

## Inclusive Identity of stage: Myths, Local Wisdom, and Resistance in the Baris Bebila Dance of Bengkulu Village

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### ABSTRACT

Bengkala Village in Bali presents a unique phenomenon, where a community of deaf (*Kolok*) and hearing (*Enget*) people coexist in a state of near-perfect integration. At the heart of this integration lies the Baris Bebila Dance, a performance masterpiece that is not merely a cultural attraction but a crystallisation of myth, local wisdom, and a decades-long process of constructing an inclusive identity. This ethnographic study aims to analyse the role of the origin myth and local wisdom of Bengkulu Village in shaping this inclusive performing art, as well as to understand how the identity of the *Kolok* community is constructed and re-signified through the medium of dance. Data was collected through intensive participant observation, in-depth interviews with *Kolok* dancers, the dance's creator, and traditional elders, as well as a study of documents related to the village's myths and history. The research findings reveal that the myth of the *Kutukan Goda Cacat* (Goda Cacat's Curse) is not viewed as a disgrace; instead, it has been intelligently transformed through local wisdom into a source of strength and collective unity. The Baris Bebila Dance becomes a stage upon which the identity of "deafness" is radically reconstructed; from a limitation into a sacred and powerful uniqueness. The values of *selempah* (close kinship) and equal partnership between the *Kolok* and *Enget*, manifested through the entire community's mastery of Bahasa Isyarat Kata *Kolok* (BIKK, the *Kolok* Sign Language), form the social foundation that enables this inclusion to be realised organically. The conclusion of this research affirms that the Baris Bebila Dance is, in essence, a subtle yet powerful form of cultural resistance against the stigma of disability. The story of Bengkulu proves that authentic and sustainable inclusion is not an imported ideal, but can flourish from within, nurtured by the community's own value systems and creativity.

### KEYWORDS

Baris Bebila Dance, Inclusion, Myth, Identity, Ethnography



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## Introduction

The waves of globalisation reach every corner of the globe, including Bali, making questions about the resilience of local community identities increasingly important. Amidst the pressures of homogenisation, traditional arts have become a stage where identity is not only preserved but also strengthened. Bengkulu Village in Buleleng, Bali, offers a remarkable story about this. Known as the "Kolok Village," where deaf (*kolok*) and hearing (*enget*) communities coexist, Bengkulu has given birth to a cultural masterpiece: the Baris Bebila Dance.

A sacred performance stage in classical Bali typically expects the complex chimes of a gamelan orchestra accompanying every movement of the dancers. Balinese aesthetics, as noted by Made Bandem [1], emphasise harmony and synchrony between audio and visual elements as a total work of art.

However, in Bengkala, that atmosphere is replaced by a tense silence filled with the powerful stomps of the dancers, strong enough to make the ground tremble. These stomps are not an absence of sound, but rather a presence of a different kind of music. Its rhythm is felt by the entire body and seen by the eyes, a profound transformation of the sonic element into a kinetic one. Here lies the first paradox: within the heart of a Balinese culture that highly values sonic complexity, a form of sacredness has emerged that derives its power precisely from the absence of that sound.

The choreography of this dance is a marvel of inclusion. Without vocal commands, the dancers' energetic movements are controlled entirely by sharp visual signals from a leader—a blink of an eye or a nod of the head becomes a universal language. This phenomenon creates a different "silent environment" or soundscape, as in Schafer's [2] concept. Within this space, hierarchies based on hearing ability become irrelevant, forming what Victor Turner [3] called *communitas*—an egalitarian bond born from collective experience. The stage of the Baris Bebila Dance becomes a space where everybody, regardless of their condition, becomes a source of agency and spirituality. This is its paradox: a community often labelled "disabled" has created an art form that achieves a collective perfection and harmony of movement difficult for conventional dance troupes to replicate.

