah represents a form of customary leadership rooted in both social and religious structures. The *Ulu Desa* functions not only as a spiritual authority but also as a guardian of customary order and cosmic balance. It regulates ritual practices, mediates between the *sekala* (visible) and *niskala* (invisible) realms, and combines administrative, social, and sacred dimensions within its leadership. This model of authority emerges from the community's collective habitus, which positions cosmic harmony as the basis of political legitimacy (Maheni et al., 2021; Subanda et al., 2020).

However, the process of village modernization has gradually reshaped this structure. Since the 1976 *Lomba Desa Adat* (Traditional Village Competition), which standardized performance through administrative indicators, and subsequent formal regulations such as Regional Regulation No. 6/1986, No. 3/2001, and No. 4/2019, the authority of the *Ulu Desa* has been increasingly displaced by the bureaucratic logic imposed by the state (Maheni et al., 2021; Subanda et al., 2020). The emergence of the *Prajuru Desa* as an institution with both administrative and customary mandates has created overlapping jurisdictions and a shift in

authority. While the *Ulu Desa* derives legitimacy from sacredness and customary consensus, the *Prajuru Desa* is legitimized through state regulations. This dynamic reflects the encounter between two distinct logics cosmological and administrative. Theoretically, it can be interpreted as a struggle over symbolic capital (Bourdieu) and an illustration of how state power redefines local knowledge (Foucault).

In practice, this is manifested in the overlapping of *awig-awig* authority and state law, particularly visible in the role of Kerta Desa as a customary court with binding legal power (Antari et al., 2023; Prasada et al., 2024). Thus, the relationship between *Ulu Desa* and *Prajuru Desa* should not be viewed merely as an institutional issue but as an arena of ideological and political negotiation. Previous studies have examined Balinese customary governance but often in a normative manner. Dharmawan (2020) emphasizes the *Ulu Desa* as a consensus-based democratic mechanism, Swanson (2018) highlights its adaptability to globalization, and Hardjowardojo (2017) stresses the need to protect local wisdom from state intervention. While valuable, these works do not specifically address the relational dynamics between *Ulu Desa* and *Prajuru Desa* emerging from regional regulations. This gap provides the entry point for the present study.

The main contribution of this research lies in offering a critical perspective on the transformation of customary authority under bureaucratization. Its novelty does not reside merely in describing the customary system but in analyzing the co-evolution between traditional and administrative authorities, showing that such adaptation often unfolds in tension rather than harmony. This approach expands the discourse on customary governance and opens new avenues for understanding how state intervention reconfigures local authority in North Bali.

Methodologically, this study adopts a multidimensional qualitative approach that explores historical, regulatory, and socio-cultural dimensions. A critical literature review and document analysis are combined with participatory observation and semi-structured interviews with customary leaders, *Prajuru Desa* officials, state apparatus, and community members in Pedawa and Julah. The data are analyzed thematically and triangulated across sources to construct a conceptual model of co-evolution between customary and administrative authority (Creswell, 2014; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2015).

Methods

The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate the contestation between the customary authority of the *Ulu Desa* and the administrative authority of the *Prajuru Desa* in Pedawa and Julah, two *Bali Aga* villages in Buleleng Regency, North Bali. These sites were chosen because they preserve strong customary leadership structures while simultaneously being subjected to state regulations, making them critical cases for examining the intersection of sacred and bureaucratic authority. Data were drawn from both primary and secondary sources primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and informal discussions, while secondary data included regional regulations (Regional Regulation No. 6/1986, No. 3/2001, No. 4/2019, and Governor Regulation No. 720/1992), village archives, and scholarly literature on Balinese customary governance. Informants consisted not only of the *Ulu Desa* and *Prajuru Desa* as the main actors but also of 8 additional participants representing community elders, youth, women leaders, cultural practitioners, and village officials, selected through purposive and snowball sampling to capture diverse perspectives. Data collection was supported by interview guides, observation notes, and document checklists, refined through preliminary field testing.

Analysis followed an interactive model involving transcription, reduction, categorization, and thematic coding, with themes such as ritual legitimacy, bureaucratic accountability, and negotiation of power emerging across sources these were subsequently interpreted using Bourdieu's framework of habitus, capital, and field together with Foucault's concepts of discourse and power/knowledge relations. Validity was ensured through triangulation of sources and methods, member checking, prolonged engagement in the field, and reflective note-taking, thereby strengthening the credibility and dependability of the findings.

