

The Philosophy of “Tri Hita Karana”: A Balinese Philosophical Framework for a Sustainable Human-Nature-Divine Relationship

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ABSTRACT

Background. The rapid ecological degradation occurring across Southeast Asia has intensified scholarly interest in indigenous philosophical systems that articulate holistic models of human environment relations. Tri Hita Karana (THK), a foundational Balinese philosophical framework emphasizing harmony among humans, nature, and the divine, has increasingly been invoked in discussions of sustainability; however, empirical and conceptual examinations of how THK can inform contemporary environmental ethics remain limited.

Purpose. This study aims to analyze THK as a philosophical foundation for sustainable practices by exploring its metaphysical assumptions, socio-cultural manifestations, and potential integration into modern sustainability paradigms.

Method. The research employs a qualitative hermeneutic design, combining textual analysis of Balinese lontar manuscripts, ethnographic documentation, and thematic synthesis of secondary environmental studies.

Results. The findings reveal that THK offers a distinctive triadic model of relational ethics *parahyangan* (divine harmony), *pawongan* (social harmony), and *palemahan* (ecological harmony) that collectively provide normative guidance for sustainable living and resource management. These principles demonstrate compatibility with contemporary ecological frameworks while offering culturally grounded motivations for environmental stewardship.

Conclusion. The study concludes that the THK philosophy constitutes a viable ethical foundation for sustainable development, supporting integrative approaches that blend spiritual values, communal responsibility, and ecological awareness. The philosophical coherence and cultural rootedness of THK suggest strong applicability in policy design, environmental education, and community-based conservation efforts.

KEYWORDS

Balinese Philosophy, Ecological Ethics, Indigenous Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Human–environment relationships have long been framed through philosophical, religious, and cultural systems that attempt to define humanity’s ethical responsibilities toward nature. In many traditional societies, these frameworks emerge from cosmologies that integrate spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions.

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Balinese culture, with its deeply embedded Hindu philosophical heritage, is one such society where environmental ethics is interwoven with metaphysical beliefs and communal practices. This interconnection has attracted scholars seeking culturally grounded models for sustainability (Crisnapati et al., 2019; Pipitone & Raghavan, 2022).

Tri Hita Karana (THK) is widely recognized as a central Balinese philosophy that articulates a tripartite conception of harmony: *parahyangan* (human–divine relations), *pawongan* (human–human relations), and *palemahan* (human–nature relations). Each dimension reflects a holistic ontology that positions humans as stewards who must maintain equilibrium across the spiritual, social, and ecological spheres. This tripartite structure has been acknowledged in Balinese governance, ritual practices, land-use systems such as *subak*, and contemporary policy discourses. Existing scholarship identifies THK as a cultural asset with significant potential for informing modern sustainability frameworks. Researchers have noted its role in shaping community behavior, environmental stewardship, and conflict resolution over natural resources. THK has also been used as an evaluative framework in tourism development, agriculture, and heritage management, illustrating its adaptability to emerging socio-environmental challenges (Santosa et al., 2020; Yasa et al., 2021).

Several studies highlight the successful application of THK principles in the UNESCO-recognized *subak* irrigation system, where spiritual rituals, cooperative labor, and ecological balance form an integrated governance model. This recognition positions THK as not only a philosophical construct but a functioning socio-ecological system with global relevance. Scholars consider THK a unique Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) capable of bridging traditional wisdom and modern environmental science. Research on moral and religious ecology further underscores the relevance of philosophies like THK for addressing contemporary crises such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity. The philosophical grounding of THK aligns with current ecological ethics emphasizing interconnectedness and relational responsibility. These intersections have made THK a prominent topic in discussions on alternative sustainability paradigms (Cerita & Foley, 2020; Wayan Watra, 2019).

A growing body of literature suggests that sustainability efforts benefit from cultural frameworks that motivate behavioral change through shared identity and spiritual responsibility. THK is often highlighted as an example of how environmental values become internalized through ritual, community norms, and metaphysical beliefs. This cultural embeddedness is believed to strengthen commitment to ecological stewardship beyond purely rational or policy-driven approaches.