The power of this dance is also rooted in myth and local wisdom that transforms the narrative about disability. The ancestral story about the origins of deafness in Bengkala, often framed by outsiders as a "curse," has been reinterpreted into a narrative of uniqueness and strength. This wisdom is a form of subtle resistance against modern perspectives that view deafness through a medical lens as a deficiency to be corrected. Instead, the Bengkala community exemplifies the social model of disability [4]: that barriers lie not within the individual, but within an inaccessible environment. The Baris Bebila Dance is an environment perfectly designed for inclusion, while simultaneously serving as a symbol of pride that enriches Bali's cultural heritage.

Based on this background, this article aims to answer the question: How did the paradox of a dance that challenges Balinese aesthetic conventions emerge in Bengkala, and how has this community transformed the narrative from "disability" to "distinction"? This article explores three main objectives: first, to analyse the Goda Cacat Myth and its interpretation in the life of the Bengkala community, examining how this myth is transformed into a source of strength and unity. Second, to examine the values of local wisdom that support inclusive practices in the daily life of the Bengkala community,

including value systems and communication practices such as Bahasa Isyarat Kata Kolok (BIKK, Kolok Sign Language). Moreover, to understand how the Baris Bebila Dance serves as a medium for constructing an inclusive identity, one must delve into the rehearsal process, performances, and its symbolic meaning in building pride and equality.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Performing Arts and Disability: Discussing Global Perspectives on Inclusive Art.

The global discourse on inclusive art often focuses on creating accessible spaces and opportunities for disabled artists within contemporary art forms. However, this approach can overlook more fundamental layers of meaning regarding how disability is integrated into a community's collective identity. This is where the Baris Bebila Dance from Bengkala Village, Bali, emerges as a political and cultural statement that challenges narratives of inability. This dance, traditionally performed by deaf individuals (kolok), presents a powerful case study for analysing the construction of an organic, inclusive identity woven from myth, local wisdom, and community resilience.

The philosophical foundation of this dance is inextricably linked to the local myth of Bengkala Village. The local wisdom of its community tells a story of the origin of deafness, which is not associated with a curse but rather seen as part of the village's destiny and history. This myth plays a crucial role in framing disability not as a medical deficiency, but as a legitimate human variant with its own place. This cultural framing distinguishes Bengkala's approach from the global discourse. The Baris Bebila Dance becomes a living manifestation of this wisdom, transforming stereotypes about people who are deaf or hard of hearing into a collective expression full of power and discipline. Through this dance, the kolok body is no longer seen as a "broken" body, but as an able body that is integrated into a stunning visual harmony.

More than just a performance, the Baris Bebila Dance is a form of subtle cultural resistance. While disabled people in other parts of the world often struggle for recognition, the Bengkala community places its deaf artists in a central position. This dance proves that true inclusion is not about assimilating individuals into existing structures, but about transforming those structures and perceptions themselves through cultural values. The performance does not ask for pity, but demands recognition of their artistic skill and contribution.

The existence of the Baris Bebila Dance offers a valuable lesson. While many inclusive art initiatives grapple with physical accessibility, Bengkala demonstrates that the most resilient foundation for inclusion is built upon ennobling myths, sheltering local wisdom, and empowering artistic practices. The study of this dance invites us to re-examine how traditional performing arts can be architects of inclusive identity, where difference is

not merely tolerated but celebrated as a strength that shapes the unique character of a community.

## **2.2. Myth as a Social Construction (Roland Barthes): Understanding myth not as an obsolete story, but as a value system that actively shapes reality.**

The contemporary understanding of myth, as conceptualised by Roland Barthes, rejects viewing it as merely a fairy tale or an obsolete story from the past. In “Mythologies” [5], Barthes defines myth as a system of communication, a message, or more precisely, a second-order semiological system that imposes cultural and ideological meanings upon a primary sign system. In other words, myth functions to transform history into nature, so that socially constructed values appear as given, inevitable, and eternal truths. It is this perspective that provides a critically sharp lens for examining the phenomenon of the Baris Bebila Dance in Bengkala Village.

