

Ecological Balance in the Symbolism of Balinese Hindu Mythology on the Bali Arts Festival Posters

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ABSTRACT

Despite being grounded in the ecological philosophy of Tri Hita Karana, modern Bali faces the paradox of an acute ecological crisis resulting from mass tourism, land conversion, and a water crisis. This condition creates an urgency to revitalize local wisdom. This research aims to analyze how the Bali Arts Festival (PKB) posters, as the festival's main visual communication medium, use symbolism from Balinese Hindu mythology to communicate messages and values of ecological balance. Using a visual semiotics approach and iconographic analysis, this study examines recent PKB posters as visual texts. The results show that the selection of mythological iconography is a deliberate semiotic act to translate the vision of Nangun Sad Kerthi Loka Bali. Key figures analyzed include the Kalpataru Tree (PKB 2021) as a representation of Wana Kerthi (purification of forests), Naga Basuki (PKB 2022) as the guardian of the hydrosphere symbolizing Danu Kerthi (purification of water), and Gajah Mina (PKB 2023) as a metaphor for ridge-to-reef ecosystem interconnection representing Segara Kerthi (purification of the seas). This study concludes that PKB posters have transformed into a "visual dharma wacana" (visual sermon/discourse) capable of "bypassing textual literacy". This medium effectively educates the public intuitively about the sacredness of nature and functions as a vital bridge between government policy, sublime philosophy, and public ecological awareness

KEYWORDS

Ecological Balance, Balinese Hindu Mythology, Bali Arts Festival Poster



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Introduction

Human civilization in the 21st century is faced with an unprecedented ecological crisis. This era, often referred to as the Anthropocene, is characterized by drastic climate change, mass biodiversity loss, and systemic pollution that threatens the planet's sustainability (Crutzen, 2002). This crisis is essentially not just a technological crisis, but also a philosophical and perceptual one. The dominant modern paradigm, which tends to separate humans (subject) from nature (object), has proven to fail in maintaining ecosystem balance (Capra & Luisi, 2014). Consequently, there has been a global shift in scientific and cultural discourse to seek alternative paradigms, often found in local wisdom and traditional ecological knowledge systems.

These traditional knowledge systems are often embedded in spiritual or mythological worldviews that do not separate humans from their natural environment. Various indigenous cultures around the world have cosmologies that regard nature as a living, sacred, and interconnected entity, where human survival depends on maintaining harmonious reciprocal relationships with non-human entities (Berkes, 2018). Mythology is not just folklore, but a cognitive and ethical framework that codifies vital ecological rules into narratives and symbols that are easily remembered and passed down through generations.

Among these various local wisdoms, Balinese Hindu philosophy stands out for its profound relevance to ecological discourse. The core of the Balinese worldview is the concept of Tri Hita Karana (Three Causes of Happiness). This concept articulates that happiness and harmony in life can only be achieved through a balance of relationships between three elements: Parahyangan (harmonious relationship with God/Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa), Pawongan (harmonious relationship among humans), and Palemahan (harmonious relationship with nature and the environment) (Windia & Wiraatmaja, 2018).

The Palemahan dimension explicitly places environmental ethics as a fundamental pillar of Balinese spirituality. Nature is not seen as a passive resource to be exploited, but as a sacred realm to be respected (sacralized). Derivative concepts such as Segara Kerthi (purification of the seas), Wana Kerthi (purification of forests), and Danu Kerthi (purification of lakes) are manifestations of ritual practices aimed at maintaining the sanctity and sustainability of these natural resources. This philosophy asserts that destroying nature is essentially an act that damages cosmic balance and, ultimately, damages oneself (Pitana, 2009).

Ironically, despite this strong philosophical foundation, modern Bali faces acute ecological challenges. The explosion of the mass tourism industry has resulted in massive conversion of agricultural land, a waste management crisis (especially plastics), and scarcity of clean water in many areas (Cole, 2012). A widening gap has occurred between the ideal philosophy and the actual reality. This paradox creates an urgency to continuously re-communicate and revitalize the ecological values contained in local wisdom to make them relevant for the current generation.