Results and Discussion

1. Panopticism in Historical Trajectory

The shifting balance of authority between the *Ulu Desa* and *prajuru* in *Bali Aga* villages such as Julah and Pedawa can be understood through a long genealogy of power in which surveillance, legitimacy, and governance were continuously reconfigured. Using Foucault's concept of panopticism and Bourdieu's notions of habitus, capital, and field, this trajectory reveals how the symbolic authority of the *Ulu Desa* was gradually subordinated to the bureaucratic power of the *prajuru*, a process shaped by dynastic politics, colonial restructuring, and modern state regulation.

During the Warmadewa period (9th-10th century), the *Ulu Desa* or *Kabayan* embodied a holistic authority that encompassed ritual, judicial, and economic functions. They represented the cosmological center of the community, legitimized by sacred traditions. The state, however, reinforced its control through taxation, corvée labor, and the spatial organization of villages into fenced settlements with single entrances. These designs not only protected communities but also enabled monitoring of compliance. Royal officials (*caksu*) ensured that tribute and ritual obligations were fulfilled, intertwining sacred cosmology with administrative surveillance (Atmadja, 2010; Ardika, 2018).

In this early configuration, the *Kabayan* still held primary symbolic and practical authority, though already under the gaze of royal oversight. The Majapahit conquest in the 14th century marked a critical shift. The establishment of sacred shrines, population enumeration, and temple records expanded surveillance while narrowing the *Kabayan's* scope of authority. Administrative agents sent by Majapahit increasingly handled political and economic matters, relegating the *Kabayan* to ritual leadership. This transition illustrates how symbolic capital, once concentrated in the *Ulu Desa*, began to shift toward *Prajuru Desa*-like officials backed by royal legitimacy (Korn, 1932; Sastrodiwiryono, 1983).

Through Bourdieu's lens, the field of village governance was restructured, ritual authority persisted, but its influence was reduced relative to the emerging bureaucratic apparatus. The rise of the Buleleng kingdom under Panji Sakti in the 17th century deepened this process. Shrines and temples were not only religious centers but also instruments of political surveillance, reinforcing loyalty to both divine and royal order. The introduction of the *tempekan* system subdivided communities, allowing closer monitoring of obligations. This crystallized a dual authority system, the *Kabayan* retained symbolic leadership, while *Prajuru Desa* gained control of administration and resources.

In Foucauldian terms, surveillance became more diffused, integrating sacred practices into mechanisms of governance. By the 18th and early 19th centuries, under Karangasem domination, bureaucratic control was further institutionalized. Temples and rituals were supervised within administrative structures, demonstrating the fusion of sacred authority with royal oversight. The *Kabayan* remained respected as ritual leaders, yet their authority was subordinated to *Prajuru Desa* officials who held greater access to economic

and political capital. Here the redistribution of capital is evident: ritual legitimacy alone was insufficient to compete with the bureaucratic and economic strength of the *Prajuru Desa*. The Dutch colonial state formalized this dualism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Colonial administrators institutionalized the division between customary and administrative spheres: the *banjar* was recognized as the locus of ritual and social life, while the *Perbekel* represented the village under colonial governance (Warren, 1991; Tsuchiya, 1986).

Through cadastral mapping, population registers, and codified regulations, colonial authorities created a modern form of surveillance that further marginalized the *Ulu Desa*. Their role was confined to religious and symbolic domains, while the *Prajuru Desa* and colonial-appointed officials exercised broader administrative control. This restructuring not only displaced the *Kabayan* but also normalized a governance model in which ritual and administrative domains coexisted under unequal conditions. From this genealogy, it becomes clear that the authority of the *Ulu Desa* was not simply diminished by external forces but systematically reshaped through overlapping regimes of surveillance.

Foucault's panopticism highlights how visibility through censuses, sacred spaces, and bureaucratic procedures ensured compliance while also reordering authority. Bourdieu's perspective shows how symbolic capital, once dominant, was eclipsed by the economic and legal capital accumulated by the *Prajuru Desa*. The field of village governance thus evolved from one dominated by ritual leaders into a hybrid arena where symbolic and bureaucratic powers coexist, though unequally. In the present, these historical layers continue to shape governance in Julah and Pedawa.