The local myth concerning the origins of deafness in Bengkala is not merely an etiological explanatory story; it is an active semiotic machine that works to shape the social reality of persons with disabilities. This myth, which tells of a curse or destiny that befell an ancestor, has undergone a process of depoliticisation and naturalisation, as explained by Barthes. It is no longer read as a contingent historical event but has become a “fact of nature” that explains the presence of the “kolok” (deaf) community in Bengkala. This process of naturalisation is precisely the key to building an inclusive identity. Because the myth has naturalised the presence of deaf people as an inseparable part of the village's collective destiny and identity, the community does not view disability through a medical lens full of pity or through a degrading social stigma.

As revealed by Sen's research on cultural narratives and disability, a myth that functions effectively can neutralise prejudice by framing difference as something that is inherently natural [6]. In a Barthesian context, the primary sign—a deaf individual with their physiological condition—has been encoded with a highly positive secondary meaning: they are part of the village's sacred history, guardians of a unique dance heritage, and proof of the community's resilience.

## **2.3. Local Wisdom and Social Capital: The Concepts of Gotong Royong, Tri Hita Karana (in the Balinese context), and Community Trust as the Foundations of Inclusion**

The foundation of inclusivity in Bengkala Village is built not only on myth but also on a robust social infrastructure, rooted in local wisdom and a high accumulation of social capital. The concept of social capital, as defined by Putnam as the networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit, finds tangible manifestation in the life of the Bengkala community [7]. Traditional Balinese

values, particularly the philosophy of “Tri Hita Karana”—which emphasises harmony in three relationships: among people (“pawongan”), with nature (“palemahan”), and with God (“parahyangan”)—provide a cosmological framework that encourages harmonious collective life. In this context, the presence of the “kolok” community is not seen as disruptive to harmony but as an integral part of the whole system that must be kept in balance.

The principle of “gotongroyong”, often referred to in Balinese as “ngayah” (working selflessly for the benefit of the community and religion), serves as the practical mechanism that ensures the functions of inclusion. The process of rehearsing and performing the Baris Bebila Dance is itself a concrete form of “ngayah”. The “kolok” dancers and their hearing (“enget”) trainers participate in this activity as a social and spiritual obligation, which strengthens their bonds with one another and with the customary village. As shown by Suardana's research on social capital in Balinese society, practices like this create “bridging social capital” that connects different groups (in this case, “kolok” and “enget”), while simultaneously strengthening “bonding social capital” within the “kolok” group itself [8]. The trust that is central to this social capital is evident in how the community entrusts the “kolok” with the significant responsibility of representing the village's identity and art on stage. This trust is not given as an act of charity but is generated through daily, equal interaction and the tangible contributions of the “kolok” in various aspects of village life.

#### **2.4. Identity and Agency: How marginalised groups (like the *Kolok*) actively shape their own identity through culture.**

Discourse on disability often falls into passive narratives that portray persons with disabilities as objects of charity or recipients of social intervention. However, the theoretical framework of agency, the capacity of individuals or groups to act independently and to make their own free choices—offers a liberating perspective. This study argues that the “kolok” community in Bengkala Village is not merely a beneficiary of an inclusive culture but is a primary actor who actively shapes and asserts its identity through cultural practices, with the Baris Bebila Dance as its primary medium.

Here, the concept of “identity” is understood not as a given, but as a process that is continuously constructed and negotiated through social interaction, as put forward by symbolic interactionism theory[9]. The “kolok” community in Bengkala has transformed the label “deaf,” which in many contexts is stigmatising, into the highly valued and pride-filled collective identity of “Kolok.” This process is a powerful form of cultural agency. Through the Baris Bebila Dance, they take control over their self-representation. On stage, bodies often looked down upon by wider society are instead displayed as full of discipline, strength, and grace. Every compact and dynamic

movement is a statement of quiet politics that refuses the stereotype of inability [10]. This dance becomes a space where they are no longer a "disabled group," but "artistic guardians of tradition." Their participation in this dance is not charitable in nature, but essential, because without them, this unique cultural heritage would cease to exist.