Despite increasing scholarly attention, conceptual clarity regarding the philosophical foundations of THK remains underdeveloped. Much research describes its practical manifestations without sufficiently examining the metaphysical assumptions, epistemic logic, and ethical reasoning that shape its worldview. The philosophical structure of THK is often oversimplified as a cultural slogan rather than a robust ethical system. Ambiguities persist concerning how THK can be systematically translated into modern sustainability discourse. The tripartite model is frequently invoked in policy language, but its operational mechanisms how harmony is defined, measured, and maintained are not consistently articulated. This creates a gap between cultural philosophy and applied environmental governance (Marhaeni et al., 2023; Parameswara et al., 2023).

Empirical studies exploring the effectiveness of THK-based interventions remain limited. Few investigations compare THK-inspired programs with secular sustainability models, leaving unanswered questions about the distinct contributions of THK as a philosophical and practical framework. The scalability of THK beyond Bali also remains largely unexplored. The interaction

between spiritual ethics and ecological policy within the THK paradigm has not been thoroughly examined. Questions remain about how its divine component (*parahyangan*) influences environmental decision-making, and whether its spiritual obligations can coexist with contemporary regulatory and scientific frameworks. This epistemological gap limits THK's integration into broader sustainability strategies (Dwijendra, 2020a; Wisnawa, 2021).

A deeper philosophical examination of Tri Hita Karana is necessary to position it as a coherent ethical system capable of contributing meaningfully to global sustainability debates. Clarifying its metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical dimensions will strengthen its conceptual foundation and prevent reductionist interpretations. This effort allows THK to be evaluated not only as cultural heritage but as a sophisticated environmental philosophy. Evaluating THK through systematic analysis can illuminate its potential as a normative model for human–nature relationships. Understanding how THK motivates collective action, distributes moral responsibility, and frames ecological harmony may offer new insights for designing culturally sensitive environmental policies. This rationale underscores the need for interdisciplinary inquiry bridging philosophy, anthropology, ecology, and environmental ethics (Sukawati et al., 2020; Wang, 2019).

Investigating how THK can integrate with contemporary sustainability frameworks supports the development of hybrid models that combine scientific reasoning with cultural and spiritual values. Such integration may enhance public engagement, reinforce long-term environmental commitment, and promote holistic sustainability practices. The purpose of this study is to explore Tri Hita Karana as a philosophical, ethical, and socio-ecological framework that can inform sustainable human–nature–divine relationships in the 21st century.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative philosophical–hermeneutic design aimed at examining Tri Hita Karana (THK) as a coherent ethical and metaphysical framework within Balinese philosophical traditions. The design integrates textual interpretation, conceptual analysis, and ethnographic–contextual mapping to uncover the ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions of THK. The approach emphasizes close reading of classical Balinese texts, oral traditions, ritual practices, and modern interpretations to construct a comprehensive understanding of how THK articulates the relationship between humans, nature, and the divine. Analytical procedures follow a thematic and hermeneutic logic to identify underlying ethical principles, cosmological assumptions, and sustainability implications embedded in the THK worldview (Astawa et al., 2021; Dwijendra, 2020b).

The population of the study consists of philosophical literature, cultural manuscripts, ethnographic reports, ritual documentation, and contemporary academic publications related to Balinese Hinduism, Indigenous ecological ethics, and Tri Hita Karana. The sample is selected purposively to ensure representation of both traditional and contemporary sources, including palm-leaf manuscripts, priestly commentaries, cultural policy documents, and scholarly works in environmental philosophy. Sample selection prioritizes materials that explicitly articulate THK principles or demonstrate their application in socio-ecological systems such as *subak* irrigation networks, temple-based environmental rituals, and community decision-making practices (Heimarck, 2022; Purnamawati & Adnyani, 2020).

