

SACREDNESS, SOCIAL COHESION, AND RELIGIOUS HARMONY: PUNDEN NYAI PANDAN SARI AS A SYMBOLIC ECOLOGICAL SPACE AMID INDUSTRIAL EXPANSION IN MOJOKERTO

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Abstract

This study examines Punden Nyai Pandan Sari in Unengan Hamlet, Sekargadung Village, Mojokerto Regency, as a sacred space that mediates ecological ethics amid industrial expansion. Drawing on symbolic ecology, sacred natural site studies, and lived religion, the study addresses the gap between research on industrial ecology, sacred natural sites, and lived religion by asking how local sacredness shapes social cohesion, religious harmony, and symbolic ecological resistance. Using a qualitative case study with environmental ethnography, data were collected over two months of fieldwork, participatory observation, documentation, and ten semi-structured interviews with the *punden* custodian, village figures, a religious leader, residents, youth, and pilgrims, and were then analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that oral traditions about Nyai Pandan Sari, Punden Kemloko as the “vehicle” symbol, Snake Cave narratives, pilgrimage, *tahlil*, *tawasul*, and unwritten



prohibitions construct the *punden* as a symbolic ecological space. Its sacredness governs everyday behavior by encouraging visitors and residents to maintain cleanliness, respect the trees, avoid damaging the area, and follow visiting etiquette. Rather than producing direct opposition to industry, the *punden* supports non-confrontational ecological resistance through care, memory, ritual, and collective participation. The study contributes to religious harmony and environmental studies by showing that local wisdom can transform sacred space into a moral-cultural boundary that links humans, God, ancestors, community, and nature. It suggests that village-based governance should recognize such spaces as cultural and ecological assets while avoiding excessive claims beyond ethnographic evidence for communities experiencing rapid spatial and socio-economic transformation in industrial villages today.

Keywords: sacred space; local wisdom; industrial expansion; ecological ethics; Punden Nyai Pandan Sari

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji Punden Nyai Pandan Sari di Dusun Unengan, Desa Sekargadung, Kabupaten Mojokerto, sebagai ruang sakral yang memediasi etika ekologi di tengah ekspansi industri. Mengacu pada ekologi simbolik, studi situs alam suci, dan agama hidup, studi ini membahas kesenjangan antara penelitian tentang ekologi industri, situs alam suci, dan agama hidup dengan menanyakan bagaimana kesakralan lokal membentuk kohesi sosial, harmoni beragama, dan perlawanan ekologis simbolis. Dengan menggunakan studi kasus kualitatif dengan etnografi lingkungan, data dikumpulkan selama dua bulan kerja lapangan melalui observasi partisipatif, dokumentasi, dan sepuluh wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan penjaga punden, tokoh desa, tokoh agama, warga, pemuda, dan peziarah, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Temuan tersebut menunjukkan bahwa tradisi lisan tentang Nyai Pandan Sari, Punden Kemloko sebagai simbol "kendaraan", narasi Gua Ular, ziarah, tahlil, tawasul, serta larangan tidak tertulis untuk membangun punden sebagai ruang ekologis simbolis. Kesakralannya mengatur perilaku sehari-hari dengan mendorong pengunjung dan penduduk untuk menjaga kebersihan, menghormati pepohonan, menghindari kerusakan area, serta mematuhi etika kunjungan. Alih-alih menghasilkan oposisi langsung terhadap industri, pakar mendukung perlawanan ekologis non-konfrontatif melalui perawatan, ingatan, ritual, dan partisipasi kolektif. Studi ini berkontribusi pada keharmonisan agama dan studi lingkungan dengan menunjukkan bahwa kearifan lokal dapat mengubah ruang suci menjadi batas moral-budaya yang menghubungkan manusia, Tuhan, leluhur, komunitas, dan alam. Ini menyarankan bahwa tata kelola berbasis desa harus mengakui ruang tersebut sebagai aset budaya dan ekologis, sambil menghindari klaim berlebihan di luar bukti etnografi, bagi masyarakat yang mengalami transformasi spasial dan sosial-ekonomi yang cepat di desa-desa industri saat ini.

Kata kunci: ruang suci; kearifan lokal; ekspansi industri; etika ekologi; Punden Nyai Pandan Sari

INTRODUCTION

Around Punden Nyai Pandan Sari in Sekargadung, Mojokerto Regency, industrial expansion has reshaped space, ecological landscapes, and local socio-cultural life. Changes in land use, access roads, settlements, and environmental quality around the *punden* show how development enters community space and sacred memory. Industrialization can attract investment, create employment, and promote regional growth; however, it also pressures local spaces through land-use change and industrial site expansion (Utami et al., 2024) (Jamil et al., 2023), urban and land conversion pressure on biodiversity (Seto et al., 2012), pollution from emerging

contaminants (Gavrilescu et al., 2015), and waste from unmanaged plastic circularity (Klemeš et al., 2021). These pressures affect ecology but also produce social vulnerability and economic decline as industrial land is converted (Kennedy et al., 2023) (Talema & Nigusie, 2023) and weakened community mental well-being through eco-anxiety and climate-related distress (American Psychological Association & ecoAmerica, 2017) (Coffey et al., 2021) (Nasution et al., 2025). Thus, industrialization should be viewed as economic, spatial, ecological, and cultural transformation.

Local communities do not always respond to environmental change through open resistance. They often develop socio-cultural mechanisms to maintain attachment to meaningful places. Environmental uncertainty may strengthen collective solidarity when communities perceive threats of ecological degradation and identity loss. In this context, mythology, sacredness, and local traditions can function as cultural resistance, namely symbolic resistance against development that threatens local ecosystem sustainability (Verschuuren & Furuta, 2016) (Sponsel, 2020). Cultural traditions may therefore operate as symbols of ecological resistance to environmental degradation caused by industrial expansion (Falaq, 2024).

In Javanese tradition, a punden is a local space with spiritual, social, historical, and ecological functions. As ancestral reverence, it reproduces values, identity, and intergenerational social solidarity (Verschuuren, 2010). Its sacredness arises from beliefs linking places with ancestors, village founders, natural elements, or important events transmitted through stories, rituals, and social reverence ("Sacralization of Natural Environment and the Socio-Religious Conditions of the South Coast of Java," 2023). Such narratives help communities remember the past, build identity, and distinguish themselves from other groups (Lopez et al., 2025). Collective memory is also transmitted through myths, rituals, commemorations, artifacts, oral traditions, folktales (Gülüm, 2023), songs (Syam et al., 2024), and other practices of social memory (O'Connor, 2022).