This is where the important role of Balinese Hindu mythology comes in. Mythological narratives such as the story of Bedawang Nala (the giant turtle supporting the world), Naga Basuki and Naga Anantaboga (the dragon guardians of earth and water balance), or the story of Dewi Danu (the goddess ruler of the lake as the source of life) are symbolic repositories of palemahan teachings. These myths are not children's tales, but cosmological blueprints that explain the interdependence of all elements in the

universe. These mythological figures function as powerful visual symbols for abstract ecological concepts (Eiseman, 1996).

One of the most important public arenas for the dissemination and reinterpretation of these cultural values is the Bali Arts Festival (PKB). As the largest and longest-running annual arts festival in Bali, PKB has become an essential cultural project for the excavation, preservation, and development of the noble values of Balinese tradition. Each year, PKB carries a grand theme taken from the treasury of Balinese Hindu philosophy, which then becomes a reference for all artistic expressions displayed (Picard & Darling, 1996). These themes often have a strong ecological charge, such as Bayu Pramana (glorification of wind energy) or Segara Kerthi (glorifying the seas).

The Bali Arts Festival poster, as the festival's main visual communication medium, plays a crucial role. This poster serves as the face of the annual theme and becomes a mass-distributed visual artifact. The PKB poster becomes a semiotic canvas dense with meaning. The poster designers are required to translate complex philosophical concepts, including the ecological teachings contained within, into a visual language that can be understood by the contemporary public, both local and international (Mantra, 1996). The poster designs consistently utilize iconography sourced from Balinese Hindu mythology. The use of mythological entities is not merely for decorative ornamentation. These elements are symbols in the Peircean semiotic sense, which have a deep conventional relationship with concepts of balance, fertility, and cosmic order (Berger, 2010). The PKB poster becomes a medium that reactivates ancient mythology to speak about contemporary issues, including the ecological crisis.

Although research on PKB as a cultural phenomenon and analysis of Balinese performing arts has been widely conducted, research that specifically focuses on PKB posters as visual texts is still limited. In particular, analysis that bridges three disciplines—mythology studies, visual communication design (semiotics), and ecological discourse—remains an area that has not been widely explored. Therefore, this research aims to fill that gap. This article will analyze how symbolism derived from Balinese Hindu mythology is used in Bali Arts Festival posters to communicate messages and values of ecological balance.

PKB Posters as Ecological Visual Texts

The Bali Arts Festival (PKB) is one of the largest and most important art events in Bali, held since 1979. The implementation of PKB was initially aimed at preserving and promoting traditional Balinese arts, covering various forms of artistic expression such as dance, music, and visual arts. Over time, the function of PKB has broadened, becoming an arena for the reproduction of cultural discourse. The poster, as one of the important elements for the success of PKB, has also transcended its function as a

promotional medium. PKB posters have now become visual texts dense with semiotic meaning that reflect, negotiate, and disseminate the noble values of Balinese culture. As Bali faces real ecological challenges, from clean water crises, land conversion, to waste problems, PKB posters consistently respond by reactivating local wisdom. This medium becomes a strategic public education tool, translating sublime philosophical teachings about natural balance into a powerful iconographic language that is easily accessible to the public.

The use of Balinese Hindu mythological symbolism in PKB posters is a deliberate semiotic act. Symbols like Hanoman, Kalpataru, Naga Basuki, and Gajah Mina are not chosen randomly as aesthetic visual elements. These mythological entities are signifiers that refer to complex signifieds, namely the concept of ecological balance embedded in the teachings of Palemahan (harmonious relationship with nature)(Eiseman, 1996). The presence of these figures effectively recalls the collective memory of the Balinese people about the ecological ethics of their ancestors, making it relevant for addressing present-day challenges.

The analysis of this ecological iconography becomes even more relevant when placed within the framework of the current development vision of Bali Province, namely Nangun Sad Kerthi Loka Bali. This vision is an elaboration of the Tri Hita Karana concept, focusing on the purification of six pillars of life: Atma Kerthi (soul), Wana Kerthi (forests), Danu Kerthi (water sources or lakes), Samudra Kerthi (oceans), Jana Kerthi (humans), and Jagad Kerthi (the universe) (Wiana, 2018). PKB posters, through their mythological symbols, function as a powerful socialization medium for this vision. These posters visualize what is meant by the purification of nature, giving concrete form to philosophical concepts that might feel abstract to some people.

