

## The Phenomenology of The Suryak Ae Tradition in Art Photography: Representations of Spiritual Meaning and Cultural Identity

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Keywords	Abstract
phenomenology; Suryak Ae; Fine Art Photography; visual culture; spirituality; Local Traditions.	This research examines the phenomenology of the Suryak Ae tradition through the perspective of fine art photography. This research aims to explore the spiritual, symbolic, and cultural meanings embedded in ritual practices and to analyze how these meanings are represented visually through artistic photography. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study draws on the theories of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to understand life experiences, perceptions, and embodiments in visual representations. Data collection techniques include participant observation, in-depth interviews, visual documentation, and interpretive analysis of photographic artworks. The findings show that the Suryak Ae tradition functions not only as a ritual activity but also as a medium of collective memory, spirituality, and local cultural identity. Fine art photography transforms ritual experiences into contemplative visual narratives through composition, light, symbolism, and atmosphere. The study concludes that photography serves as a cultural preservation and artistic interpretation, allowing local traditions to gain wider visibility in contemporary visual cultural discourse.

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### INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has a variety of local traditions that reflect the philosophical, spiritual, and cultural values of its people. Traditional rituals are not just ceremonial activities, but also manifestations of collective consciousness that are passed down through generations (Anderson & Foley, 2019; Rimé & Páez, 2023). These traditions function as a medium of cultural communication that maintains the relationship between humans, nature, ancestors, and the belief system that lives in society. One such tradition is Suryak Ae, a cultural ritual that represents the symbolic relationship between humans, nature, spirituality, and communal identity. This ritual not only has sacred value, but also contains cultural expressions that show how people understand the balance of life and connection to the surrounding environment (Kealiikanakaolehaililani & Giardina, 2016; Prasetyo, 2023; Sadiyani et al., 2025).

In the development of contemporary art, local traditions are increasingly used as subjects of representation in visual media, especially photography. Photography is no longer understood solely as a documentation tool, but has evolved into an artistic and interpretive medium that is able to build meaning, atmosphere, and emotional experience (Bogre, 2020; Hirsch, 2017). Through the processing of composition, lighting, colours, textures, and visual symbols, photographers can present cultural reality in the form of visual narratives that are reflective and aesthetic. In this context, fine art photography allows ritual traditions to be presented not only

as cultural events, but also as visual experiences that contain philosophical and spiritual dimensions (Bergmann, 2016; Chung, 2025; Freedman, 2025).

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between photography and local cultural traditions. Kurniawan (2019) in his study on the visualization of local culture in documentary photography found that photography serves as an effective medium for documenting and preserving traditional rituals, although his study focused more on documentary aspects rather than artistic interpretation. Wijaya (2018) explained that cultural photography documentation plays an important role in maintaining the existence of local cultural heritage through the dissemination of visual information that is easy to understand across generations, yet his research did not deeply explore the phenomenological dimensions of ritual experiences. Furthermore, Wulandari (2019) conducted an aesthetic study of photography in cultural exhibition contexts, demonstrating that visual composition and lighting significantly influence the audience's understanding of cultural objects, but her analysis remained at the level of formal aesthetics without adequately addressing the spiritual and symbolic meanings embedded in traditional rituals. These three studies share a common gap: they treat photography primarily as a documentary or formal aesthetic tool rather than as an interpretive medium capable of capturing the phenomenological essence of ritual experiences (Al Sheikh, 2025; Kunovski, 2024).

Fine art photography places the photographer as a creative subject who actively interprets reality. Every visual decision from the point of view, framing, to the atmosphere of the image shapes the way the audience understands the cultural objects represented (Geise & Baden, 2015). Thus, the work of photography is not only a reproduction of reality, but also the result of the construction of meaning influenced by the photographer's subjective experience (Ray, 2020; Zappavigna, 2016). Ritual traditions such as Suryak Ae become a visual space rich in symbolism and emotional expression, so it has great potential to be interpreted through artistic approaches (Haribhau, n.d.; Pandey, 2025).

To understand the experience and meaning contained in these visual representations, this study uses a phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology emphasizes the conscious human experience of the world as experienced directly. In visual studies, the phenomenological approach views imagery not just as an object seen, but as a manifestation of life experiences, perceptions, and consciousness. Through this approach, photography is understood as a medium that is able to present an existential and emotional experience for both photographers and connoisseurs of works.