At Punden Nyai Pandan Sari, ongoing visits by residents and pilgrims demonstrate its social and spiritual vitality. The site functions not only as a sacred place, but also as a social space linking collective memory, ancestral reverence, cultural-religious practices (Mossière, 2009a), and community identity. Studies on Punden Ki Andong Sari and Nyai Sabirah show that local figures, sacred sites, and natural elements can shape community identity, intangible cultural heritage, and spiritual connectedness (Utomo et al., 2025) (Karim et al., 2023). Thus, Punden Nyai Pandan Sari serves as a cultural resource for social cohesion, religious harmony, and ecological awareness amid industrial expansion in Mojokerto (Akbari et al., 2024).

Operationally, "symbolic ecological space" in this study refers to a sacred local space where ecological meaning is produced through myth, ritual, oral narrative, prohibition, and everyday respect for the site. It does not indicate measured ecological quality, but a moral-cultural framework that guides how the community relates to trees, land, ancestors, and sacred surroundings.

The existence of this punden is important for social cohesion, namely a sense of belonging to a community or territory and an orientation toward the common good (Schiefer & Van Der Noll, 2017). Ritual practices, pilgrimage, mutual cooperation,

environmental care, and shared reverence for the punden strengthen social bonds, collective affection, and community togetherness (Singh et al., 2020) as well as social norms and environmental conservation practices (Dawson, 2024). Under industrialization pressures, the punden preserves social relations among residents and strengthens community social resilience (Paramita et al., 2023).

The punden also serves as a space of religious harmony, understood here not primarily as interfaith relations, but as balanced relations among formal religion, local tradition, community ethics, and the environment. Reverence for the punden should not be viewed as contradicting religion, but as local culture that connects prayer, gratitude, ancestral respect, social ethics, and care for sacred surroundings. It becomes a dialogical space where religion and local wisdom support social cohesion and shared cultural values (Gede Agung et al., 2024).

From the perspective of symbolic ecology, natural elements such as trees, soil, water, stones, springs, and sacred spaces can function as symbols connecting humans with ancestors, community, and cosmological order. This relationship arises through signs, perception, communication, and the categorization of nature (Maran & Kull, 2014). Nature also contains intrinsic and relational values emerging from meaningful relationships among humans, communities, and their environment (Himes et al., 2024). Sacred spaces, which are regarded as holy, are often protected through taboos, rituals, social norms, and collective beliefs that restrict acts of environmental destruction (Tatay & Merino, 2023a). In many cases, sacred spaces function as centers of long-term culture-based conservation (Verschuuren, 2010). Therefore, the sacredness of Punden Nyai Pandan Sari can be understood as a cultural mechanism that helps maintain ecological sustainability amid modernization and industrial expansion (Ibrahim Siregar & Suheri Sahputra Rangkuti, 2024).

Thus, symbol-based ecological resistance is not only a cultural expression but also a socio-political strategy that integrates religious values, tradition, and local wisdom to maintain environmental sustainability. Punden Nyai Pandan Sari becomes an alternative space for understanding society-environment relations in ecological-material, symbolic, spiritual, and social terms. This dynamic is relevant for formulating inclusive, participatory conservation policies grounded in local practices (Tatay & Merino, 2023b) (Zannini et al., 2021). In Mojokerto, the punden can serve as a symbol of ecological resistance and a space of negotiation among industrial development, environmental sustainability, cultural identity, and socio-religious harmony.

Industrialization studies explain ecological impacts mainly through land-use change, environmental degradation, waste, and pressure on natural resources, but they rarely read sacredness as a local mechanism for social harmony and ecological meaning (Seto et al., 2012) ; (Gavrilescu et al., 2015) ; (Klemeš et al., 2021). Environmental psychology studies examine emotional responses such as eco-anxiety, but give limited attention to collective cultural resources that help communities interpret environmental pressure (Coffey et al., 2021) ; (Ágoston et al., 2022). Meanwhile, studies on sacred natural sites, mythology, and ritual practices show that sacred spaces regulate human-nature relations through spiritual values and social

norms, but they do not specifically address industrial expansion (Verschuuren, 2010) ; (Verschuuren & Furuta, 2016) ; (Sponsel, 2020). Therefore, the gap lies in explaining how mythology, sacredness, social cohesion, and religious harmony operate together as a form of symbolic ecological resistance in an industrializing local space.

Based on this gap, this study positions Punden Nyai Pandan Sari as a symbolic ecological space that links local sacredness, social cohesion, and religious harmony amid industrial expansion in Mojokerto. The punden is viewed not only as a cultural site but as a space where communities construct meaning, preserve collective memory, strengthen solidarity, maintain harmonious relations among religion, tradition, community, and environment, and respond to industrialization through local values embedded in social practices. This article is guided by three research questions: first, how is Punden Nyai Pandan Sari interpreted by the community as a symbolic ecological space? Second, how does local sacredness shape social cohesion and religious harmony around the punden? Third, how do myths, rituals, oral narratives, and unwritten prohibitions function as symbolic ecological resistance amid industrial expansion in Mojokerto?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using environmental ethnography and a case study method. The approach was chosen to understand cultural meanings, symbols, collective memory, and spiritual practices around Punden Nyai Pandan Sari. Ethnography studies social interactions, behaviors, and belief systems through the researcher's direct engagement in the field, enabling in-depth understanding of the community's social and environmental worldview (Reeves et al., 2008). Here, environmental ethnography examines how the community interprets sacred space, nature, ritual practices, and ecological changes related to industrialization.

The case study method was required because this research focuses on a single bounded case: Punden Nyai Pandan Sari, a sacred local space in Unengan Hamlet, Sekargadung Village, Mojokerto Regency, within changing social, ecological, and industrial landscapes. The unit of analysis is the punden as a sacred, social, and symbolic ecological space, including its mythology, ritual practices, oral narratives, social actors, spatial surroundings, and community responses to environmental change. The case is bounded by place, actors, and issue. Spatially, it is limited to the punden area and surrounding community. Socially, it focuses on actors involved with or knowledgeable about the punden. Thematically, it examines sacredness, social cohesion, religious harmony, and symbolic ecological resistance.

The lead author, who conducted the fieldwork, positioned herself as a direct field observer and interpretive instrument, engaging with informants, observing social practices, recording spatial-environmental conditions, and reflecting on field experiences through detailed notes. As a researcher from outside the immediate hamlet but familiar with the broader Mojokerto region and Javanese Islamic practice, she balanced insider cultural familiarity with the analytical distance of an academic observer. Analytical distance was maintained through triangulation, member checking, and comparison between interviews, observations, and documentation.

Environmental ethnography was applied by recording ritual activities, social interactions, reverence patterns, cleanliness practices, tree and green-space maintenance, sacred boundaries, oral narratives, and residents' responses to spatial and environmental change around the punden.

