



## BALINESE LOCAL WISDOM IN WELLNESS TOURISM: A STUDY OF TRADITIONAL HEALING PRACTICES IN UBUD

I Gusti Bagus Angga Wiguna<sup>1\*</sup>, Dwik Suwarnata Triana<sup>2</sup>

Institut Pariwisata dan Bisnis Internasional, Indonesia

Email: gusangga@ipb-intl.ac.id<sup>1\*</sup>, dwiksuwarnata@ipb-intl.ac.id<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*Ubud, Bali has evolved into one of the leading destinations in the wellness tourism sector by promoting traditional healing practices rooted in Balinese local wisdom. This study aims to examine how traditional healing methods such as usadha (herbal and spiritual medicine based on lontar manuscripts), melukat (spiritual purification rituals using holy water), tapak dara (energy-balancing therapy), and the role of balian (traditional healers) contribute to the development of authentic and sustainable wellness tourism. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method, using field observations and online document analysis, including official websites of traditional healing service providers. The findings indicate that these healing practices offer not only holistic health benefits but also serve as a medium for preserving Balinese culture and spirituality. Despite the risk of commodification, most practitioners remain committed to maintaining the sacred and authentic values of these traditions. This study confirms that wellness tourism in Ubud can develop sustainably through an approach that emphasizes cultural integrity and spiritual depth.*

**Keywords:** Wellness tourism, Balinese local wisdom, Balinese traditional healing.

### INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, health and wellness tourism has emerged as a rapidly growing global trend, including in Indonesia. Bali, as one of the world's premier tourist destinations, is known not only for its natural beauty but also for its rich culture, spirituality, and local wisdom—elements that attract travelers seeking healing and holistic care experiences. According to Rai Utama and Nyandra (2021), Bali has become the center of wellness tourism in Indonesia, experiencing over 160% growth since 2003, with more than 390 spas and wellness retreats spread across the island (Rai Utama & Nyandra, 2021).

One of the most prominent areas in the context of wellness tourism is Ubud, an artistic and spiritual village in Gianyar Regency. Ubud has become an epicenter for travelers seeking spiritual and self-healing experiences, offering hundreds of yoga centers, meditation classes, spiritual healing sessions, as well as traditional therapy and spa services. The area's serene natural environment, combined with the Balinese life philosophy of Tri Hita Karana (harmony between humans, nature, and the divine), makes it an ideal setting for culturally rooted wellness practices.

What distinguishes wellness tourism in Bali—particularly in Ubud—from other destinations worldwide is the presence of traditional Balinese healing practices deeply rooted in local knowledge systems passed down through generations. Methods such as usadha (traditional Balinese medicine based on lontar manuscripts), melukat (spiritual purification rituals using holy water), tapak dara (traditional energy-based massage), and the role of balian (traditional healers or shamans) are integral to Balinese healing traditions.

According to Suwantana (2025), Balinese traditional healing practices are undergoing revitalization in response to growing tourist interest in natural and spiritual alternative

therapies. Visitors no longer come solely for modern spa experiences but also seek immersive and authentic spiritual healing rooted in local culture (Suwantana, 2025).

A study by Arsana et al. (2020) on Usadha Tiwang, one of the lontar texts containing treatments for severe illnesses, reveals that herbal medicine, prayer, and spiritual energy practices are used in healing sessions by traditional practitioners or pengusada. These practices reflect the distinctive Balinese holistic approach, combining physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions into a unified therapeutic system (Arsana et al., 2020).

At the same time, traditional healing practices have also adapted and transformed within the context of tourism. Sutarya and Sirtha (2023) observed that several spiritual practitioners in Bali have begun offering their services to international tourists while striving to preserve the spiritual essence and cultural values of Balinese traditions. This transformation highlights a convergence between global tourist demands and local values, although it also raises concerns regarding authenticity and cultural profanation (Sutarya & Sirtha, 2023).

As demand for authentic, culturally rooted wellness tourism continues to grow, it becomes increasingly important to explore how traditional healing practitioners in Ubud conduct their practices and engage with tourists. This study aims to examine the forms of local wisdom that are still preserved within traditional healing practices, and how local healers interpret their roles within the context of modern tourism. Thus, this research seeks to strengthen the narrative that wellness tourism in Bali is not merely a commercial product, but a meaningful expression of living cultural preservation.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. The research was conducted in Ubud, Gianyar Regency, Bali an area widely recognized as a center for the development of wellness tourism based on local culture. The type of data used is qualitative, derived from both primary and secondary sources.

Primary data were obtained through non-participatory direct observation of traditional Balinese healing practices, including usadha (healing based on lontar manuscripts and herbal remedies), melukat (spiritual cleansing rituals using holy water), tapak dara (energy-balancing therapy), and the healing practices conducted by balian (traditional healers). Observations were carried out three times during April and May 2025, with each visit taking place on weekends when healing activities were more frequented by tourists. Observations were conducted at several healing locations such as Tirta Empul Temple, Mengening Temple, Om Ham Retreat & Resort, and other local healing centers in the Ubud area. The researcher did not participate in the rituals but observed from the outside (non-participatory), taking notes on the structure of the processions, interactions between practitioners and tourists, and the cultural elements present. Visual documentation and field notes were also used to support the findings.