Ecological Balance in the Symbolism of Mythological Figures on PKB Posters

a) The Kalpataru Tree as a Symbol of Wana Kerthi

The Kalpataru Tree (Tree of Life) is one of the most fundamental ecological symbols in Hindu cosmology. On PKB posters, its appearance directly represents the pillar of Wana Kerthi, or the purification of forests and vegetation. Kalpataru represents the world axis that connects bhur (underworld), bwah (middle world), and swah (upper world). Ecologically, Kalpataru is a symbol of prosperity, the source of all life (food, oxygen, water), and a representation of nature that gives selflessly (Vickers, 2012). Its depiction on the poster is a visual education that the preservation of forests and biodiversity is not just an environmental issue, but a spiritual act to safeguard the source of life itself.

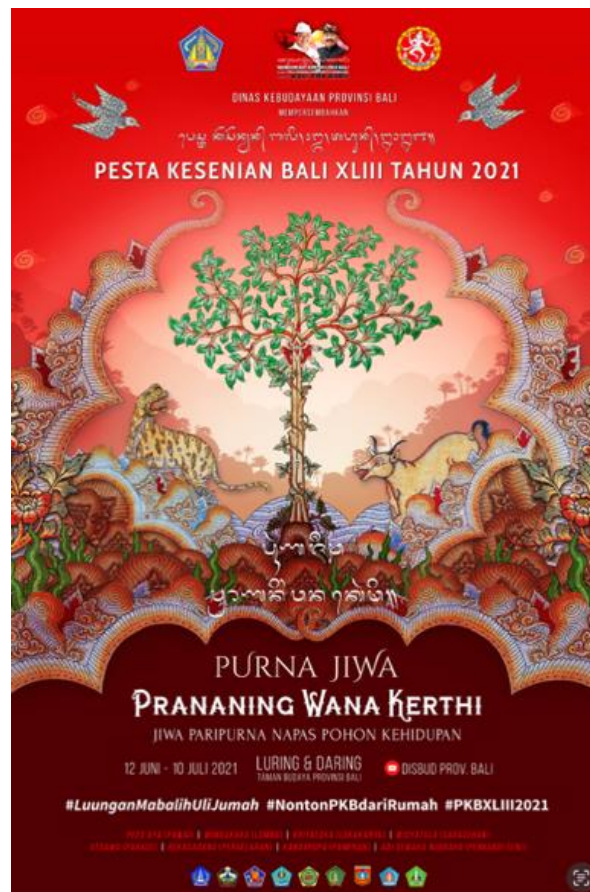


Figure 1. Visualization of PKB Billboard Year 2021

In mythology, the Kalpataru tree is described as having distinctive features: evergreen leaves, beautiful flowers with a fragrant aroma, abundant fruit, as well as gold chains and strands of pearls hanging from its branches. Around the tree, various animals are often depicted, serving as guardians of the tree's sanctity (Muhajirin, 2010). Kalpataru not only represents life, but also connects various aspects of sustainability such as food, pharmacology, culture, economy, and spirituality.

The Kalpataru tree, in the concept of Wana Kerthi, has a very important role as a symbol of life that is inseparable from nature and human welfare. Kalpataru, known in Hindu mythology as the divine tree that emerged from the Samudra Manthana (Churning of the Ocean of Milk), is the tree that provides all kinds of life's necessities (Kamadhenu). In the Wana Kerthi philosophy, this mythology is profoundly translated into a fundamental concept of natural balance. The "giving" or "grace" of Kalpataru is not just a passive miracle, but a representation of the ecological functions of a healthy and balanced forest: its ability to provide clean water, fresh air, soil fertility, and biodiversity that sustains civilization.