Fieldwork was carried out for two months, or eight weeks. Preliminary observations identified site conditions, social actors, ritual activities, and environmental dynamics around the punden. The study then involved repeated field visits, participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, documentation, and data verification with key informants. This duration allowed rapport building, cultural understanding, and natural observation of social and ritual practices in their everyday setting.

Research participants were selected through purposive sampling, selecting informants with knowledge, experience, and direct involvement with Punden Nyai Pandan Sari. The study involved ten informants: the punden custodian, customary leaders, religious leaders, local residents, pilgrims, village officials, village youth, and community members affected by environmental changes and industrial expansion. Criteria included knowledge of the history or mythology of Nyai Pandan Sari, involvement in rituals or punden maintenance, residence around the site for at least five years, understanding of environmental changes, and willingness to provide information. Key informants were selected from individuals with local knowledge and authority, such as custodians, village elders, and community leaders.

Informant information :

NO	Code	Role	Age	Gender	Length of Stay	Relevance
1	PI	Village figures	58	Man	More than 10 years	Provides information on village history, social changes, and community perceptions of Punden Nyai Pandan Sari
2	DW	Village figures	45	Woman	More than 10 years	Provides a female community perspective on local traditions, social relations, and the meaning of the punden
3	PDK	Village figures	63	Man	More than 10 years	Provides historical knowledge, oral narratives, and long-term observations of changes around the punden.
4	ARP	Village figures	56	Man	More than 10 years	Provides information on community values, local leadership, and social cohesion related to the punden
5	STO	Religious leader	60	Man	More than 10 years	Provides religious interpretation of ritual practices, sacredness, prayer, and religious harmony around the punden
6	BD	Pilgrims	44	Man	More than 2 years	Provides the pilgrim's perspective on spiritual experience, ritual motivation, and reverence toward the punden
7	MD	Pilgrims	50	Man	More than 2 years	Provides information on pilgrimage practices, sacred meaning, and continuity of spiritual visits to the punden
8	PR	Village youth	27	Man	More than 10 years	Provides a younger generation's perspective on local identity, environmental awareness, and cultural continuity
9	AG	Local people	55	Man	More than 10 years	Provides everyday community perspectives on environmental changes,

						local wisdom, and social practices around the punden
10	SPR	Caretaker of the Punden	58	Man	More than 10 years	Provides key information on the punden's history, mythology, ritual procedures, sacred prohibitions, and site maintenance

Source: Observations were conducted in February and March 2026

Data were collected through participatory observation, ten semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Each interview lasted 30–60 minutes and used a guide while allowing informants to explain their experiences in depth. Observation focused on rituals, patterns of reverence, cleanliness practices, trees, green spaces, sacred symbols, residents' narratives, and community involvement in maintaining the punden. Field notes were descriptive and reflective, recording spatial conditions, ritual situations, interactions, and researcher reflections. Documentation included site photographs, ritual objects, trees, access routes, and community records. Question themes covered mythology, sacred meaning, rituals, relations with nature, industrial change, ecological concerns, social cohesion, and religious harmony.

This study received ethical clearance from the research ethics committee of Uluwiyah University prior to fieldwork. Ethical standards were upheld through informed consent, confidentiality, and informants' right to refuse questions or to stop interviews at any point. Consent was obtained verbally from each informant before interviews, in line with local custom, and separately for any photograph in which an individual is identifiable. The researcher respected local norms, sacred-space procedures, customary prohibitions, and religious sensitivities. Photo documentation was done with relevant permission. During rituals, the researcher avoided actions that could disrupt activities or offend beliefs.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedure, combined with the Miles and Huberman data reduction, theme categorization, data presentation, and conclusion-drawing sequence. Interview data, observation notes, and documentation were coded to identify patterns of mythology, sacredness, rituals, social cohesion, religious harmony, and ecological resistance. Data validity used source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, and detailed field notes. Source triangulation compared information from the custodian, residents, religious leaders, pilgrims, and village officials. Method triangulation compared interviews, observations, and documentation. Member checking reconfirmed main findings with key informants to ensure interpretations matched community experiences. Through these stages, the study explains how symbols, rituals, collective memory, and local beliefs shape ecological awareness, social cohesion, religious harmony, and community strategies in facing industrialization and environmental change in Mojokerto Regency.

Table 1.
Data Source Mapping, Indicators, and Core Constructs

No.	Core Construct	Focus of Study	Observed Indicators	Main Data Sources	Data Collection Techniques
1	Punden as a Symbolic Ecological Space	Interpretation of the punden as a physical, symbolic, spiritual, social, and ecological space	The punden is understood as a sacred space; trees, soil, water sources, or green spaces are preserved; there are prohibitions against damaging the punden area; the punden functions as a marker of local identity	Punden custodian, customary leaders, local residents, site documentation	Field observation, in-depth interviews, visual documentation
2	Mythology of Nyai Pandan Sari	Local stories, legends, and oral narratives that shape community meanings of the punden	Stories about the origin of Nyai Pandan Sari; intergenerational transmission of narratives; narratives about ancestors, local figures, or village guardians; myths as behavioral guidance	Village elders, punden custodians, community leaders, elderly residents	In-depth interviews, oral history exploration, local document review
3	Local Sacredness	Forms of community reverence toward the punden as a space with special moral and spiritual value	Rituals, communal prayers, pilgrimage, offerings, and punden cleansing; etiquette when entering the punden area; belief in taboos and sacred prohibitions	Punden custodian, religious leaders, ritual practitioners, local residents	Participatory observation, interviews, ritual documentation
4	Sacredness-Based Ecological Ethics	Relationship between sacred beliefs and environmental care around the punden	Large trees are preserved; residents avoid cutting trees carelessly; the punden area is kept clean; green spaces are maintained; the site is relatively protected from damage	Local residents, punden custodians, village officials, community groups	Environmental observation, interviews, physical-site documentation
5	Social Cohesion	The role of the punden in strengthening social bonds and community solidarity	Mutual cooperation in cleaning the pound, collective activities across generations; community deliberation; shared sense of belonging; solidarity in preserving local heritage	Residents, village youth, village officials, community leaders	Interviews, observation of social activities, community activity documentation
6	Religious Harmony	Balanced relations among formal religion, local tradition, community ethics, and the environment	Punden traditions are not viewed as contradicting religion; cultural reverence is distinguished from worship; religious leaders provide space for local traditions; community members respect sacred practices	Religious leaders, customary leaders, punden custodian, local residents	In-depth interviews, ritual observation, analysis of religious-cultural narratives
7	Collective Memory	Shared memory of the history, figures, and functions of the punden	Stories of the punden are transmitted orally; the punden is remembered as part of village history; residents recall important events related to the site; emotional attachment to the punden is expressed	Village elders, long-term residents, customary leaders, local archives	Oral history interviews, document review, narrative documentation
8	Industrial Expansion	Pressure of industrial development on local space, culture, and the environment around the punden	Land-use change; reduced green space; changing village spatial structure; increased industrial activity; altered access to the punden; residents' concerns about environmental damage	Village officials, local residents, spatial documents, regional maps, industrial data	Field observation, document review, interviews
9	Symbolic Ecological Resistance	Community efforts to preserve the punden as a cultural and ecological space amid industrial expansion	Resistance to punden destruction; sacred narratives protect the site; efforts to preserve trees, soil, and sacred boundaries; cultural values are	Community leaders, residents, punden custodian, village officials	In-depth interviews, observation, analysis of