Secondary data were collected through document analysis from various online sources, including academic journal articles, publications from Bali regional government institutions,

and official content from wellness tourism service provider websites and traditional healing centers.

The data analysis technique used was qualitative descriptive analysis, which was carried out in several stages: (1) summarizing the results of field observations and document analysis, (2) categorizing data based on the types of healing practices and embedded cultural values, and (3) evaluating the forms of involvement of these practices within the context of wellness tourism development in Ubud. The research began with a literature review to build a theoretical framework and foundational understanding of traditional healing practices, followed by field observation to assess how local wisdom is practically implemented in wellness services for tourists.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Data Description or Result

Traditional healing practices developed in Ubud demonstrate the significant contribution of local wisdom to the development of an authentic, culturally rooted, and sustainable wellness tourism sector. Observational findings and online document analysis show that forms of healing such as melukat, usadha, tapak dara, and the role of the balian (Balinese traditional healers) are not only still actively practiced by the local community but have also become major attractions for international tourists seeking spiritual healing experiences unique to Bali. These practices serve not only as alternative health services but also as educational tools that convey the spiritual and cultural values of Balinese tradition.

One of the most popular practices among tourists is the melukat ritual, a spiritual purification process using holy water (tirta). This service is widely offered by retreat centers such as Om Ham Retreat & Resort, which provides melukat packages at sacred sites like Pura Mengening, guided directly by local spiritual figures such as Master Ketut Arsana (Om Ham Retreat, 2025).



**Figure 1.** Melukat Ceremony at Pura Mengening with Master Ketut Arsana

Source: Om Ham Retreat, 2025

In addition, through the GetYourGuide platform, tourists can access similar experiences via the Ubud Body Cleansing Purification Ceremony package, which combines sacred water bathing with meditation in a distinctly Balinese spiritual atmosphere (GetYourGuide, 2025). Other service providers such as Gdas Bali Wellness Resort and Bali Wondr also offer this ritual in a more exclusive format while still emphasizing the sacred values and the philosophy of Tri Hita Karana as its core foundation.



**Figure 2.** Tourists Performing Holy Water Bathing and Meditation

Source : GetYourGuide, 2025

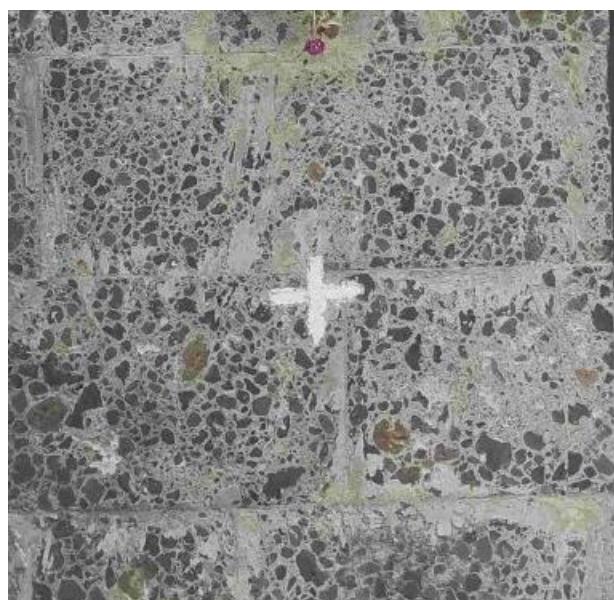
Apart from melukat, the practice of usadha—a traditional Balinese healing method based on lontar manuscripts continues to be carried out by various spiritual centers and balian (traditional healers) in Ubud. This system involves the use of herbal remedies, prayers, and spiritual mediation, and is rooted in ancient texts such as Lontar Usadha Tiwang. In this healing system, the pengusada or balian combine physical and spiritual healing techniques to achieve balance between the body (shtula), soul (suksma), and mind (antahkarana) (Arsana et al., 2020; Dana, 2023). At several retreats, such as Om Ham, usadha-based approaches are integrated into energy healing and meditation programs, demonstrating that this practice remains relevant despite its adaptation to modern wellness contexts.



**Figure 3.** Herbal Ingredients Used in Boreh Treatments

Source: Om Ham Retreat, 2025

Another practice observed in the context of traditional Balinese healing is the use of the tapak dara symbol, which represents energy balance and spiritual protection. Although it has not been widely discussed in academic literature, this symbol is commonly used in healing spaces and therapy sessions by balian, as well as in altar decorations within spiritual retreats. According to cultural sources from budayabali.com, the tapak dara is considered a cosmic symbol that maintains harmony between natural elements and human energy, and is used in rituals and healing to ward off negative forces and strengthen the body spiritually.



