

The Urban Tourism Vortex: Hegemony and the Triple Marginalization of Subak Traditions in Denpasar, Bali

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates urban tourism in Denpasar, Bali, and how it expands by displacing the Subak irrigation system, a living heritage institution that underlies Balinese identity at the regional level. We theorize the urban tourism vortex as corresponding to a regularized process of normalization in which spatial planning priorities, labor market shift narratives, and development narratives become canon in accord with the thesis of Gramscian hegemony, such that agrarian dispossession expectations follow slowly but surely without the sound of open class antagonism. It employs a qualitative case study, using longitudinal land-use data (2009–2021), policy documents, field observations, and semi-structured interviews with Subak leaders, farmers, and temple custodians. Our findings illustrate three co-dependent governance challenges: (i) ecological contraction as 777 hectares of rice fields lose function, (ii) social restructuring through the redistribution of agricultural work towards tourism-related services, and (iii) symbolic transformation in which agro-cultural places are institutionally reconfigured as economic sites of urban values whilst retaining symbolic imagery for tourism branding. Collectively, these processes undermine the living heritage material and social foundations, although cultural symbols are retained for marketing purposes. By showing that cultural unsustainability can arise through incremental, consensual policies rather than direct coercion, this research contributes to tourism management literature.

KEYWORDS: cultural landscape, Denpasar, hegemony, political economy of tourism, Subak, urban tourism vortex

INTRODUCTION

One of the key drivers transforming peri-urban landscapes across Asia, Latin America, and Europe (Andyana et al., 2023; Dai et al., 2021; Sutheeshna, 2021) is urban tourism expansion. While tourism has the potential for economic

development and cultural expression, in reality, accelerating urban tourism growth threatens living heritage systems (Bianchi, 2018; Hall, 2011). Most policymakers face this paradox as destinations can only rationalize their position from a global perspective. Given their unique identity, they are currently at risk from the urbanization spawned by tourism.

One of the most essential sites on this contradiction is in Bali. These agrarian landscapes are deeply interlinked with the island's global tourism identity, the Subak irrigation system. Subak is a socio-ecological institution that integrates a water management system with rice farming and rituals (Hisyam et al., 2024; Sukanteri et al., 2021). Subak Culture is a living heritage that exemplifies the multi-functionality of ecological, social, and religious dimensions, which are synergistically complementary; it is recognized as a cultural landscape by UNESCO (Arsana et al., 2025; Vipriyanti et al., 2025). In contrast, rapid urbanization and tourism-oriented land use developments in Denpasar compete more fiercely for land, labor, and water resources (Ambarini et al., 2026; IDPO et al., 2023). To this end, an urgent question for tourism management is: how can destinations nurture living heritage systems whilst experiencing rapid urban tourism growth?

However, much important previous work leaves key gaps. Most studies on "Subak" have addressed conservation strategies or community ecotourism, casting Subak more as an asset than as a system reconstructed in the context of political-economic change (Zen et al., 2024). This approach is useful, but often overlooks several issues, such as how land-use planning sees heritage as a form of property, how labor market incentives artificially raise or lower employment and ways of life, and how narratives of

development reconstruct heritage. Tourism studies since 1990 have been perceiving both resident opposition and the inevitability of environmental degradation. Meanwhile, few studies focus on the governance mechanisms that make this kind of change normal (Fletcher et al., 2019; Milano et al., 2019). At the same time, even political economy perspectives that examine how tourism development intersects with agendas for capital accumulation and urban growth (Britton, 1982) largely fail to examine the justification of such transformations in local communities. Another gap related to this is the different conception of hegemony. Notably, researchers in tourism have applied Gramsci's historical materialist methodology to the study of contained asymmetric power dynamics (Özçelik, 2025). This study applies Gramsci's concept of hegemony as a framework for understanding how some cultural landscapes systematically reconstitute themselves as "inevitable" and has been more than a little-examined in tourism. Additionally, several prior heritage studies (Smith, 2006) indicate a failure to explain whether symbolic continuity can coexist with material dislocation.

This study seeks to bridge these gaps by asking: What role does the growth of urban tourism play in marginalizing the Subak system, and how is this marginalization negotiated and normalized as a consensual process? We perceive the vortex of urban tourism as a periodically implemented process, in which values of spatial planning, labor market changes, and the project narrative become institutionalized. Merging literature on ecological contraction, social restructuring, and symbolic transformation, we contend that marginalization transpires as a triad—through the interrelated processes of ecological contraction (e.g., reduced access to land or natural resources), social restructuring (e.g., exclusions from systems of governance), and symbolic transformation (e.g., loss of cultural heritage).