			used to maintain environmental care		community narratives
10	Socio- Cultural Change	Changes in sacred practices, community participation, and social relations amid modernization and industrialization	Decreasing or changing youth participation; shifting understanding of rituals; persistence or weakening of traditions; adaptation of rituals in the modern context	Young residents, older residents, community leaders, ritual practitioners	Intergenerational interviews, observation, comparative narrative analysis

Source: Processed from the Author's Observations, Interviews, and Documentation, 2026.

FINDINGS

The Landscape of Sekargadung Village and the Pressures of Industrialization

Sekargadung Village is not merely an administrative village, but a local space situated within the dynamics of industrial spatial transformation in Mojokerto. In the 2012–2032 Regional Spatial Plan (RTRW) of Mojokerto Regency, Sekargadung is designated as part of an industrial zone. Economically, Pungging has become an important industrial area, as the manufacturing sector accounted for 57.17 percent of Mojokerto's Gross Regional Domestic Product in 2023. BPS identifies Pungging as the second-largest representation of large and medium industries in Mojokerto Regency, after Ngoro, accounting for 13 percent of total IBS companies. Pungging's proximity to Ngoro places Sekargadung under the influence of an industrial growth center. These data matter because the punden is located within a social landscape undergoing changes in spatial function.



Figure 1: Spatial Map of Punden Nyai Pandan Sari and the Surrounding Industrial Area (s)

In the small and medium industry sector, Sekargadung also shows a strong economic profile. The official Mojokerto Industry portal records that Pungging has 1,548 IKM, while Sekargadung Village has 121 IKM. Industrial pressure, therefore, arises from large factories and the accumulation of small- and medium-scale production activities.

"The village head stated that the area has developed since large industries entered, particularly over the past five years. However, the *punden* area has limited potential to be developed into a large industrial area like those along the main Pungging–Trawas Road and in Ngoro because it is close to residential settlements" (*Interview, February 2026*).

Field observations show that Punden Nyai Pandan Sari continues to be preserved as a sacred space surrounded by natural elements, including soil, trees, and a maintained clean area. The community views the punden as a space that must be respected. Pilgrimage, communal prayers, punden cleansing, and reverence for ancestors help maintain this sacred boundary.

"The village secretary explained that there are nine punden sites in the village, each hamlet has one, and they continue to be respected and sacralized. The community cleans them every *Kamis Kliwon* and holds annual *ruwat desa*" (*Interview with the village secretary, February 2026*).

This finding shows that industrialization in Sekargadung is related to economic change and changes in spatial meaning. Punden Nyai Pandan Sari becomes relatively protected because cultural and spiritual reasons support preservation. In a village landscape transformed by industry, the punden symbolizes balance among living, economic, spiritual, and ecological spaces.

The Legend of Nyai Pandan Sari and the Formation of Sacred Space

Punden Nyai Pandan Sari is understood not merely as a burial site, but as a sacred space that lives within collective memory. In local oral tradition, Nyai Pandan Sari is associated with the spread of Islam in Java.

"According to the punden custodian, she was regarded as a disseminator of Islam during the era of the Sunan and as an ancestor whose descendants cleared and founded the village. However, the community's search and inquiries to village elders have not produced documentary or genealogical evidence confirming this narrative" (*interview, February 2026*).

Thus, this account is treated in this study as oral tradition rather than as a historically verified fact. Although not always archive-supported, its continuity and reverence practices have created strong social legitimacy. Punden Nyai Pandan Sari becomes relatively protected because cultural and spiritual reasons support preservation. In a village landscape transformed by industry, the punden symbolizes balance among living, economic, spiritual, and ecological spaces.

In the field findings, the story of Nyai Pandan Sari functions as a moral boundary within the punden area. Residents and pilgrims tend to maintain proper speech, dress, cleanliness, and behavior when visiting the site. Actions considered impolite, damaging, or polluting are understood within local beliefs to have spiritual consequences. According to Mr. SPR,

"The cleaning of Punden Nyai Pandan Sari and its surroundings is carried out every *Kamis Kliwon*. Although this activity is not formally mandatory, it continues through collective awareness, respect, and the shared desire to preserve the place. There is also a local rule prohibiting visitors from sleeping

in the grave area. If staying overnight is unavoidable, visitors are expected to submit their identity card to the punden custodian or hamlet head to maintain security and order” (*interview with a local resident around the punden, February 2026*).

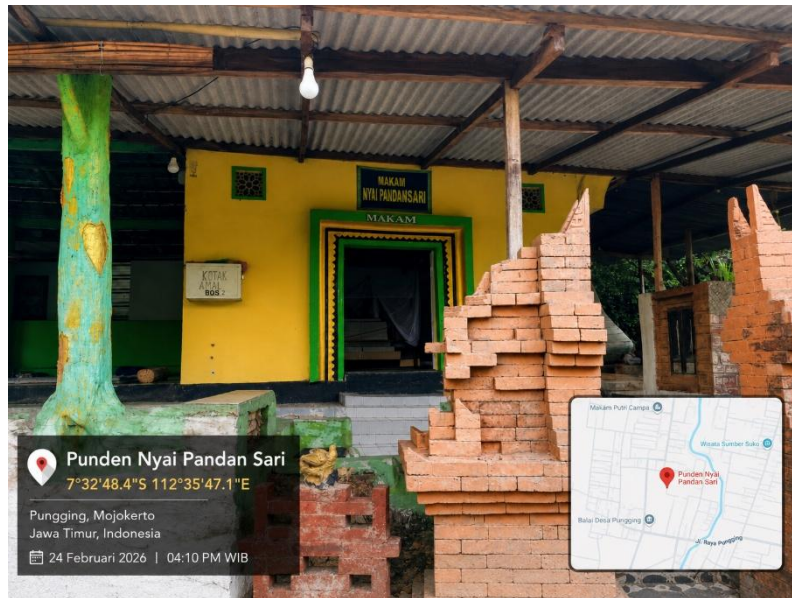


Figure 2. Punden Nyai Pandan Sari represents a local sacred space that preserves collective memory, cultural identity, and the community’s ecological ethics amid spatial changes caused by industrialization