The Wana Kerthi philosophy, which focuses on the harmony and sanctity of the forest as an integral part of Sad Kerthi (Six Forms of Sanctity), views Kalpataru as a symbol of the ideal ecosystem. Herein lies the core of its balance: the tree symbolizes the close reciprocal relationship between humans (Bhuana Alit/microcosm) and nature (Bhuana Agung/macrocosm). Kalpataru functions as a resource that provides life spiritually, ecologically, and socially, only if humans fulfill their obligations to care for, respect, and maintain the sanctity of nature. This mythology teaches that when humans destroy the forest, they are essentially 'cutting down' the Kalpataru tree itself, thereby stopping the flow of life's grace. Thus, Kalpataru is the "tree of life" that teaches humans about natural sustainability and its preservation through the principle of balance: nature provides what humans need, and humans must protect nature so that this provision continues.

b) Naga Basuki as the Guardian of Water Source Balance

The figure of the naga (dragon) is one of the most widespread mythological figures, present in the traditions of various global cultures. Commonly, in folklore such as myths and legends, the naga takes on a secondary or supporting role.



Figure 2. Visualization of PKB Billboard Year 2022

The PKB poster for 2022 with the theme "Danu Kerthi: Huluning Amreta" highlights reverence for water as the primary source of life. This poster design features a Balinese Hindu mythological entity, with Naga Basuki as the main element in the form of Balinese wayang (shadow puppet). In Balinese Hindu cosmology, Naga Basuki is one of the pillars

guarding the balance of the universe (Bhuana Agung). Unlike Naga Anantaboga who manifests as the earth's layers (lithosphere), Naga Basuki is specifically the ruler and guardian of the hydrosphere, which includes oceans, lakes, and the entire water cycle that supports life (Suyoga & Ayu Juliasih, 2019).

Naga Basuki in Hindu belief, is considered a protector who has the power to control water, which is a vital element for the survival of all beings (Bhattacharyya, 2001). As the guardian of water, Naga Basuki is believed to have an important role in maintaining the flow of holy water which is believed to bring prosperity and fertility to humans and the surrounding environment.

Naga Basuki is not only a mythological symbol, but also a representation of the importance of maintaining ecological balance. The Balinese people understand that damaging or polluting a river or sea means damaging Naga Basuki, which in turn can disrupt the balance of nature. Therefore, there are customary prohibitions that forbid the destruction and pollution of rivers, as a form of respect for Naga Basuki and an effort to preserve the environment.

Naga Basuki is believed to be the guardian of balance that connects the mountain as a symbol of tranquility and the sea as a symbol of dynamism. The river basin, often considered the center of civilization, is described as resembling a naga, with its winding flow, reminding us of the mythological creature. Water, as a very important element, flows in a continuous cycle, reflecting the continuity of life in the world. This process begins with the evaporation of water from land and sea, cloud formation, rain, until it finally flows back to the springs and returns to the sea to fertilize the Earth (Setem, 2021). Its presence on the PKB poster serves as a strong reminder of the importance of maintaining the sanctity of water, both lakes and rivers, as the source of life. Damaging the land and water is tantamount to disturbing the naga's "sleep," which can result in imbalance and disaster.

c) Gajah Mina as a Metaphor for Ecosystem Interconnection

Gajah Mina is one of the most powerful symbols in representing ecological balance. In Hindu mythology, Gajah Mina is a surreal hybrid entity, depicted as a creature with the body of a fish and the head of an elephant, which serves as the vehicle for Dewa Baruna, the god who rules the oceans. In Hindu tradition, Dewa Baruna, along with Gajah Mina as His vahana (vehicle), holds the great responsibility of maintaining the Law of Rta, which is the law that maintains cosmic balance (Putra dkk., 2024)



Figure 3. Visualization of PKB Billboard Year 2023

Educationally, this symbol teaches the ridge-to-reef concept (from upstream to downstream, from mountain to ocean) which is at the core of ecological management. The PKB poster featuring Gajah Mina communicates a message of harmony between land and sea, as well as depicting the relationship between humans and the universe. This emphasizes the principle of Sat Kerthi Loka Bali, which prioritizes the glorification of the sea (Segara Kerthi) as a source of life and welfare.