## Research Method, Research Location And Timing

This study employs an ethnographic approach to understand the construction of inclusive identity through the Baris Bebila Dance. This approach was chosen to uncover the meanings, values, and socio-cultural practices directly from the perspective of the community itself (an emic perspective). The researcher will live alongside and engage in the daily life of both the kolok (deaf) and enget (hearing) communities in Bengkala Village, Buleleng, Bali. This location was deliberately selected as it is the sole place where this dance thrives and forms the heart of their inclusive identity. A flexible research timeline will allow for in-depth observation of various cultural activities and for building trust with the research subjects.

## Discussion

### 4.1. The Goda Cacat Myth: From Curse to Conscious Blessing

Balinese oral traditions often utilise myths to explain social phenomena, functioning as a "cultural aetiology" that reveals the origins of a condition through symbolic language [11]. At the heart of the inclusive identity of Bengkala Village, known as Desa Kolok (Kolok Village), lies a founding myth that is nurtured and recounted with deep conviction. Local legend tells of a battle between two great deities, Dewa Surya Jnana (the God of light and sound) and Dewa Kala Rudra (the God of darkness and silence), vying for control of the Bengkala territory. This conflict resulted in a dual curse: Surya Jnana cursed some of the village's descendants to lose their hearing, while Kala Rudra cursed others to lose their ability to speak. Within this mythical framework, the deaf-mute condition in Bengkala is not merely a medical "disability," but part of a cosmic destiny resulting from divine intervention.

What is fascinating is the cultural response of the Bengkala community. Rather than denying it, they have adopted this myth as an ontological explanation that defines their collective uniqueness. As noted by anthropologist Natalie, "The myth in Bengkala does not function as a stigma, but as a kind of 'sacred genealogy' that provides a sense of belonging and shared destiny [12]." The curse has undergone a fundamental transformation of meaning; from something potentially viewed as a punishment, it has become a creative destiny that sets them apart. Every kolok child born is considered a fulfilment of this ancestral narrative, a reminder of their mystical history, and not a family disgrace. This acceptance represents an intelligent reframing of meaning.

Academically, this myth reflects how a society interprets its social experiences. According to Barthes, myth operates as a semiotic system that structures a worldview [5]. In the Bengkulu context, the narrative of the gods' curse can be understood as a form of cultural legitimisation—an effort to accept the deaf-mute condition as a legitimate part of the collective identity, thereby supporting social solidarity.

Furthermore, this myth demonstrates how the disabled community in Bengkulu is positioned within a cultural framework that is not purely discriminatory. The curse, instead, became the basis for creating a cultural innovation: the Bengkulu sign language (Kata Kolok), a unique communication system found only in this village [13]. In other words, the myth is not just a story, but also a historical-cultural explanation for the birth of inclusive communication practices.

By embracing the myth, the community builds a solid philosophical foundation for acceptance. For them, the existence of the kolok is part of their village's cosmic blueprint, written since the age of the gods. This is the fundamental local wisdom: the ability to transform a potentially divisive narrative into a unifying bond. The myth of the two warring gods is not a haunting spectre, but the mythological foundation that makes inclusion in Bengkulu feel natural and indisputable.