Source: Processed from the Author’s Observations, Interview, and Documentation, 2026

Pilgrimage Practice, *Tawasul*, and Social Cohesion

Punden Nyai Pandan Sari has become a pilgrimage site for residents of Sekargadung and surrounding villages, as well as pilgrims from outside Mojokerto Regency. Visits are usually made to pray, recite *tahlil*, offer prayers to a respected figure, and seek safety, sustenance, health, and peace. In Javanese Islamic tradition, this practice is understood as *tawasul*, namely praying to Allah by invoking the memory of a pious person as a moral and spiritual intermediary. As Mr. ARP explained,

“People come here to seek blessings, recite *tahlil*, perform *istighosah*, and pray.” A religious figure in Mojokerto Regency also brings his congregation monthly; through these visits, a *musholla* and the *punden* area have been developed” (*interview with the hamlet head, March 2026*).

The *punden* custodian stated,

“Every day there are visitors, usually one to three people, especially after Maghrib. Some pray, recite *tahlil*, and perform *istighosah*, while others simply see the grave and *punden*. Visitors usually come through word of mouth, and many feel peace in the area. One pilgrim said, the place feels calm because there are trees and a river nearby” (*interview with the punden custodian, February 2026*).

The “Vehicle” Punden and Snake Cave as Symbolic Boundaries

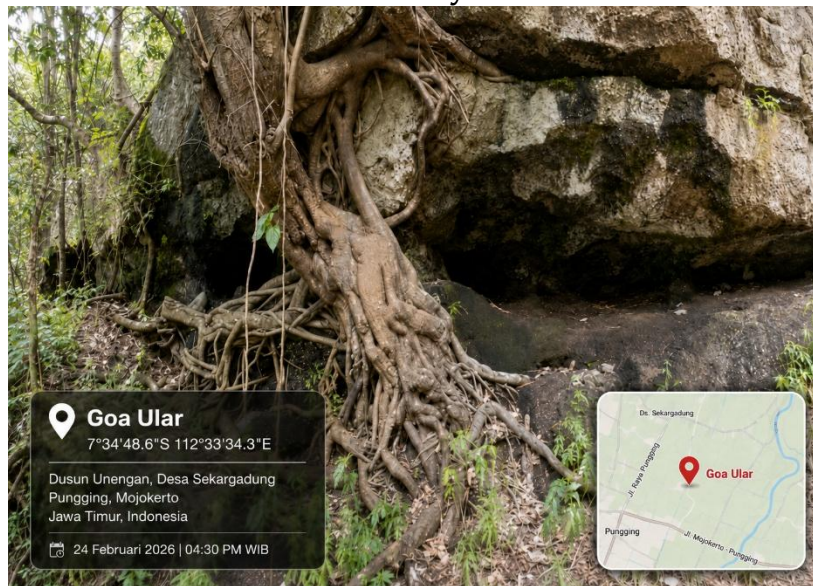


Figure 3. Snake Cave, Unengan Hamlet, Sekargadung Village

Source: Processed from the Author's Observations, Interview, and Documentation, 2026

Approximately 100 meters away in the Punden Nyai Pandan Sari area, there is a small cave locally known as Snake Cave. According to local narratives, the cave is associated with a guardian python, understood not as an objective claim but as a moral warning for visitors to act respectfully. Around the main area, there is also a small punden known as Punden Kemloko. In residents' understanding, this place represents the “vehicle” of Nyai Pandan Sari, a symbolic element that accompanies the main sacred figure. Its existence shows that sacred space is formed through layered meanings. This point serves as a symbol of a sacred boundary, marking the transition from ordinary space to a space entered with order and respect.

“An informant explained that Snake Cave is not widely discussed and is considered taboo in local conversation. He was initially hesitant to tell the story because he feared misrepresenting its origin and narrative. The main message is that visitors should come carefully and with good intentions” (*interview with Mr. STO, a village figure, February 2026*).

According to the punden custodian, every hamlet has a punden, while Nyai Pandan Sari is regarded as the main punden.

“The “vehicle” is understood through the story that she once traveled around the village by *dokar*. The cave is difficult to access because the terrain is steep and hilly; therefore, few people go there, and residents understand its guardian narrative as part of local sacred meaning” (*interview with the punden custodian, February 2026*).

Local Wisdom as an Ecological Stronghold

An important finding is that the sacredness of the punden shapes ecological ethics through everyday practices of care. Spirituality does not stop at prayers and

rituals, but is expressed through respect for land, trees, cleanliness, and living space around the *punden*. The community maintains the area not merely because of village instructions, but because the site is understood as holding spiritual and moral value. Unwritten prohibitions against cutting trees, littering, or behaving disrespectfully are part of local wisdom transmitted through stories, pilgrimage, and collective practice. In this sense, local wisdom functions as a symbolic ecological boundary amid industrial expansion. The community does not necessarily reject industry directly, but preserves the sacred site by cleaning it, caring for it, remembering it, narrating it, and maintaining its environmental condition.

“According to the *punden* custodian, the cleaning agenda is carried out every 40 days, on *Kamis Kliwon*, and has been inherited across generations. Youth and adolescents are invited to participate, while Wi-Fi access is provided to attract visitors and encourage involvement. This shows a generational negotiation: technology helps regenerate tradition, but sacred etiquette is still needed to prevent the *punden* from becoming an ordinary social space. Funding comes from the community treasury. According to Mr. PDK, the agenda is voluntary, and residents participate because of solidarity and concern. The *musholla* was built through mutual cooperation and community self-help, with support from various parties, and supports religious outreach and *da’wah* (interview with Mr. PDK, February 2026).

The Production of Meaning Through Oral Narrative

Oral narratives are the main means through which the *punden* remains alive. They do not appear as a neat chronology, but as fragments of stories about a pious female figure, supernatural guardians, and pilgrims' experiences. These fragments circulate in family conversations, parental advice, and explanations from the *punden* custodian. In this way, sacredness is renewed through speech and experience. Oral narratives also function as moral education: children and youth learn that the *punden* is not a place for playing, littering, or behaving disrespectfully. Mythology has a practical dimension because narratives about Nyai Pandan Sari, the “vehicle” *punden*, and Snake Cave give the area layers of meaning that are difficult to replace with administrative regulations.