**Figure 4.** The Tapak Dara Symbol

Source: budayabali.com, 2025

The role of the balian or traditional healer remains a central element in healing practices in Ubud. These healers not only offer traditional medical services but also act as guardians of spiritual and cultural values. Through practices such as palm reading, energy alignment, herbal therapy, and spiritual healing, balian offer a personalized and holistic healing approach. Some balian have begun to open their services to tourists in collaboration with wellness retreat providers and online platforms, though they continue to maintain spiritual boundaries by only accepting those with sincere intentions. According to Suwantana (2025), some balian have even begun to integrate basic scientific knowledge such as anatomy and psychology into their practices, without abandoning the sacred essence of ancestral traditions.

The Provincial Government of Bali has responded to this development by supporting traditional healing as part of the local healthcare system and economic potential, as outlined in Governor Regulation No. 55 of 2019 and Regional Regulation No. 6 of 2020. These policies strengthen the position of usadha, melukat, and other healing practices within Bali's wellness tourism framework. However, this growth also presents challenges. Excessive commercialization may risk diminishing the sacred values of these practices. Sutarya and Sirtha (2023) noted the risk of profanation, referring to the shift of sacred practices into mere tourism commodities.

Nevertheless, the majority of healing practitioners and service providers in Ubud remain committed to preserving the authenticity and noble values of Balinese tradition. They emphasize the importance of pure intention, reverence for ancestors, and a deep understanding of spiritual energy in every healing practice. Thus, wellness tourism based on Balinese local wisdom in Ubud is not only a means of physical and spiritual recovery, but also a medium for preserving Balinese cultural and spiritual heritage within an increasingly globalized world.

The findings of this study reveal that traditional Balinese healing practices such as usadha, melukat, tapak dara, and the role of the balian contribute significantly to the development of wellness tourism in Ubud. These practices have not only persisted as part of community tradition, but have also transformed into spiritual tourism attractions favored by international visitors. This aligns with Rai Utama and Nyandra's (2021) view that the rapid growth of wellness tourism in Bali stems from its ability to integrate local cultural values with the holistic healing needs of modern travelers.

Field observations indicate that melukat is the most accessible and open ritual for tourists. Ceremonies held at Pura Tirta Empul, Pura Mengening, and retreats such as Om Ham offer a deeply spiritual experience. Tourists are not merely observers but also active participants in the rituals. This reflects a functional transformation from a strictly traditional practice into a form of spiritual tourism while remaining guided by priests or spiritual leaders to preserve its sacred essence.

The practice of usadha, although not widely promoted in the tourism sector, continues to be preserved by balian and healing centers that incorporate herbal therapy, prayer, and spiritual energy work. Its integrative approach balancing the body (shtula), soul (suksma), and mind (antahkarana) is in line with holistic tourism trends that emphasize comprehensive

well-being. Dana (2023) affirms that usadha is not merely a cultural heritage but a form of indigenous knowledge with potential for development within alternative health systems.

The tapak dara symbol found in healing spaces and spiritual altars illustrates the symbolic dimension of the healing process. Believed to maintain energetic balance and ward off negative forces, the symbol reinforces the spiritual environment of the therapy. Although it has not been widely explored in academic discourse, its consistent presence highlights the importance of visual and spiritual elements in enhancing the healing experience.

However, there are challenges in preserving the authenticity of these practices. Commodification and the demands of the tourism market may dilute the sacred value of rituals meant to be performed with spiritual awareness. As noted by Sutarya and Sirtha (2023), the transformation of spiritual practices into tourism attractions must be accompanied by culturally sensitive policies to avoid profanation.

Overall, these findings suggest that wellness tourism rooted in Balinese local wisdom can serve as a sustainable tourism development model, as long as cultural preservation and community involvement are maintained. Traditional Balinese healing practices function not only as alternative therapeutic methods but also as bridges to introduce the richness of Balinese spiritual culture to the international community.

## **CLOSING**

### **Conclusion**

This study reveals that traditional Balinese healing practices such as usadha, melukat, tapak dara, and the central role of balian have formed a crucial foundation in the development of wellness tourism in Ubud. These activities are not merely forms of alternative healing services but also expressions of local wisdom that integrate spiritual values, holistic body-mind-soul balance, and a living cultural heritage that continues to thrive within the modern tourism landscape. The continuity of these practices demonstrates that Balinese spirituality is capable of adaptive transformation in a global context without losing its philosophical substance and sacredness.

The findings strengthen the argument that wellness tourism in Bali is inseparable from local knowledge systems and cultural practices, and in fact gains added value because of its uniqueness. Therefore, this research contributes to reinforcing the concept of culturally based holistic tourism, which emphasizes the integration of spiritual dimensions, tourist experiences, and cultural preservation as a mutually reinforcing system.

The practical implications of this study include the need for policy development and governance models that are sensitive to local values, as well as the importance of collaboration between traditional leaders, tourism service providers, and government authorities to safeguard the authenticity of traditional healing practices. In addition, further documentation is needed for underexplored elements such as tapak dara energy massage, both from an anthropological perspective and in terms of tourist receptivity. This study also opens up opportunities for future research exploring tourist perceptions and experiences of traditional wellness practices as a form of transformational travel rooted in local culture.

## Statement of Appreciation

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