#### 4.2. Bengkulu's Local Wisdom: Selempah and the *Kolok-Enget* Partnership Philosophy

Behind the spectacular stage of the Baris Bebila Dance lies a humane social infrastructure that binds the inclusive life in Bengkulu Village: the value of selempah (a concept of close and profound kinship in Balinese society). This selempah is not mere rhetoric; it is an emotional bond and collective responsibility felt by every citizen, a tangible manifestation of the *Gemeinschaft* or community idealised by classical sociologists like Ferdinand Tönnies [14]. It is within this warm social climate that Bahasa Isyarat Kata Kolok (the village's unique, hereditary sign language) evolved not just as a communication tool, but as the very breath of selempah itself. What distinguishes Bengkulu from almost all other communities worldwide is that this sign language is actively mastered by nearly the entire population, both deaf (kolok) and hearing (enget). This is a rare and voluntary form of mass linguistic accommodation. As researched by De Vos in her linguistic studies, this phenomenon fundamentally alters social dynamics, transforming communication from a separating barrier into a unifying bridge [15].

Kata kolok facilitates everyday conversations in food stalls, coordination in communal work, and even complex instructions during dance practice. In the context of the Baris Bebila Dance, this language becomes the nervous system that animates the performance. Complex choreography is directed through visual signals, movement

corrections are given through shared body language and signs, and, most importantly, a solid sense of camaraderie is built because no one is alienated in the creative process. By mastering Kata Kolok, the enget community does not merely "help" the kolok; they fully embrace them into the community's conversation, making the value of selempah something lived and practised. This is the most concrete form of local wisdom: a community that collectively decided to adopt a minority language as a shared language, ensuring that all can genuinely enjoy the stages of both life and dance.

#### 4.3. Baris Bebila Dance as a Cultural Text: Deconstructing "Mute" and "Potent"

To understand how the Baris Bebila Dance reverses the narrative of disability into a powerful, inclusive identity, we must delve into the symbolic language expressed through its costumes, movements, and name. The kolok (deaf) dancers do not wear just any attire; they don magnificent traditional Balinese warrior garb, complete with authoritative headdresses and spears. This aesthetic choice is not an attempt to "normalise" their appearance, but rather a deliberate positioning of them as powerful, noble, and full of authority.

Every spear they hold is a metaphorical extension of their strength and resolve. Their movements are firm, synchronised, robust, and stomped with an internal, potent rhythm. These movements are born from a unique bodily epistemology. Because they do not rely on audible music, their rhythm is built entirely through sharp visual awareness and a kinesthetic sensitivity to vibrations. As expressed by Spagnol, "The movements in Baris Bebila do not seek to hide deafness; on the contrary, they make this different way of interacting the source of a unique and powerful aesthetic discipline [16]."

The meaning of all these symbols is crystallised in the dance's name. The word "Bebila" is said to be an acronym for "Bebek Bingar Bengkala," describing dynamic and compact movements. However, in the vocabulary of Old Balinese, "Bebila" also means "potent" or "sacred." This is where cultural resistance reaches its peak. The Bengkala community believes that, due to their unique condition, the kolok dancers possess greater inner concentration and spirituality, enabling them to perform this dance with a distinctive magical aura. This belief is reinforced by ritual taboos, such as prohibiting dancers from being involved in matters related to death before a performance, lest they forget the movements. This prohibition affirms the sacredness and magical consequences of this performance.

## Conclusion

The Baris Bebila Dance in Bengkala Village is a comprehensive manifestation of an inclusive identity constructed through three cultural pillars. First, the Goda Cacat Myth transforms from a narrative of a curse into a cosmological foundation that glorifies difference, where the kolok (deaf) community is regarded as a destiny that enriches the village's identity. Second, local wisdom, such as the value of selempah (close kinship) and the mastery of Bahasa Isyarat Kata kolok (BIKK, Kolok Sign Language), creates a social infrastructure for an equal partnership between the kolok and enget (hearing) citizens. Third, the Baris Bebila Dance functions as a powerful medium of cultural agency, re-representing the often-stigmatised Kolok body as a potent and sacred body through warrior costumes and visual choreography.

This construction of inclusivity in Bengkala grew from the transformation of cultural narratives, local wisdom, and artistic empowerment, not from external intervention. Its story offers an inspirational model for the development of an authentic and sustainable inclusive society.

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