The study makes four contributions. In doing this, it first contributes to political economy scholarship by showing how incremental policy accumulation allocates administrative investment and achieves consent for socio-ecological displacement through tourism-led urbanization. Second, it reframes cultural sustainability by demonstrating that preserving heritage conservation measures is futile without protecting space for material production. Thirdly, it proposes that destination governance should be based on the criteria of spatial and symbolic justice. Fourth, it presents longitudinal evidence (2009–2021) from Denpasar—a critical case in which urban expansion and destination competitiveness occur together with a deep symbolic valuation of agrarian heritage (IDPO et al., 2023).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Political Economy of Tourism

Urban tourism development is a closely contingent process rooted in political and institutional structures that shape the value of land, labor, and cultural assets (Nelson, 2012). From political economy perspectives, tourism growth contributes in more nuanced ways through its role as capital accumulation, urban entrepreneurship (Bianchi, 2018), and state-assisted infrastructure expansion. Moderately, the urbanization of tourist destinations increases competition for land, particularly in food-producing areas (peri-urban agriculture), whose urban value has increased (Ambarini et al., 2026). Cultural landscapes are often commodified in this context, producing economic resources that generate incentives to preserve landscapes, but by nature, disassociate symbolic representation from material reproduction. Research on overtourism shows that pro-competitive governance dominates over pro-sustainability governance (Saarinen, 2014), but studies of policy processes normalizing heritage erosion are rarer (Fletcher et al., 2019; Loda & Abenante, 2024). In this respect, this research intervenes by focusing on discursive and institutional practices that build growth-oriented development as common sense.

Gramscian Hegemony and the Normalization of Transformation

Through the lens of Gramsci's theory of hegemony, we offer an interpretation of how development priorities are made non-existent. Hegemony is defined as the means by which a ruling class gains consent through everyday cultural practices, institutions, and narratives independent of or in addition to overt coercion (Özçelik, 2025). This hegemonic functioning of tourism governance ensures that spatial planning, labor conditions, and media narratives transform tourism-driven urbanization into 'normal' and desirable. The reasons for land conversion are framed not as displacement but rather the imposition of profit from rising land prices. Backward imputed coding of farming and new projections on modern service employment. Aging, in turn, becomes a historiography that rewrites local values over time, agrarian decline an act of evolutionary adjustment. Many systemic decisions made over a long period across domains such as land-use planning, tax policies, and labor incentives have led to marginalization, converging on macro-governance with micro-cultural effects.

Heritage, Symbolic Reconfiguration, and Living Culture

Heritage is deemed as actually not natural but selectively sanctioned (Smith 2006). This is the basis of the discourse of authorized heritage, wherein symbolic values take precedence over quotidian practices sustaining living culture. For example, in the case of designation as agricultural heritage sites, Zhenzhen Zhou and Jariya Buranaut (2025) argue that this may promote the conservation of the physical structure, but such designation leads to the degradation of agro-ecosystems and the erosion of productive resources. Long-standing cultural systems can be symbolically conserved while materially weakened. Ritual may be simplified or reshaped in response to land-use changes. Although not without criticism (Arsana et al., 2025; Loda & Abenante, 2024), heritage branding can help achieve symbolic visibility from a governance perspective, but may fall short in land-use protection. In this sense, sustainable cultural tourism should be considered within the focus of spatial equity and productive activities over time.

Integrating Ecology, Labor, and Meaning

Combining these strands, we theorize the marginalization of Subak through three interconnected lenses. Ecological contraction is the concept of physical shrinkage in agricultural land, the Subak ecological and economic foundation (Arsana et al., 2025). Social reorganization is related to the transformation of work and community organization; as employment shifts from agriculture to tourism, collective mechanisms to support rehabilitation of irrigation systems begin to decompose (Sukanteri et al., 2021). Symbolic transformation refers to changes in religious meaning; for instance, if agricultural production declines, ritual institutions might adapt by changing the interpretation of their purpose from fertility ceremonies to urban prosperity blessings. These dimensions are interrelated and mutually reinforcing: land conversion hampers agricultural viability, leading to increased labor out-migration, which erodes institutions and legitimizes the perception that farming is outdated in urban development. Every step appears to be rational evolution rather than structural displacement by hegemonic processes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Case Selection

This study uses a qualitative case study design, which is well-suited to exploring complex socio-ecological processes (Baxter & Jack, 2015). There are two grounds why Denpasar was chosen as the most extreme case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Specifically, Denpasar, as Bali's

economic and administrative center, is under immense pressure from urban expansion and tourism development (IDPO et al., 2023; Setiawan et al., 2021). Second, in the international context, Subak has been connected to effective governance arrangements. However, research remains focused on rural areas; Denpasar offers an opportunity to observe extreme land scarcity and engage with living heritage under an urban tourism governance situation (Ambarini et al., 2026).