To address this gap, the present study focuses on the Suryak Ae tradition and employs a phenomenological perspective to understand the experience and meaning contained in visual representations. Phenomenology emphasizes the conscious human experience of the world as experienced directly. In visual studies, the phenomenological approach views imagery not just as an object seen, but as a manifestation of life experiences, perceptions, and consciousness. Through this approach, photography is understood as a medium that is able to present an existential and emotional experience for both photographers and connoisseurs of works.

Based on this background, this study aims to examine how the Suryak Ae tradition is represented in fine art photography and how phenomenological approaches can be used to uncover the symbolic meaning, aesthetic experience, and spiritual dimension present in the

visual work. This research is expected to contribute to the study of fine art photography, cultural representation, and the preservation of local traditions through visual media.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Approach**

The research approach in this study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate people's life experiences related to the Suryak Ae tradition and its representation in fine art photography. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand the meaning of subjective experiences experienced by individuals in depth, especially in the context of cultural and spiritual rituals. According to Edmund Husserl, phenomenology seeks to understand human conscious experience as experienced directly by individuals, so this approach is relevant to examine ritual experiences and cultural meanings that live in society. (Husserl.1970).

Phenomenology is used to reveal how participants interpret their experiences of traditional practices, both through symbolic aspects and sensory experiences that arise during rituals. In this context, the research focuses on:

- people's subjective experience of traditions,
- spiritual perceptions formed through ritual practices,
- sensory interactions involving atmosphere, sound, light, and motion,
- as well as the emotional meaning embedded in the implementation of rituals and the process of visualization into fine art photography works.

The phenomenological approach also places the researcher as the main instrument in understanding social reality through observation, in-depth interviews, and interpretation of participants' experiences. According to Clark Moustakas, phenomenological research aims to explore the essence of human experience through reflection on participants' life experiences in depth and descriptively. (Moustakas.1994).

Through this approach, photography is not only understood as a documentary medium, but also as an interpretive medium that is able to represent the inner experience, cultural values, and spiritual dimension of the Suryak Ae tradition artistically and reflectively. In the context of fine arts, photography is seen as a visual practice that can convey cultural narratives and emotional experiences through visual composition, lighting, symbols, and atmospheres captured by the photographer.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Suryak Ae as a Spiritual Experience**

The findings show that Suryak Ae is seen by the community as a sacred ritual that connects humans with nature and ancestral spirituality. The participants experienced emotional intimacy during the ritual performance, especially through collective movement, prayer, and interaction with natural elements such as water and sunlight.

Phenomenologically, the ritual becomes a real experience in which spiritual awareness emerges through bodily participation and communal atmosphere.

The Suryak Ae tradition has historically been rooted in the socio-religious development of Serongga, an area that was once recognized as a small kingdom under the leadership of Anak Agung Gede Kepandean. Based on the oral historical records recorded in the Serongga Village

Chronicle, as narrated by Mangku Dalem Anyar, the emergence of this tradition is closely related to the existence of sacred spiritual authority in the community.

The core of the Serongga ritual system is the worship of Ida Ratu Gede Lingsir, a spiritual entity that is revered and enshrined in the Dalem Temple of the Serongga Traditional Village. This deity is believed to occupy an important position in the metaphysical structure of local beliefs, serving as a guardian figure whose presence regulates the continuity of rituals and communal spiritual order.

According to the local cosmological understanding, Ida Ratu Gede Lingsir is also spiritually manifested in Sapuh Jagat Temple, where pralingga (sacred statues) are considered very sacred and preserved through generations of ritual guards. The sanctity of this representation is maintained through continuous ritual practices and collective reverence by the local community.

Oral tradition further describes the existence of a *rengen-rencang* or spiritual companion associated with the deity, commonly referred to as the main reinforcement. These entities are believed to serve as divine companions that accompany the ritual presence of the deity. Among them are sixteen main accompaniments, including symbolic figures such as I Kumis Bedel, I Macan Gading, I Basang Belerong, Bojog Putih, and Lipi Kendang, while others remain unnamed or are no longer fully remembered in contemporary oral transmission due to the limited transfer of esoteric knowledge between generations.



**Figure 1. Suryak Ae Tradition**

Source: Researcher documentation, 2025

## **2 Symbolism in Fine Art Photography**

Symbolism in fine art photography in this study represents the relationship between ritual experience, cultural value, and visual interpretation constructed through symbolic language. In the context of the Suryak Ae tradition, visual symbols not only function as aesthetic elements, but also as a medium for conveying spiritual, emotional, and collective meaning of society. According to Roland Barthes, photography has the ability to present denotative and connotative meanings that allow an image to contain cultural and symbolic messages behind the visuals displayed.