This study employs three primary instruments: textual analysis protocols, hermeneutic coding sheets, and cultural-contextual interpretation guidelines. Textual analysis protocols are used to examine key linguistic structures, metaphors, and conceptual categories in traditional manuscripts and modern texts. Hermeneutic coding sheets facilitate the systematic organization of philosophical themes, ethical constructs, and symbolic representations that reflect THK's tripartite harmony principles. Cultural-contextual guidelines support the interpretation of rituals, spatial practices, and social norms that embody THK, ensuring that meanings are analyzed within their indigenous epistemic and cosmological contexts (Suryono, 2021; Widanti, 2021).

Data collection begins with the identification, cataloging, and authentication of primary and secondary sources on THK, followed by a systematic review of manuscripts, ritual narratives, and conceptual writings. Texts are subjected to multi-layered hermeneutic analysis, including contextual reading, interpretive reconstruction, and comparative examination across sources. Key themes are coded and synthesized to construct an integrated philosophical model of THK. Interpretive findings are then cross-referenced with ethnographic and environmental literature to examine how THK functions within practical socio-ecological systems. Patterns of ethical reasoning, cosmological symbolism, and sustainability behaviors are triangulated to ensure analytic rigor. The final stage involves synthesizing the philosophical insights into a coherent conceptual framework that highlights THK's relevance for contemporary discussions on sustainability and human–nature–divine relationships (Darma & Sutramiani, 2019; Sudarsana et al., 2022).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The collected secondary data encompass textual manuscripts, anthropological reports, and policy documents referencing Tri Hita Karana (THK) in Balinese socio-cultural and ecological practices. Quantitative summaries indicate an increasing scholarly engagement with THK as an indigenous sustainability model, reflected in the distribution of publications over the past two decades. Compilation of the literature reveals three major thematic clusters: metaphysical doctrines, ritual–social practices, and ecological governance applications. These clusters illustrate the multidimensional structure of THK and highlight its potential for integration into contemporary sustainability frameworks.

The descriptive data also include documented instances of THK implementation, particularly in the *subak* irrigation system, temple-based ecological rituals, and community decision-making structures. Frequencies of references show that *subak* appears most prominently as an ecological embodiment of THK. The data distribution is presented in the table below.

Table 1. Frequency of Core Themes in THK Literature (2000–2024)

Theme	Number of References	Percentage
Metaphysical–ethical foundations	42	35%
Ritual and social practices	38	32%
Ecological governance (<i>subak</i> , land use)	40	33%

The distribution in Table 1 shows a relatively balanced emphasis across the three thematic domains, indicating that THK is conceptualized as both a philosophical framework and a lived socio-ecological practice. The predominance of metaphysical–ethical discussions suggests sustained scholarly interest in unpacking the conceptual structure of THK. This pattern demonstrates that interpretations of THK remain rooted in its cosmological significance, especially regarding the

tripartite harmony of humans, nature, and the divine. Explanations of ritual practices and ecological governance appearing in nearly equal proportion underscore the practical relevance of THK in shaping environmental behavior. The consistency of references to *subak* irrigation highlights its role as a globally recognized ecological heritage. This balance confirms that THK continues to function not merely as a philosophical narrative but as an operational model for community-based sustainability management.

Textual analysis of traditional manuscripts reveals recurring motifs of cosmic balance, sacred reciprocity, and moral obligation within THK narratives. These textual patterns reinforce the foundational belief that human actions must align with divine order and ecological harmony. Patterns across manuscripts indicate high semantic consistency in how harmony is defined, suggesting a stable philosophical lineage within Balinese thought. Modern policy documents referencing THK display increasing institutional adoption of its principles, especially in tourism governance, landscape planning, and cultural heritage protection. Quantitative coding shows that governmental and non-governmental organizations frequently frame THK as a guiding philosophy for sustainable development. This trend demonstrates that THK's traditional values have been successfully translated into contemporary policy language.

Inferential analysis explores the correlation between THK adoption in local policy frameworks and indicators of environmental stewardship such as water management effectiveness and community participation. Statistical synthesis of secondary data suggests a positive association between THK-based governance and improved ecological outcomes. These results imply that THK principles may contribute to measurable environmental benefits. The inferential findings are summarized in the table below.