Data Collection

Data were collected from three sources. Data on agricultural land-use statistics (2009–2021), regional development plans, urban spatial plans, labor statistics and policy archive data were analyzed as secondary data. Field observations were carried out in the remaining of the Subak area in West, East, North and South Denpasar during 2021–2023, also observing irrigation infrastructure (*tula*), rice field conditions (*Caturangsa*), religious sites (*pelinggih*) and signs of land conversion. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 key informants (Subak leaders/*Pekaseh*, Kelian/traditional village leaders, active farmers, landowners, temple guardians, and local officials), using a purposive sampling. Each lasted 60–120 min, was conducted in both Balinese and Indonesian (language use varied by participant ethnicity), audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then translated into English.

To provide a clearer profile of the interview participants, the 21 key informants were grouped into six categories according to their institutional roles and experiential relevance to Subak governance, agricultural practice, land-use change, ritual life, and local policy implementation (Table 1).

Table 1. Informant Categories

No.	Informant Category	Description/Role in the Study	Number of Informants
1	Pekaseh/ Subak leaders	Leaders responsible for Subak irrigation organization, water allocation, agricultural coordination, and ritual-related decision-making within Subak institutions.	4
2	Kelian/ Traditional village leaders	Customary community leaders who provided information on village governance, local norms, community participation, and institutional responses to land-use change.	3

No.	Informant Category	Description/Role in the Study	Number of Informants
3	Active farmers	Farmers who were still directly involved in rice cultivation and could explain changes in agricultural practices, irrigation access, labor availability, and farming viability.	6
4	Landowners	Owners of agricultural or former agricultural land who provided perspectives on land-market pressures, land conversion decisions, inheritance, and economic incentives.	3
5	Temple guardians	Custodians of Subak-related temples who provided insights into ritual continuity, ceremonial simplification, and symbolic transformation of agrarian religious practices.	3
6	Local officials	Government or administrative officials who provided information on spatial planning, land-use policy, tourism development, and municipal governance.	2
Total			21

(Source: Researcher, 2026)

This composition enabled the study to capture multiple perspectives on the marginalization of Subak, including institutional, agricultural, economic, ritual, and policy-related dimensions. All informants were anonymized to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Our approach to data analysis was a three-stage thematic coding (Naeem et al., 2023). Open coding of the raw data revealed that in the absence of younger farmers, land sales and ceremony simplification were recurring themes. Axial coding structured codes into three higher-order dimensions: ecological contraction, social restructuring, and symbolic transformation. This was integrated into the hegemony framework through selective coding, as consent is produced in this realm (through planning discourse, labor incentives, and institutional adaptation) (see Tabel 2).

Table 2. Thematic Coding

Dimension	Open Code Examples	Representative Quote
Ecological contraction	Land selling, water disruption, field conversion	"Our rice field became a hotel. What could we do? Land price was too high." (Farmer, South Denpasar)
Social restructuring	No successors, tourism employment, less cooperation	"My children work in Nusa Dua hotels. Farming is too hard." (Farmer, East Denpasar)
Symbolic transformation	Ritual simplification, temple reorientation, new meanings	"The temple now prays for business prosperity, not just rice." (Temple guardian, West Denpasar)

(Source: Researcher, 2026)

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Triangulation of interview accounts with land-use statistics and planning documents, along with member checking with five key informants, ensured credibility (Suter, 2012). We established dependability by providing an audit trail of raw data, coding logs, and analytic memos. Reflexive journals prevented this cautiously by not romanticizing Subak. The basis of transferability is a thick description of the case context (Drisko, 2025).