The *Ulu Desa* still command respect as ritual leaders, maintaining traditions and symbolic continuity. Yet their authority operates alongside, and often in tension with, the *Prajuru Desa*, who embody administrative rationality and are reinforced by modern state regulations such as Regional Regulation No. 4/2019. Contemporary contestations between the two thus cannot be reduced to local disputes, they are the latest expression of a centuries-long process in which symbolic authority has been subordinated to bureaucratic power. The relevance of this historical trajectory lies in its explanation of why authority struggles remain persistent. The *Ulu Desa*'s authority draws on habitus and symbolic capital deeply rooted in cosmology and tradition, while the *Prajuru Desa* authority rests on bureaucratic recognition, legal codification, and economic management.

These two forms of legitimacy inevitably clash in contexts where both sacred tradition and state regulation claim supremacy. By tracing the genealogy of this shift, we see not only the endurance of *Bali Aga* traditions but also the structural transformation that has redefined village governance. Thus, the contestation between *Ulu Desa* and *Prajuru Desa* reflects more than leadership rivalry, it embodies a long history of shifting power relations, where panoptic surveillance and redistribution of capital have displaced ritual centrality in favor of bureaucratic dominance. This layered genealogy underscores that current struggles are rooted in centuries of transformation, making them crucial for understanding the dynamics of authority in *Bali Aga* villages today.

2. The Penetration of State Logic

The Village Competition (*Lomba Desa*) in Bali in 1976 can be understood as the initial entry point for the penetration of state logic into the customary system, particularly in the *Bali Aga* villages. On the surface, the competition was designed as an evaluation of development and cultural preservation, but substantively it became a mechanism of guidance and standardization of social structures. Villages such as Pedawa and Julah, which previously

had leadership systems based on the *Ulu Desa* collective, spiritual, and hereditary were directed to become legible to state bureaucratic standards through requirements such as clear organizational structures, written *awig-awig*, and the implementation of the *Kahyangan Tiga* system. In Julah, several elders recalled that before the competition, we never thought of writing down the *awig-awig*; everything was preserved orally (Interview, I Ketut Sidemen, Julah, 2024). Meanwhile, in Pedawa, villagers associated the competition with the obligation to display modern-style offices and documents, which they felt were more for the eyes of the government than for our own needs (Interview, I Ketut Sidemen, Pedawa, 2024).

According to Antonio Gramsci (1971) state hegemony operates not only through coercion but also through the creation of cultural consensus. The Village Competition can be read as a form of passive hegemony customary communities voluntarily adjusted themselves to the state framework in pursuit of legitimacy and recognition. In Pedawa, local leaders acknowledged that compliance with the competition format was driven by the desire to achieve prestige and state recognition, even though the true life of the village is not in those documents, but in the honoring of traditions and rituals (Interview, Wayan Sukrata, Pedawa, 2024).

This marked the beginning of a transition when adat no longer fully stood on its own logic, but entered an arena defined by the state. The next stage appeared with Regional Regulation (*Perda*) No. 6 of 1986, which for the first time institutionalized customary village institutions within the regional legal framework. This regulation appeared to be an act of recognition, but in fact contained a homogenizing agenda. The *Prajuru Desa* model (*Bendesa*, *Petajuh*, *Penyarikan*, and so on), adopted from the *Bali Nagari* system, was imposed as the single standard, ignoring the distinctiveness of the *Ulu Desa* system of the *Bali Aga*.

In Julah, several informants described this period as confusing because they were suddenly asked to elect a *Bendesa*, while the *Ulu Desa* lineage still had to be respected, leading to overlapping authority (Interview, I Ketut Sidemen, Julah, 2024). James C. Scott (1998) in *Seeing Like a State*, explains that modern states always seek to create social systems that are legible. Thus, *Perda* 6/1986 was not merely a regulation, but an instrument to make *Bali Aga adat* more easily monitored and controlled. From Pierre Bourdieu's perspective (1984) the imposition of the *Bali Nagari* model onto the *Bali Aga* produced a hysteresis effect, namely a tension between the old habitus and the new arena.

The customary habitus fluid, oral, and spiritual was forced to adapt to a bureaucratic arena that emphasized administrative order. This process generated misrecognition, as communities accepted the new structure as normal or ideal, even though it was an external construction. A Pedawa elder remarked, we follow that system because it is the rule, but in practice people still go to the *Ulu Desa* for blessings and decisions (Interview, Wayan Sukrata, Pedawa, 2024). This is where symbolic domination operates the state model is adopted formally, while the customary habitus survives informally. The Reform Era introduced *Perda* No. 3 of 2001 on *Desa Pekraman*.