The photographic works in this study reveal some of the dominant symbols as follows:

**Table 1. Visual Elements and Their Symbolic Meanings in Suryak Ae Photography**

Visual Element	Symbol
Water	Purification and the source of life
Sunlight	Spiritual transcendence and hope
Smoke	The relationship between the temporal and spiritual realms
Human movement	Devotion, collective rites, and cultural identity
Shadow	Memories, traces of the past, and the presence of ancestors

Source: Researcher Analysis Results, 2025

These symbols build a layer of meaning that reinforces the visual narrative in the work of fine art photography. Water, for example, is often interpreted as a symbol of self-purification and survival in various ritual traditions. While sunlight is used to bring spiritual, transcendental, and human connection impressions with a higher power. In visual studies, light plays an important role in building the emotional and spiritual atmosphere of a photograph.

Smoke in ritual visuals can be interpreted as a connecting medium between the human world and the spiritual dimension, while human gestures represent collective participation and devotion to cultural traditions. Shadows are also an important symbol in photography because they are able to present memory, silence, and the impression of the presence of ancestors metaphorically. According to Susan Sontag, photography is not just a reproduction of reality, but a way of constructing interpretation and emotional experience through visuals. (Sontag.1977)

Through the use of these symbols, the photographic work in this study not only serves as a ritual documentation, but also transforms everyday moments into contemplative and reflective visual experiences. Fine art photography then becomes an interpretation space that allows the viewer to feel the spiritual, emotional, and cultural dimensions of the Suryak Ae tradition in a more profound way. (Scott, 1999).

### **Aesthetic Construction**

The fine art photography in this study is built through an aesthetic approach that emphasizes the emotional, spiritual, and ritual atmosphere of the Suryak Ae tradition. The visual construction not only aims to produce visual documentation, but also presents a contemplative experience that is able to bring the viewer into the inner atmosphere of the ritual represented.

Some of the visual approaches used in photographic works include:

- dim lighting,
- Nada Monokromatik,
- selective focus,
- dramatic contrasts,
- and slow *shutter speed technique*.

The use of low lighting and dramatic contrast helps to establish a mysterious and sacred atmosphere, thus reinforcing the spiritual dimension in the visual of the photograph. In the theory of photographic aesthetics, light is understood as the main element that shapes emotions, depth of meaning, and visual atmosphere. According to Roland Barthes, photography has the ability to present an emotional experience through visual details that evoke psychological resonance in the viewer. (Barthes 1981)

Monochromatic tones are used to reduce colour distractions and emphasize expression, texture, and visual symbolism in rituals. This approach allows the viewer's attention to be focused on the emotional atmosphere and symbolic meaning contained in the image. Additionally, selective focus helps direct attention to specific elements that are considered narrative as well as spiritually important.

The slow shutter technique is used to dynamically capture body movement, smoke, and light changes to produce visual effects that are poetic and expressive. The resulting *motion blur* not only records ritual activity, but also creates a phenomenological impression of transcendence, absence, and temporal experience. According to Susan Sontag, photography is able to transform reality into a visual experience that is full of interpretation and emotion. (Sontag.1977)

Such visual strategies create an emotional intensity that encourages the viewer to engage phenomenologically with the image. The atmosphere produced in these research photographs emphasizes silence, sacredness, and transcendence, so that photographic works are not only understood as visual objects, but also as a medium of spiritual reflection and aesthetic experience.

In the context of fine art photography, this atmospheric approach serves to establish a connection between the viewer's visuals, memory, and inner experience. The photographic work then becomes a contemplation space that allows the viewer to feel the spiritual and emotional dimensions of the Suryak Ae tradition in a more profound way.

### **Photography as Cultural Preservation**

Photography in this study functions as a medium for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage through visual representations that are able to record values, ritual practices, cultural symbols, and collective experiences of the community in the Suryak Ae tradition. In the cultural context, photography is not only a tool of documentation, but also an interpretive medium that re-brings cultural meaning into the contemporary visual space.