Ethical Considerations and Researcher Reflexivity

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Bali Tourism Polytechnic. A consent form, assurance that the study would not identify them (anonymity), and the option to refuse to participate at any time were provided to all respondents. They did not reveal any of their ritual secrets and handled sensitive cultural information with care.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ecological Contraction and Urban Land Governance

Table 3 reveals long-term (2009–2021) land-use change analyses indicate a continued decrease in rice field area throughout Denpasar. Between 2009 (2,693 hectares) and 2021 (1,916 hectares), total paddy land experienced a net loss of 777 ha. The drop was not even across the three

districts: South Denpasar saw a 42% reduction in rice area (929 ha to 537 ha), while East and North Denpasar were also substantially reduced in size. West Denpasar itself, with very little land under cultivation, continued on its downward path.

Table 3. Reducing Rice Fields in Denpasar City (ha), 2009–2021

Region	2009	2014	2021
West Denpasar	269	256	208
East Denpasar	726	701	584
South Denpasar	929	840	537
North Denpasar	769	712	587
Central Denpasar	2,693	2,509	1,916

Source: Compiled from official municipal statistics, 2026

The worst-hit areas are under immense pressure due to residential and commercial use. Not all land conversions are random — they follow development corridors with high land rents. If they do describe displacement in relation to the conversion, they do so sparingly, yet frame it as an entirely rational development error due to home prices climbing and city-brand upgrading. This is how hegemony functions — development narratives are naturalized for consent (Özçelik, 2025).

The durability of decline possibly indicates that policies have been locked into place in a pro-growth type manner (Bianchi, 2018). Fragmentation also decreases the efficiency of functioning in the remaining Subak units and their capability to ensure irrigation flows (Arsana et al., 2025). Yet, then as now, this agrarian imagery is what tourism-based branding depends on in the absence of a material base eroding in Denpasar. Integrated land-use planning is essential.

Social Restructuring and Labor Reorientation

Employment data includes a structural change to labor statistics. Employment in 2009 was 8.89%, services and tourism were at 38.04%. This gap was even larger as recently as 2021. But perhaps even less surprisingly, interviews also pointed to a generational gap —younger people leaving farming for hospitality, retail, construction, and public service. Poll respondents reported higher pay, more consistent hours, and better social capital for tourism jobs. One East Denpasar farmer, speaking anonymously, said: "I don't grow rice myself anymore. Farming is too hard. There is no future in rice."

This transition seems to lower the importance of occupational identities. Farming is negatively viewed as

labor-intensive, high-risk, and backward. Meanwhile, tourism has sported a modern, respectable lifestyle. This hegemonic process recodes welfare as involvement in the service economy (Hall, 2011). Collective mechanisms upon which Subak relies — among them mutual assistance (gotong royong), irrigation maintenance, and ceremonial labor— begin to curl at the edges of temple-economic nirvana. Some of the Pekaseh claimed that it was hard to gather people to attend.

There will be limits to how much can and should be achieved through niche ecotourism interventions (Vipriyanti et al., 2025) in terms of reversing structural incentives that reward exit from agriculture. Without measures that strengthen agricultural competitiveness (such as price supports, tax breaks, and farm-to-tourism value chains), the demographic drain remains unbroken. In sustainable cultural tourism, it needs to be determined if the community of practice is sustainable.

Symbolic Transformation and Institutional Reconfiguration

The third dimension relates to religious and institutional changes. In Subak, irrigation is linked to ritual. Field observations reveal that with diminishing rice fields, certain ceremonies have been simplified by reducing the number of ritual sequences/parts, changing their timing, and/or limiting who participates. "More prepared ahead," said a temple guardian in West Denpasar, "now the offerings are fewer because rice has become less planted. You are still praying, only it is not the same."

Ulun Suwi Temple, in an area that was converted into Swagina Taman Sari Temple, for example, is one of the most obvious examples. When rice fields were bountiful, the temple became a place of worship for both fertility and harvest. In an era of agricultural decline, the temple was symbolically oriented toward success in urban livelihoods, such as commercial, entrepreneurial, and digital businesses; good jobs with livable wages; and economic security.

This is not disappearance but recontextualization (Smith, 2006). Hegemonic rule reframes change as adaptive resilience and not loss. The ritual shift from a political economy perspective that circles around limits determined by an agriculture already set for inevitable collapse (Loda & Abenante, 2024). The people still meet for a ceremony, the temple stands — but the connection between ritual ecology and productive labor has been severed.

Indicators of heritage conservation, whether in temples or festival schedules, do not suffice. Governance should not be asking only: "Is the temple overgrown? but also "Does there still exist a farming community that feeds it?"