“According to the *punden* custodian, there are no physical records or manuscripts, but information about Nyai Pandan Sari is very well known and has made the site a pilgrimage destination for the area and its surroundings. The information is transmitted by word of mouth, from parents to children. Children are also invited to join communal work, and through this activity they receive information about the *punden*” (interview with the *punden* custodian, March 2026).

Social Change and Generational Negotiation

Industrial expansion has changed youth orientation, as some young people are now more connected with industrial work, formal education, and digital media than with traditional practices. However, the *punden* remains present in social memory

because it is linked to family, prayer, and village identity. Intergenerational negotiation appears in punden cleaning activities involving adolescents. Older residents emphasize continuity of stories, etiquette, and ritual procedures. As one village elder stated,

“This place must be respected because it is inherited from the ancestors.”

Meanwhile, youth participation is more practical. Mas PR explained,

“Not all youth join, but some help clean and still come when there is *bancaan* or *tumpengan*.”

This shows that the older generation preserves sacred meaning, while the younger generation contributes by cleaning, documenting, and sharing information. If meaning is transmitted, this change can strengthen punden sustainability; if not, the site risks being seen merely as a tourist or ordinary place. Therefore, oral narrative documentation and heritage-based education are essential.

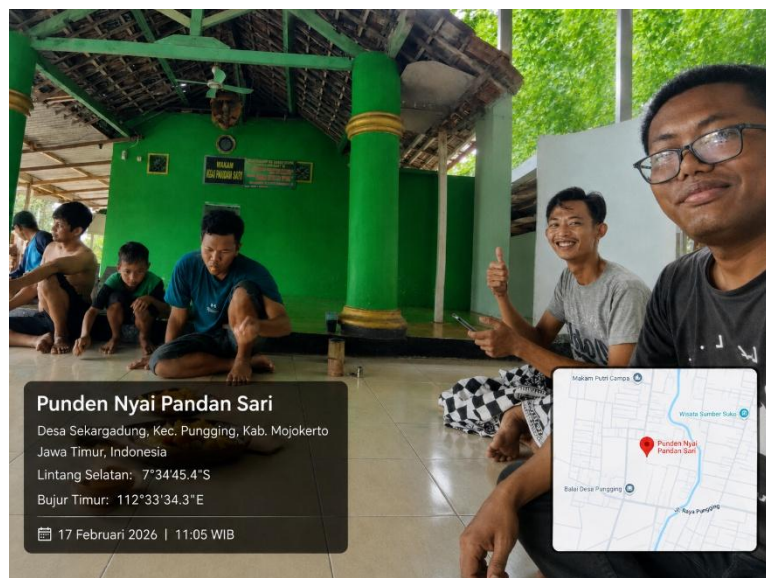


Figure 4. Cleaning the Punden Nyai Pandan Sari Area Together with Village Youth
Source : Processed from the Author's Observations, Interview, and Documentation, 2026

“According to Mas PR, some residents hold *bancaan* or *tumpengan* in the punden area and invite the community, including youth. On one occasion, a goat was slaughtered and eaten together. Although not all youth are involved, some participate in cleaning the punden. The nearby river is also used by children for bathing, so the area remains lively and frequently passed, despite its steep and descending terrain” (*interview with youth informant Mas PR, March 2026*).

Table 2.

Sacredness Elements and Ecological Functions of Punden Nyai Pandan Sari

Finding Element	Field Description	Symbolic Meaning	Social Function	Ecological Function
Main punden	A grave visited by pilgrims surrounded by trees	Sacred space and ancestral reverence	Strengthens collective identity	Keeps the area shaded and clean
Legend of Nyai Pandan Sari	A pious female figure and guardian of harmony	Symbol of the guardian of nature and fertility	Binds collective memory	Shapes an ethic of respect for the environment
“Vehicle” punden	A point of reverence before the main grave	Marker of the boundary of sacred space	Regulates the ethics of entering the area	Reduces exploitative behavior
Snake Cave	Believed to be the place of a guardian python	Symbol of the spiritual guardian of the area	Instills respect and caution	Prevents the destruction of trees and the surrounding area
Pilgrimage tradition	Prayer, tahlil, flower scattering, and tawasul	Reproduction of religious values	Strengthens social solidarity	Maintains the continuity of sacred space
Mystical narratives	Spiritual consequences for those who damage the site	Symbolic ecological boundary	Informal social control	Belief-based conservation

Source: Processed from the Author’s Observations, Interview, and Documentation, 2026

DISCUSSION

The Punden as a Symbolic Ecological Boundary

The findings of this study show that the community’s relationship with Punden Nyai Pandan Sari is shaped not only by the physical function of space, but primarily by a system of meanings that lives within the community’s collective consciousness. From the perspective of symbolic ecology, nature is not a neutral space, but a landscape imbued with meaning through symbols, myths, ritual practices, and shared experiences. The punden, trees, “vehicle,” and Snake Cave form a symbolic unity that distinguishes sacred space from profane space. Through these elements, the community regulates behaviors deemed appropriate or inappropriate in the punden area. Therefore, the punden functions not only as a pilgrimage site but also as a space that guides the community’s social and ecological ethics.

This symbolic boundary works as an informal ecological regulation. It is not created through written rules but through trusted stories, inherited taboos, and a sense of shame or fear when those taboos are violated. This mechanism aligns with the idea of traditional ecological knowledge, namely knowledge formed through the community’s long-term experience in interacting with the environment, as discussed by Berkes (2000, 2012), Verschuuren (2010), Posey, (1999), Berkes (2000). In Sekargadung, this knowledge is not conveyed through the language of modern conservation, but through the language of sacredness, prayer, ancestors, and supernatural guardians. This pattern is also in line with (Colding & Folke, 2001), who show that social taboos can operate as an unwritten system of natural resource management and remain effective because they are supported by collective compliance. In this way, the community builds an environmental protection system rooted in belief, cultural experience, and shared moral responsibility.

The contribution of this article to symbolic ecology lies in explaining that cultural symbols can function as moral infrastructure for environmental protection. This infrastructure is not always visible, but it can guide social action. The reluctance to cut down trees, the effort to maintain cleanliness, and the respect for the boundaries of the *punden* are examples of how the community not only interprets nature symbolically but also transforms these meanings into concrete behavior. Within this framework, the legend of Nyai Pandan Sari, the story of the guardian snake, and the existence of the “vehicle” *punden* can be understood as a symbolic ecological boundary, namely a symbolic boundary that socially protects the area from acts of exploitation. Myths and oral narratives are not merely cultural expressions, but also normative instruments that build the community’s ecological ethics (Woodward, 2010) (Mossi re, 2009a). Thus, in this case, sacred space appears to function as a moral fence that is more subtle than formal rules, and among these informants it carried binding power because it is connected to respect, fear, and social responsibility.