Modern iconographic studies reinforce this interpretation. Research by Cahyadi analyzing the visual of Gajah Mina in Kamasan Wayang paintings at Kertha Gosa found that this figure serves as a visual interpretation that records the events and relationships of the Klungkung coastal community with the marine environment. Gajah Mina is not just a myth, but also a visual narrative that communicates historical heritage and the importance of the sea as an inseparable part of the life and spirituality of the Balinese people (Cahyadi dkk., 2023)

This symbolism of balance is also expressed through the concept of Rwa Bhineda (two different but complementary dualities). I Wayan Sui Suadnyana (2022), quoting architect Popo Danes, states the jukung (boat) design at the harbor uses the Gajah Mina pattern as its main icon. Popo Danes explained that the gajah (elephant) represents the land, is masculine (Lingga), while the mina (fish) represents the ocean, is feminine

(Yoni). Their unification in one form is a representation of "the matter of balance" and the harmonious connectivity between humans on land who go "to the fish's home" in the sea.

The power of the Gajah Mina symbol is not limited to visual arts or coastal architecture. Its figure is also present in very sacred ritual contexts, such as the Pitra Yadnya (Ngaben/Cremation) ceremony with the use of a petulangan (corpse tower) in the shape of Gajah Mina. The use of this mythological entity, which symbolizes cosmic balance, in a transition ritual shows that Gajah Mina is seen as a sacred entity capable of escorting the soul across realms, affirming its role as a guardian of order not only in the physical realm (sea and land) but also in the spiritual realm (Arnata, 2017).

Gajah Mina is a local wisdom expressed through visual arts and rituals, which contains deep ecological pedagogical messages. Long before global warming and plastic pollution became modern crises, Balinese culture already had a noble symbol reminding that land and sea are one inseparable body. Damaging one means damaging the balance as a whole. Gajah Mina is an eternal reminder that ecological harmony is an absolute prerequisite for achieving cosmic harmony.

d) The Poster as a Visual Dharma Wacana

Through this blend of iconography, the PKB poster no longer functions merely as a medium of information, but is transformed into a visual dharma wacana (visual sermon/discourse). The composition featuring Kalpataru (source of life), Naga Basuki (guardian of water sanctity), and Gajah Mina (connector of land and sea) is a complete narrative about Sad Kerthi. This narrative educates the public that these six Kerthi pillars are not separate concepts, but a single, mutually supporting ecological-spiritual system.

The educational power of this lies in its ability to bypass textual literacy. People from various backgrounds, including international tourists, may not read the Nangun Sad Kerthi Loka Bali vision document. However, when they see the PKB poster, they intuitively grasp the message about the sacredness of nature through these grand and familiar mythological figures (Picard & Darling, 1996). This poster becomes a bridge between government policy, sublime philosophy, and public awareness.

Conclusion

This research concludes that the Bali Arts Festival (PKB) poster has undergone a significant functional transformation. It no longer merely serves as a promotional and informational medium, but has become a strategic visual dharma wacana. Amidst the ecological crisis challenges faced by the island of Bali, PKB posters consistently respond by reactivating local wisdom to communicate the values of ecological balance.

Iconographic and semiotic analysis shows that the use of Balinese Hindu mythological figures is not just an aesthetic element, but a deliberate semiotic act. Mythological figures such as the Kalpataru Tree (PKB 2021) represent Wana Kerthi (purification of forests), Naga Basuki (PKB 2022) as the guardian of the hydrosphere symbolizing Danu Kerthi (purification of water), and Gajah Mina (PKB 2023) as a metaphor for ridge-to-reef ecosystem interconnection representing Segara Kerthi (purification of the seas).

The significance of this finding lies in the PKB poster's ability to "bypass textual literacy". Through grand and familiar mythological symbols, this medium successfully translates sublime philosophical concepts, especially the vision of Nangun Sad Kerthi Loka Bali, into a powerful visual language that is easily and intuitively accessible to the public. Thus, the PKB poster functions effectively as an essential bridge connecting government policy, sublime philosophy, and public ecological awareness.

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