Integrating the Three Dimensions

The results suggest a coupling among ecological contraction, social, and symbolic restructuring. While agrarian systems collapse as a viable institution, land reverts to urban districts with faster out-migration. Each step, considered in isolation, appears reasonable and non-compulsory. Finally, they will create a system of hegemony.

Furthermore, the step explains why cultural unsustainability can happen short of total war. Dominance [Hegemony] is contested through common sense — development is good, (and tourism) modern; farming is backward; urban life is deemed aspirational (Bianchi, 2018; Özçelik, 2025). There is not a single actor who "decides" Subak must die. What it is instead is thousands of little decisions bubbling up and solidifying into structures.

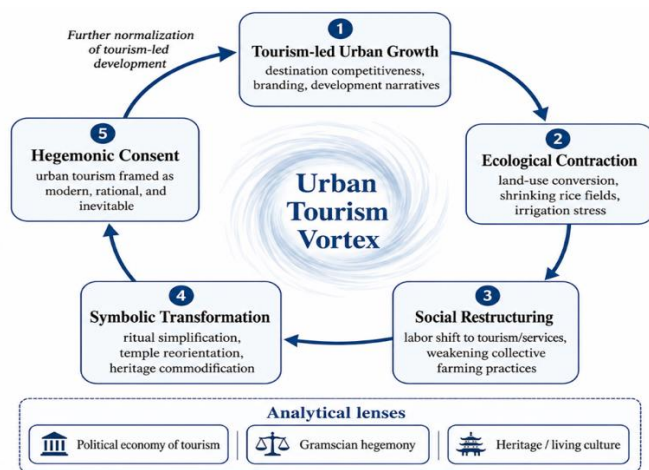


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Urban Tourism Vortex
 (Source: Researcher, 2026)

For tourism, land-use and agricultural policy to be developed as cultural sustainability—building ex-ante instead of conserving ex-post after damage. Figure 1 shows how the urban tourism vortex links tourism-led urban growth, ecological contraction, social restructuring, symbolic transformation, and the production of Gramscian consent.

There has to be specific governance around spatial and symbolic justice because the zones that we call agrarian are living spaces within productive landscapes, not museum exhibits. The voices of farmers associated with tourism need to be included in the decision-making.

CONCLUSION

This research explored urban tourism expansion in Denpasar, Bali, and the implications for marginalizing the Subak irrigation system. Three key findings are demonstrated through longitudinal analysis (2009–2021). First, ecological shrinkage has reduced rice area by 777 hectares in areas under enormous residential and event strain. Second, social restructuring has shifted labor from agriculture to tourism-related services, which are detrimental to the reproduction of collective mechanisms needed for Subak. Third, ritual institutions have themselves been symbolically transformed: temples become neo-secular in their adaptation to urban livelihoods, even as their agrarian foundations erode. They are mutually reinforcing and episodic, achieved indirectly through hegemonic consent rather than direct confrontation.

Theoretical contributions are threefold. In line with our focus, the study makes several contributions to political economy scholarship by illustrating how these long-term processes of tourism-led urbanization work together as a cookbook for securing consent over socio-ecological displacement through an assemblage of policy decisions. Our second argument is that it reframes cultural sustainability and highlights that mere recognition (awards, branding, ecotourism) of heritage hawkers means nothing without protecting spaces for material production or communal practices. Third, it articulates space-time and symbolic justice as normative frameworks that should guide the governance of destinations beyond visitor-focused metrics.

Policy implications call for greater attention to integrated governance. This implies more than just land-use regulations; tourism policy must support the protection of agriculture through zoning strategies paired with tax incentives for continuing to farm, as well as organizations that incorporate locally-produced food into their forms of tourism, such as farm-to-table dining and community-supported agriculture. Ongoing collaboration through governance to ensure that there are common land-use visions between destination management organizations and municipal planning agencies prioritizing living heritage over symbolic facade.

Future work comparing Denpasar with other rapidly urbanizing tourism destinations. It would shed light on the ways in which land markets, labor restructuring, and governance modalities interact. The integration of spatial analysis with institutional ethnography, as presented in this

Framework, illuminates potential pathways into resilient cultural landscapes for destinations that depend on growth.

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DECLARATIONS

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no competing financial, professional, or personal interests that could have influenced the research or the publication of this manuscript.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study was approved by the Academic Board of Politeknik Pariwisata Bali. The research was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical principles for studies involving human participants. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their rights to confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents had the right to decline or withdraw from the study at any time without any adverse consequences.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, I Ketut Surata (surata@ppb.ac.id), upon reasonable request.

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