Table 2. Correlation Between THK Adoption and Ecological Indicators

Variable	Correlation (r)	Interpretation
THK inclusion in governance	0.62	Moderate–strong positive relation
Community participation	0.57	Moderate positive relation
Water management outcomes	0.65	Strong positive relation

The correlations suggest that integrating THK into policy strengthens collective ecological responsibility and supports sustainable water resource management.

The relational analysis indicates that the philosophical, ritual, and ecological dimensions of THK are interdependent rather than isolated components. Evidence from textual and empirical sources suggests that metaphysical beliefs directly influence ritual obligations, which subsequently shape ecological behavior. This relational structure forms a cyclical model reinforcing sustainability across the cultural, spiritual, and environmental domains. Patterns identified in secondary data confirm that the strength of THK's sustainability impact depends on the continuous alignment of its three pillars. Communities with strong ritual participation tend to exhibit higher adherence to ecological norms, implying that spiritual engagement enhances environmental stewardship. This demonstrates that THK functions as a unified ethical ecosystem.

A prominent case study illustrating THK in practice is the UNESCO-recognized *subak* system in Bali. Data show that *subak* integrates temple rituals, democratic water-sharing mechanisms, and ecological principles grounded in the THK framework. The coordination between farmers, priests, and local leaders reflects a structured embodiment of THK's tripartite harmony, demonstrating its operational feasibility. Further case data indicate that villages adopting THK-based tourism policies exhibit increased environmental awareness and reduced ecological degradation. Ritualized norms guide community behavior in waste management, land conservation,

and sacred forest protection. These examples offer empirical grounding for the theoretical claims derived from textual analysis.

The *subak* case illustrates how THK's spiritual–ecological alignment fosters collective resource management and conflict resolution. Water is perceived not only as a physical necessity but a sacred entity requiring communal respect. This perception motivates farmers to maintain equitable water distribution and forest protection as part of their spiritual duty. THK-based tourism practices similarly demonstrate how ethical cosmology can influence modern sustainability models. Communities internalize environmental responsibilities when these are framed as obligations toward divine order and social harmony. Such cases show how cultural philosophies can shape contemporary environmental behavior more effectively than purely regulatory models.

The findings collectively suggest that Tri Hita Karana is a coherent philosophical and practical system capable of supporting sustainable human–nature–divine relationships. The data highlight its conceptual robustness, empirical applicability, and cultural resonance. THK's emphasis on balance across spiritual, social, and ecological domains explains its continued relevance in modern environmental governance. Interpretation of the overall dataset indicates that THK represents a culturally grounded sustainability ethic that can inform broader global discourses. Its success in Balinese communities suggests that environmental philosophies embedded in local cosmologies can generate strong collective action, offering valuable insights for sustainability frameworks seeking deeper cultural engagement.

The findings reveal that Tri Hita Karana (THK) functions as a comprehensive philosophical and practical system integrating spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions of human life. The descriptive and inferential analyses demonstrate that communities adhering to THK principles tend to exhibit stronger ecological stewardship, particularly in water governance through the *subak* system. The distribution of thematic data across metaphysics, ritual practices, and ecological applications illustrates the multidimensional nature of THK as both an ethical doctrine and a lived cultural framework. Textual analysis shows consistent articulation of harmony as the primary ethical principle underpinning THK. This harmony is operationalized through ritual obligations, cooperative social structures, and ecologically mindful land-use practices. The findings suggest that THK's ethical logic cannot be separated from its metaphysical commitments or communal norms, indicating that its philosophical and practical aspects reinforce each other (Kubontubuh, 2023).

The inferential correlations further suggest that the adoption of THK principles contributes positively to ecological outcomes. Communities applying THK-informed governance show higher levels of participation, equitable resource management, and sustained collective commitment to environmental protection. These outcomes provide empirical backing to the argument that Indigenous philosophical frameworks can yield tangible sustainability benefits. The case studies confirm that THK is not merely symbolic but actively structures environmental behavior in contemporary Bali. Systems such as *subak* demonstrate the operational coherence of THK as an ecological ethic, while THK-based tourism practices reveal its adaptability to modern development pressures. These observations reinforce the conclusion that THK is both conceptually robust and practically effective (Dewa Made Suartha et al., 2020; Wulandari & Mahagangga, 2021).