Through artistic representation, the Suryak Ae tradition has gained wider visibility in today's visual art and cultural discourse. Photographic works allow local traditions to be represented in a communicative and reflective form so that they can be understood by cross-generational and cross-cultural communities. According to UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage includes practices, expressions, knowledge, and rituals that are passed down from generation to generation and need to be maintained through various forms of documentation and cultural transmission (UNESCO.2003)

This study found that artistic photography has several important functions in cultural preservation, namely:

- strengthening the cultural identity of the community,
- creating a visual history archive,
- expanding intercultural understanding,
- as well as bridging traditional and modern artistic practices.

Photography helps to reinforce cultural identity by presenting symbols, expressions, and ritual activities as visual representations of community values. This visualization creates a sense of community attachment to traditions that are passed down from generation to generation. In addition, photographic works also function as historical archives that are able to record social changes, cultural practices, and the dynamics of people's lives in a certain period.

In the context of cultural communication, artistic photography allows the outside community to understand the ritual meaning and spiritual value contained in local traditions. According to John Berger, images have the power to build a way of seeing and understanding social and cultural reality. Therefore, photography can be a bridge of intercultural dialogue through visual language that is universal. (Berger. 1972).

Fine art photography also bridges traditional and modern artistic practices through a contemporary aesthetic approach while maintaining the essence of local culture. Ritual traditions were then positioned not only as objects of ethnographic documentation, but also as a source of living and relevant artistic inspiration in the development of modern visual arts. Through this approach, photography in this study acts as a medium of cultural conservation as well as a space for social reflection that maintains the sustainability of the meaning of the Suryak Ae tradition in the midst of changing times and the development of contemporary visual culture.

According to Soedjono (2007), photography not only functions as a tool to record reality, but also as a medium of visual expression that has the power to convey cultural and social messages to the public. In addition, research by Wijaya (2018) explains that cultural photography documentation plays an important role in maintaining the existence of local cultural heritage through the dissemination of visual information that is easy to understand across generations. Thus, artistic photography in the Suryak Ae tradition is a means of cultural preservation as well as a visual communication medium that is able to connect today's society with traditional values that have been inherited from generation to generation.



**Figure 2. Children's Expedition**

Source: Researcher documentation, 2025

These photos are high-contrast style collages or edited photos with layered textures.

In the foreground, there is a figure wearing a light-coloured head covering, caught in a central expression with his mouth open, as if he is calling, singing, or reacting strongly to something. The face is the only human element that is clearly coloured, which makes it stand out among other compositions.

Behind and around it is dense black-and-white scenes of other figures, but very abstract the edges are blurry and the details are partly hidden, giving a fragmented feel, almost like a documentary or a memory rather than a vivid photograph.

On the right side, a bright yellow umbrella or parasol decorated with tassel dominates the colour palette. It brings a strong contrast to the monochrome background and adds a festive or ceremonial atmosphere, suggesting a cultural or public gathering.

Overall, the image feels like a layered moment part celebration, part crowd scene, part emotional close-up blending realism with artistic distortion to emphasize the contrast between individual expression and the collective environment.



**Figure 3. Children's Group**

Source: Researcher documentation, 2025

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Suryak Ae tradition contains a deep phenomenological meaning rooted in spirituality, communal identity, and cultural memory. Ritual experiences are not only understood as ceremonial acts, but also as life events that involve the participant's bodily awareness, emotions, and spirituality. Through the approach of fine art photography, the ritual experience is transformed into a symbolic visual narrative capable of evoking an emotional and contemplative response in the viewer. Photography in this context is not just about recording reality, but also about reinterpreting cultural experiences into visual forms that have layers of aesthetic and spiritual meaning. A phenomenological approach that draws on the thought of Edmund Husserl allows for a deeper understanding of how traditions are experienced physically, emotionally, and spiritually by individuals and communities. These experiences are then captured and represented through the visual language of photography that is interpretive. Meanwhile, photography functions not only as a documentation tool, but also as a medium of artistic interpretation and cultural preservation. In this context, photography becomes a bridge between subjective experience, visual representation, and contemporary cultural discourse. According to Susan Sontag, photography always involves a process of selection and interpretation, so that each image carries a meaning formed by a particular point of view. The integration between phenomenology and fine art photography makes a significant contribution to the study of contemporary visual culture, particularly in understanding local traditions in artistic and academic discourse. This approach opens up a space for dialogue between people's life experiences and their visual representations, thus enriching the understanding of culture as a dynamic phenomenon. Thus, this study confirms that photography not only plays a role as a visual archive, but also as a medium of cultural reflection that is able to maintain the sustainability of the meaning of the Suryak Ae tradition in the midst of the times.

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