1. Sacred Natural Sites and Non-Confrontational Ecological Resistance

Punden Nyai Pandan Sari can be understood as a local-scale sacred natural site because it holds spiritual meaning and generates social protection for the surrounding landscape. In conservation literature, sacred natural sites are often linked to memory, ritual, and environmental protection. (Verschuuren et al., 2010) (Tatay & Merino, 2023c). Studies on sacred groves show that locally protected sacred spaces can support habitat and biodiversity conservation while facing modernization and land-use change. (Bhagwat & Rutte, 2006). (Dudley et al., 2009) also show that sacred places and areas around religious buildings can protect species and habitats through religious moral authority. In Punden Nyai Pandan Sari, this protection is evident in the roles of the *punden* custodian, village figures, residents, and youth who maintain the site, trees, cleanliness, and visiting etiquette.

The sacredness of Punden Nyai Pandan Sari is reproduced through repeated community practices. Residents and pilgrims pray, recite tahlil, perform tawasul, clean the area, and follow local etiquette. The *punden* is cleaned every Kamis Kliwon, or every 40 days, through voluntary participation and community funds. Local prohibitions include carelessly cutting trees, littering, being impolite, and sleeping in the grave area without permission. If visitors must stay overnight, they are asked to submit their identity card to the custodian or hamlet head. Thus, sacredness does not only reside in past narratives but is renewed through social discipline and everyday care. This is in line with (Sullivan et al., 2024), who show that sacred forests can provide ecological and social benefits often overlooked in formal conservation.

In the context of industrial expansion, the protection of the *punden* can be read as a form of non-confrontational ecological resistance. Residents do not reject industry through demonstrations or legal claims, but by caring for, visiting, cleaning, narrating, and maintaining unwritten prohibitions. Interviews indicate that Sekargadung has developed since large industries entered the area, especially in the last five years, while Pungging and nearby Ngoro serve as industrial growth areas. However, the *punden* is considered less likely to become a large industrial site because it is close to settlements and remains socially respected. No direct case of physical destruction of

the punden was reported, but residents noted changes in the landscape, road access, and growing industrial activity around the village. In this context, mythology becomes a local language for maintaining ecological boundaries, in line with spiritual ecology studies that view religion and tradition as sources of environmental ethics (Verschuuren & Furuta, 2016).

Punden Nyai Pandan Sari also shows that sacredness-based conservation is adaptive. The community continues to live amid economic change and does not fully reject industrial development. However, the custodian, village figures, residents, and youth preserve the punden as a space that must be respected and not treated carelessly. Sacred natural sites can therefore bridge cultural heritage, religion, and village environmental governance (Verschuuren & Furuta, 2016) (Verschuuren, 2010) (Dudley et al., 2009). In this case, the punden becomes a meeting point between development interests, local memory, and the protection of the community's living space.

Lived Religion, Social Cohesion, and Religious Harmony

The relevance of this study to religious harmony studies lies in its conceptual expansion of social-religious harmony through local ecology. The punden becomes a space that nurtures social relations not only among people but also between religious practice, local tradition, sacred space, and environmental care. Pilgrimage practices connect people to a revered figure while bringing together residents, pilgrims, religious leaders, and local caretakers in mutual respect. The punden becomes a space of lived religion because religion is present in everyday actions: reciting prayers, tahlil, tawasul, maintaining proper speech, cleaning the site, respecting fellow pilgrims, and caring for the environment. (Mossière, 2009a) emphasizes that religion needs to be understood as a practice lived in everyday life, not merely as an institutional doctrinal system. Also shows that everyday religion appears in ordinary, repeated social practices that are often integrated into community routines. In the context of Punden Nyai Pandan Sari, religion is a lived practice intertwined with local tradition and the community's social ethics.

In a plural society, harmony is not always built through formal intergroup dialogue, but also through shared practices that foster social ethics. Punden Nyai Pandan Sari demonstrates that local practices can strengthen social cohesion when the community shares a respected symbol. This symbol creates belonging, strengthens collective memory, and provides space without conflict. (Schiefer & Van Der Noll, 2017) explains that social cohesion is relations, identification with the community, and orientation toward the common good. Ecological values and the values of social harmony converge in caring for a sacred place. When the community cleans the punden, maintains its shade, and respects its sacred boundaries, they perform ecological work while strengthening social solidarity.

This finding enriches studies of religious moderation and harmony by showing that local traditions are not necessarily obstacles to religiosity. Instead, tradition can become a medium for expressing religion peacefully, contextually, and ecologically. Pilgrimage and reverence for the punden remain directed toward God while

maintaining solidarity, ancestral respect, and care for place. (Kong, 2001) emphasizes that religious space is not only related to formal worship places, but also to politics, identity, community, and place meaning. Thus, local sacredness becomes social capital for facing ecological and social pressures caused by industrialization. Religious harmony here means not only peaceful relations among religious communities but also a balanced relationship among humans, God, ancestors, sacred space, and nature.

However, this harmony needs to be maintained through inclusive narratives. The management of the *punden* should avoid making exclusive claims that limit other residents' participation. Emphasizing shared values such as cleanliness, respect, safety, and environmental sustainability can make the *punden* a space that is more widely accepted. In this regard, village policies and the role of religious leaders are important to ensure that sacredness not only preserves memory, but also builds public ethics aligned with the common good. In this way, the *punden* can become a space of harmony that simultaneously connects spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions.

This study uses religious harmony in a sense that differs from its more common meaning in the literature, namely, peaceful relations among distinct religious communities, such as Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists, who share a locality. In Sekargadung, religious plurality across faiths is limited, so the harmony observed operates within Javanese Islam itself, between traditionalist practice associated with *tahlil*, *tawasul*, and pilgrimage and more reformist currents that are cautious about grave visitation and local ritual. Field data suggest this tension is managed quietly rather than resolved through open debate. The religious leader interviewed did not reject *punden* practices outright but distinguished them from worship directed at Nyai Pandan Sari herself, treating prayer as directed only to God while treating the *punden* visit as an act of remembrance. This positioning resembles the accommodation strategies described in studies of religious moderation in Indonesia, where local tradition is neither fully embraced nor rejected but reinterpreted to remain compatible with orthodox practice (Gede Agung et al., 2024). Reading religious harmony this way, as intrareligious accommodation as well as interreligious coexistence, extends the concept without abandoning its core concern with reducing conflict and sustaining coexistence among different ways of being religious in one place.