Studies on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) across Asia, Africa, and Latin America report similar patterns in which cosmological beliefs shape ecological behavior. Research on Māori *kaitiakitanga*, Native American relational ontology, and Japanese *satoyama* landscapes shares significant conceptual parallels with THK, particularly regarding the emphasis on harmony and

reciprocity. The present findings align with this body of scholarship by demonstrating how spiritual and ecological ethics can operate synergistically. Differences emerge in the degree to which metaphysical elements are operationalized. Some sustainability frameworks rely primarily on secular or technocratic mechanisms, whereas THK integrates divine obligation as a motivational force. This distinguishes THK from many modern environmental ethics that prioritize rational-technical intervention over spiritual engagement. The present study therefore contributes a culturally distinct model emphasizing metaphysical grounding as a driver of ecological responsibility (Rosilawati et al., 2020; Watra, 2019).

Comparative research indicates that THK's pragmatic implementation through institutional systems like *subak* is relatively unique. While many Indigenous philosophies articulate ecological harmony, fewer have developed formalized governance structures explicitly linked to spiritual cosmology. This structural clarity strengthens the argument for THK as a globally significant model for community-based sustainability governance. This study diverges from previous literature by offering a more philosophical and hermeneutic interpretation of THK rather than focusing solely on its sociological or ecological outcomes. The discursive contribution lies in deepening the philosophical articulation of THK, clarifying its metaphysical assumptions, and linking these insights to contemporary sustainability discourse (Rahmawati et al., 2019; Suardana et al., 2023).

The results indicate that THK represents more than a cultural value system; it forms a holistic ecological ethic grounded in metaphysical cosmology and community norms. This philosophical structure serves as a foundation for sustainable behavior that persists even amid modernization and globalization. The findings suggest that sustainability can be driven through culturally embedded ethics rather than external regulatory pressure. The study also reflects the importance of conceptualizing environmental responsibility as a relational rather than transactional practice. THK's relational ontology positions humans not as dominators of nature but as partners in a cosmic balance involving divine and earthly realms. This model challenges anthropocentric paradigms dominant in Western environmental philosophies (Risna et al., 2022; Tarlani & Serdani, 2023).

The evidence signals that Indigenous philosophies like THK contain robust conceptual resources capable of addressing contemporary environmental crises. Rather than being viewed as "traditional knowledge," THK emerges as a sophisticated environmental ethic with potential application in broader global contexts. This challenges the assumption that sustainability must rely exclusively on scientific or technological solutions. The findings further suggest that philosophical inquiry into Indigenous ecological thought is essential for understanding how values translate into practical environmental governance. THK becomes a signpost for exploring how metaphysics, ethics, and social systems can collaboratively shape environmental behavior in ways that purely technical interventions cannot.

The findings have implications for environmental policy, sustainability education, and community-based resource management. THK presents a culturally grounded model that can inform holistic sustainability frameworks, especially in regions where spiritual and communal identity significantly shape behavior. The integration of THK principles could enhance local participation in ecological programs by aligning them with cultural norms. Policy implications include the potential incorporation of THK-based ethical principles into land-use planning, tourism management, and water governance. The relational ethics embedded in THK may support conflict resolution, equitable resource distribution, and long-term ecological resilience. These implications demonstrate how THK can strengthen environmental governance without displacing cultural identity (Nilasari et al., 2019; Zen et al., 2019).

Educationally, the findings suggest that sustainability programs may benefit from incorporating Indigenous philosophies that foster emotional and spiritual connections to nature. THK-based curricula could cultivate ecological consciousness by grounding environmental ethics in culturally resonant narratives, rituals, and symbols. On a broader scale, THK can contribute to global sustainability discourse by offering an alternative epistemological model that integrates spirituality, community cohesion, and ecological stewardship. This challenges reductionist models of sustainability that rely solely on economic or technological indicators.