This regulation formally recognized customary villages as public legal entities and even granted them the right to regulate adat life through *awig-awig*. However, this recognition was hegemonic, *Prajuru Desa* structures had to be standardized, *awig-awig* was required to be written, and customary values were aligned with *Tri Hita Karana*. Within Michel Foucault's (1980) framework, this regulation reflects *technologies of power* mechanisms of power that do not operate coercively but through classification, evaluation, and normalization. *Adat* became a space of examination, measured by formal standards, and

thus subordinated to the logic of modern administration. In Julah, the state's requirement to write down the *awig-awig* sparked debate among villagers, some feared that once written, it would be harder to change when circumstances demand flexibility (Interview, I Ketut Sidemen, Julah, 2024).

This phenomenon can also be interpreted through Clifford Geertz's (1980) concept of the theatre state, in which, in Bali, power operates not primarily through bureaucracy but through symbolism and ritual. The case of Pedawa, for instance, shows that *written awig-awig* was not considered valid until it underwent the *Lelintih Nemu Gelang* ritual. In other words, legal texts only acquired legitimacy when embedded within sacred performativity. As one Pedawa informant stated emphatically the government wants paper, but for us, paper has no power before it is consecrated (Interview, Wayan Sudiastika, Pedawa, 2024). The most recent stage is *Perda* No. 4 of 2019, which appeared more accommodating by explicitly recognizing the existence of *Desa Adat Tua* with the *Ulu Desa* system.

Yet in practice, ambivalence remains. *Bali Aga* villages that had operated hybrid systems since the 1980s continue to maintain dualism *Prajuru Desa* administrators function to meet bureaucratic demands, while the *Ulu Desa* remains preserved as a spiritual symbol. In Julah, villagers describe this dualism as two faces of one village one facing the government, the other facing the ancestors (Interview, Wayan Sukrata, Pedawa, 2024). This phenomenon reflects what Sally Engle Merry (1988) calls legal pluralism customary law and state law do not negate one another but interact through complex negotiations. Reviewing the process from the Village Competition to the various regional regulations, it becomes clear that the penetration of state logic unfolded gradually beginning with persuasive mechanisms (the competition), followed by institutional regulations (*Perda* 6/1986), strengthened through hegemonic recognition (*Perda* 3/2001), and culminating in ambivalent affirmation (*Perda* 4/2019).

This process produced institutional hybridization, where adat persists but in a form conditioned by the state. Thus, the relationship between the state and adat in *Bali Aga* is dialectical: the state embeds bureaucratic logic through competitions, regulations, and symbolization, while customary communities respond with symbolic resistance through ritual, habitus, and adaptive strategies. The cases of Julah and Pedawa show that even though the state pushes homogenization, villagers maintain ritual authority, debate the role of written law, and sustain a dual leadership system. This dialectic demonstrates that the *Bali Aga* customary system is not merely a victim of homogenization but also an active agent in shaping the space of negotiation for identity and authority amid state modernization.

3. Social and Economic Dynamics

Socio-economic changes in Julah and Pedawa illustrate how *Bali Aga* communities navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity. These shifts have not unfolded through frontal confrontation but through subtle negotiations permeating everyday social life, involving diaspora, education, information technology, and the economy. Diaspora is not merely a geographical relocation of *krama adat* for economic or educational purposes. An informant in Julah, I Ketut Sidemen, noted, Those who return from the city usually come with a different mindset more practical, sometimes questioning why ceremonies must be so expensive (Interview, January 20, 2025).

Another informant in Pedawa added, Children who work in Denpasar prefer faster prayers; they say Tri Sandya or a short prayer is enough (Interview, January 23, 2025). Such attitudes do not outright reject custom rather, they manifest in reduced participation in rituals,

criticism of ritual extravagance, and the adoption of shorter, standardized forms of worship. Thus, the return of migrants brings values of efficiency, rationality, and religious formality that gradually displace the hegemony of customary cosmology, marking forms of micro-resistances Foucault (1980) that are not frontal yet effectively shift the boundaries of power. This tension is further deepened by education. A *Balian Desa* in Pedawa stated, Those who go to school certainly know Hindu teachings, including Tri Sandya and Panca Sembah. Sometimes they question why our way is different (Interview, January 22, 2025).

A young graduate of *pasraman* added, We were taught to pray in a certain sequence, so when we see differences in the village, we get confused which one is right? (Interview, January 24, 2025). Such questions reveal epistemic tensions between local knowledge grounded in spiritual experience and formal knowledge shaped by the institutionalization of religion. In Bourdieu's perspective (1986) this condition reflects the emergence of new cultural capital formal religious knowledge that challenges the symbolic-spiritual authority of *balian* and customary elders. Furthermore, in line with Asad's (1986) thesis on the *scripturalization of religion*, religious practices once transmitted orally are now redefined through textual standards and formalized rituals.