The Risk of Weakening Sacredness and Governance Challenges

Although the sacredness of the *punden* has ecological strength, this mechanism is not free from risks. The first risk is the weakening of collective memory. Field findings show that some narratives are already handled with care because informants fear misrepresenting their origins, and that documentary or genealogical records of Nyai Pandan Sari have not been found. When oral narratives are no longer transmitted, unwritten prohibitions may lose their binding power. The community may still know the location of the *punden* but no longer understand why the place must be protected. Under such conditions, sacredness becomes a label without practice. Therefore, story documentation, local education, and youth involvement are important parts of preservation.

The second risk is economic pressure and spatial change. Field interviews indicate that Sekargadung has developed since large industries entered the area, especially in the last five years. Although no direct physical destruction of the punden was reported, residents noted changes in access, mobility, village space, and industrial activity around the area. Myth-based protection alone may not be sufficient to face capital pressure, spatial planning, or infrastructure needs. Therefore, sacredness needs to be translated into village-based inclusive governance, including formal recognition of the punden area, cleanliness rules, restrictions on destructive activities, and a preservation plan that involves residents, youth, religious leaders, the custodian, and village officials.

The third risk is the changing function of the punden. Field data show that Wi-Fi access is provided to attract visitors and youth, while some community meals, *bancaan*, *tumpengan*, and children's activities around the nearby river make the area increasingly lively. These practices may support regeneration but may also shift the punden toward an ordinary social space if sacred etiquette is weakened. More pilgrims may strengthen its existence but may also create waste, parking issues, noise, or an excessive economic orientation. Management must balance public access, local livelihoods, and sacred-space ethics, ensuring that economic activities support rather than replace the *punden's* functions of prayer, memory, and environmental protection.

Thus, Punden Nyai Pandan Sari governance needs to integrate cultural, ecological, and administrative approaches. A cultural approach preserves sacred narratives, pilgrimage ethics, and ancestral reverence. An ecological approach keeps the area clean, shaded, and protected from destructive practices. An administrative approach ensures that protection does not rely only on oral memory, but is supported by village policy, participatory mapping, community monitoring, and inclusive decision-making. This model is important because industrial expansion often places local spaces under economic pressure. If the punden is understood only as a grave, its protection will be limited.

However, if the punden is understood as a socio-ecological space, the community and the village government have a stronger basis for preserving it as part of the village's identity and environmental sustainability. Such strengthening prevents conservation from becoming merely a physical project. Punden preservation needs to be measured through sustained lived practices, orderly pilgrimage, inherited stories, protected trees, clean surroundings, and residents' participation in caring for sacred space. With these indicators, the punden is not only materially preserved but also remains alive as a space of meaning, ethics, and social harmony amid increasingly complex changes in the village.

From the perspective of harmony studies, this article understands religious harmony not only as peaceful relations among humans, but also as the community's capacity to maintain balance with nature through lived religion. Social harmony around the *punden* is fostered by residents shared respect for a common symbol. This symbol reduces conflict, regulates visitation ethics, and provides moral language for environmental protection. By expanding harmony to include human-nature relations, this article shows that ecological issues are important to studies of religion and society.

This contribution is relevant because local communities often face theological, ecological, and economic pressures simultaneously.

Sacred space gives the community a way to retain moral control over part of its landscape. Amid industrial expansion, this symbolic control helps residents maintain a sense of place, identity, and solidarity. Punden Nyai Pandan Sari shows that religion as lived in society can become a source of public ethics, not merely a private matter. Thus, the *punden* serves as an example of how religious harmony and environmental sustainability can mutually reinforce each other through concrete social practices.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Punden Nyai Pandan Sari in Unengan Hamlet, Sekargadung Village, is not merely a sacred grave but a living sacred space that shapes relations among humans, God, ancestors, and the environment. The mythology of Nyai Pandan Sari, pilgrimage practices, Punden Kemloko as the “vehicle” symbol, and local narratives of Snake Cave form a system of meaning that regulates community behavior. Through stories, beliefs, taboos, and repeated practices, the community distinguishes sacred space from ordinary space and maintains visiting ethics, cleanliness, shade, and respect for trees around the punden. The main finding affirms that sacredness can function as a symbolic ecological mechanism that protects the site through moral awareness rather than formal regulation.

Theoretically, this study contributes to symbolic ecology, sacred natural site studies, ecological resistance, and lived religion in the context of Javanese Islam. It shows that local sacred spaces can function as symbolic ecological boundaries, where mythology provides symbolic language, sacredness confers moral legitimacy, pilgrimage sustains social practice, and ecological resistance protects space from exploitation. Practically, the study shows that environmental conservation can be strengthened by recognizing local cultural and religious values. The *punden* becomes social capital for building religious harmony, social cohesion, and ecological concern amid industrial expansion and village change.

The implication of this study is that the preservation of Punden Nyai Pandan Sari should be situated within a village-based governance framework that respects both spiritual and ecological dimensions. The village government, religious leaders, punden custodian, youth, and residents can work together to document oral narratives, develop pilgrimage ethics, maintain cleanliness programs, protect trees, and ensure that development does not disturb the site's sacred character. These efforts can help the punden remain a space of prayer, collective memory, local identity, and ecological care for future generations.

This study focuses on a single punden and uses limited quantitative data on ecological changes around the site. However, field evidence shows how sacredness is maintained in practice; as the custodian stated, “Every *Kamis Kliwon*, the *punden* is cleaned together,” and a youth informant noted that “some young people still help clean the area.” The findings are based on ethnographic observation, interviews, oral narratives, and field documentation, so they should be read as contextual rather than universal for all sacred sites in industrial areas. Further research should compare

several punden or sacred sites, involve younger generations more deeply, and combine environmental ethnography with spatial mapping, land-use change analysis, and environmental quality data. This will clarify how sacredness, culture, industrial expansion, and ecological protection interact across different local contexts.

Regarding this study, governments are advised to include *punden* and local sacred spaces in cultural-environmental protection programs. Operational measures can include issuing a village decree on punden protection, preparing pilgrimage SOPs, setting a regular cleaning schedule, installing educational boards that do not disrupt sacredness, documenting oral history, and conducting simple environmental monitoring of trees, cleanliness, shade, and surrounding access. Area management should be participatory by involving the punden custodian, religious leaders, residents, pilgrims, youth, and village officials.

Educational institutions and local communities can use Punden Nyai Pandan Sari as a learning resource for local history, religious harmony, and environmental ethics. However, educational programs or pilgrimage tourism development require clear guidelines, visitor ethics, waste management, and community oversight so that the punden remains a sacred space rather than becoming a commodity that loses its spiritual meaning.

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AI DISCLOSURE

This manuscript used artificial intelligence assistance for language editing, article structure organization, format consistency checking, and summarizing several sections to comply with the journal template. All field data, interpretations, academic responsibility, validation of interview quotations, and final decisions regarding the content of the manuscript remain with the author.

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