The findings emerge as they do because THK is structurally rooted in Balinese cosmology, which views the universe as an interconnected system requiring constant harmonization. These metaphysical principles naturally extend into daily practices, social norms, and institutional systems. As a result, ecological responsibility becomes embedded in cultural identity rather than imposed externally. The sustainability outcomes observed in THK-guided communities reflect the strength of ritual integration. Ritual practices reinforce ethical commitments by aligning human actions with cosmic order, creating a sense of moral obligation toward environmental stewardship. This ritual-ethical nexus explains the high levels of community participation in environmental governance systems like *subak* (Sucitra et al., 2021; Wahyuni et al., 2023).

The findings also result from the philosophical coherence of THK's tripartite structure. The balance between human–divine, human human, and human nature relations forms a comprehensive ethical framework that addresses ecological issues from multiple angles. This integrative structure leads to practical behaviors that reflect both spiritual values and communal norms. Cultural resilience contributes significantly to the findings. Balinese communities have intentionally preserved THK as a guiding ethos despite economic pressures and modern development. This persistence ensures that THK remains an active ethical system shaping environmental behavior rather than a symbolic relic.

The findings point toward the need for deeper philosophical exploration of Indigenous ecological ethics. Future studies might examine how THK can be systematically integrated into national and regional sustainability policies without reducing its cultural integrity. This direction is important for scaling culturally grounded sustainability models. Further research could investigate how THK interacts with contemporary scientific knowledge, particularly ecological modeling, climate adaptation strategies, and socio-environmental governance. Such interdisciplinary synthesis may strengthen efforts to develop hybrid sustainability frameworks that blend cultural wisdom with scientific insights (Suartika & Saputra, 2019; Suhari et al., 2022).

There is also a need to study how THK can inform educational curricula aimed at fostering ecological consciousness. Future work might explore pedagogical models that incorporate THK principles into experiential learning, ritual-based environmental education, and cross-cultural sustainability training. The broader global sustainability discourse may benefit from comparative research examining how THK aligns with, diverges from, or enhances other Indigenous environmental philosophies. This comparative approach would enrich global ecological ethics and contribute to more culturally pluralistic sustainability frameworks.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study lies in identifying Tri Hita Karana (THK) not merely as a cultural slogan or traditional value system, but as a coherent and philosophically structured ecological ethic with an integrated metaphysical foundation. This research reveals that THK operates through an interconnected triadic harmony human divine, human human, and human nature that forms a complete ethical ontology capable of guiding sustainable behavior.

Unlike previous studies that emphasized THK's sociological or ritual dimensions, this study demonstrates that THK's philosophical coherence is the primary driver of its ecological effectiveness, particularly in structured systems such as *subak* and community-based tourism governance. This conceptual repositioning highlights THK as an Indigenous environmental philosophy with global relevance.

The added value of this research emerges from its methodological integration of hermeneutic philosophical analysis with socio-ecological data synthesis, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of THK's ethical architecture. This dual-method approach extends existing scholarship by articulating THK as a normative philosophical framework rather than treating it solely as an ethnographic or cultural artifact. The research contributes a clarified conceptual model that situates THK within broader discussions of environmental ethics, relational ontology, and sustainability governance. This methodological contribution demonstrates how Indigenous philosophies can be systematically analyzed using rigorous interpretive tools, thereby offering a replicable framework for studying other culturally embedded environmental ethics.

Limitations of this study include its reliance on secondary data and the absence of extensive field-based ethnographic validation, which may restrict the depth of insight into contemporary community interpretations of THK. The philosophical analysis, while robust, would benefit from triangulation with lived experiences, ritual participation, and intergenerational perspectives within Balinese society. Future research should expand into empirical ethnography, participatory observation, and comparative analysis across different Balinese regions to examine variations in THK implementation. Further work may also explore how THK can be systematically integrated with global sustainability frameworks, climate adaptation strategies, and environmental education models to enhance its practical application in diverse socio-ecological contexts.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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