Education thus becomes an arena of contestation of authority between the older and younger generations. Information technology further accelerates this transformation. A youth in Pedawa explained, Now we coordinate *paruman* more often through WhatsApp, but the elders still wait for the messenger to call them directly (Interview, January 24, 2025). An elder emphasized, If I am only informed through the phone, I often do not understand. It is better if someone comes directly or announces it in the *Bale Banjar* (Interview, January 25, 2025). This duality shows two parallel communication systems digital efficiency among the youth and traditional oral pathways among the elders.

As a result, those who are digitally literate gain greater access to information and decision-making, while those unfamiliar with digital tools risk exclusion. This situation demonstrates deskilling among the older generation and reskilling among the younger, which in turn shifts the balance of authority within the community. Redistribution of authority is most evident in administrative practices. According to Wayan Sudiastika (Interview, January 24, 2025), accountability reports and funding applications are now prepared by younger *Kelihan Desa*, while the *Ulu Desa* remains respected as a symbolic leader. Giddens (1990) refers to this phenomenon as *disembedding*, local social relations are reoriented toward abstract systems such as digital bureaucracy.

Elders lose part of their technical capacity due to unfamiliarity with online systems, while younger generations acquire digital capital Ragnedda and Ruiu (2017) new skills of strategic value in relations with the state and donor institutions. This creates a hybrid configuration, the *Ulu Desa* continues as a cosmological figure and symbolic center of legitimacy, but technocratic functions and external connections are mediated by younger officials. Economic factors further reinforce these changes through *Bantuan Keuangan Khusus* (BKK). The *Kelihan Desa* of Pedawa stated, If we dared to refuse government aid, perhaps we could stick with the old system, but if not, then we must adjust (Interview, January 22, 2025).

State support of Rp. 300 million annually (Regional Regulation No. 4/2019; Governor Regulation No. 34/2019) requires digital reporting, accountability, and transparency. Although these funds appear to strengthen custom because they are used for ceremonies or *bale banjar* construction, they actually embed bureaucratic discipline into village governance. Foucault (1980) describes this mechanism as *governmentality* power

operates through the internalization of administrative standards so that villages govern themselves according to state logic. In Bourdieu's framework (1984) the distribution of BKK reduces the *Ulu Desa's* symbolic capital rooted in tradition, while increasing the administrative capital of younger generations who master accounting and reporting systems. Thus, the language of development and transparency becomes an instrument of symbolic violence reforming custom to make it compatible with modern bureaucracy.

Overall, Julah and Pedawa are not simply undergoing modernization. They are shaping a hybrid power formation in which tradition is restructured to align with the logic of the state and modernity. The *Ulu Desa* is preserved as a cosmological figure, but technocratic and administrative authority shifts to younger *Prajuru Desa*. Informants emphasized pride in preserving custom, but also anxiety in facing bureaucratic demands. This illustrates that *Bali Aga* communities are not passive subjects but adaptive actors negotiating their identities between customary cosmology and modern rationality a fluid dynamic that may evolve into more radical structural shifts in the future.

Conclusion

The contestation between *Ulu Desa* and *Prajuru Desa* in *Bali Aga* villages is not merely an institutional clash but the outcome of long-standing historical, regulatory, and socio-economic processes. Over time, dynastic power, colonial restructuring, and state regulations, together with the impacts of migration, education, and technology, have continuously reshaped the distribution of authority within these communities. This historical trajectory explains why tensions between sacred and bureaucratic leadership remain persistent and deeply rooted. Within this dynamic, the *Ulu Desa* continues to endure as a symbolic and spiritual figure, safeguarding cosmological legitimacy and acting as the guardian of tradition. In contrast, the *Prajuru Desa* increasingly dominates the administrative and bureaucratic realm, supported by legal recognition, economic resources, and modern governance systems. The coexistence of these two authorities demonstrates that the struggle is not about elimination but about adaptation. Ultimately, the relationship between *Ulu Desa* and *Prajuru Desa* represents an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity. This negotiation results in a hybridization of power, where sacred authority and bureaucratic logic coexist through tension and mutual adjustment. The practical implications of this study emphasize the importance of designing policies that respect both dimensions of authority, fostering intergenerational dialogue to integrate sacred knowledge with new technocratic skills, and ensuring that ritual legitimacy remains central so that modernization does not erode the cosmological foundations of *Bali Aga* society.

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