

SANDYAGITA Vocal and Instrumental Bali: Tradition and Innovation for Strengthening Wisdom Memories

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ABSTRACT

Sandyagita is a form of Balinese traditional musical expression that unites vocal and instrumental elements imbued with deep philosophical, aesthetic, and social meanings. As a traditional choral form emphasizing collective vocal expression, Sandyagita is rooted in mythological narratives and sacred memories transmitted through literary texts and melodic traditions. Its soft yet dynamic vocal style reflects the continuity between the mythical world and collective memory, embodying harmony and balance as central values in Balinese cosmology. In its modern development, Sandyagita is usually accompanied by the Gong Kebyar gamelan tuned in pelog panca nada, while vocal elaborations explore slendro or pelog sapta nada scales. This study aims to examine the functions of vocals and instruments in Sandyagita and explore the innovations emerging within the contexts of performance and Balinese music education. Employing literature study, observation, and interviews with practitioners, the findings reveal that vocals remain the core element, while instruments enhance the musical atmosphere. Innovations arise through the creative synthesis of traditional vocal techniques with modern arrangements, strengthening collective memory and cultural wisdom. Thus, Sandyagita serves not only as an artistic expression but also as a living memory that connects myth, world, and wisdom through music.

KEYWORDS

Sandyagita, Balinese vocal, myth and memory, traditional instruments, innovation, cultural wisdom



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Introduction

Balinese culture is well known for its flexibility and creativity in maintaining the continuity of tradition while responding to the challenges of modernity. One of the creative manifestations within the realm of performing arts is the emergence of *Sandyagita*, a vocal-instrumental genre that integrates the strength of literary text (*gita*), vocal expression, and gamelan accompaniment. In this context, *Sandyagita* functions not only as an aesthetic performance but also as a medium of spiritual reflection and a vessel for transmitting cultural wisdom and collective memory.

The enduring dialogue between preserving tradition and embracing innovation has long been a defining discourse in Balinese art. Tradition provides a foundation of identity and inherited wisdom, whereas innovation revitalizes it, ensuring that the arts remain relevant and alive. This paper examines how *Sandyagita* negotiates these two principles

while serving as a repository of “wisdom memories”—a living remembrance of ancestral values expressed through sound, text, and ritual.

Balinese performing arts are widely recognized as among the most dynamic and vibrant traditions in the world, where music, dance, and drama intertwine to form a spiritual and aesthetic expression. For the Balinese community, art is inseparable from ritual, philosophy, and social life. Music, in particular, functions not merely as entertainment but as a channel of communication with the divine, a realization of philosophical thought, and a means of preserving cultural identity (Bandem & deBoer, 1995; Dibia, 2012). Within this cultural ecology, vocal traditions hold a central position as they embody the articulation of text, sound, and meaning—bridging literature, myth, and lived experience.

One genre that synthesizes the synergy between text, voice, and instrument is *Sandyagita*. The term originates from Sanskrit: *sandhya* (dusk, transition, or conjunction) and *gita* (song, chant, or vocal expression). Etymologically, *Sandyagita* symbolizes a form of expression that resides in a liminal space—between sacred and secular, tradition and innovation, the mythical and the contemporary. As a Balinese vocal-instrumental genre, *Sandyagita* integrates elements of traditional singing, poetic text, and gamelan accompaniment while allowing room for artistic experimentation and reinterpretation.

The development of *Sandyagita* cannot be separated from the long history of Balinese vocal traditions, which encompass a variety of forms such as *kidung*, *kakawin*, and *gegitaan*, as well as ritual chants like *mantra* and *gagendingan*. These vocal arts are deeply connected to literary and mythic traditions, often derived from sacred texts or poetic compositions that carry philosophical reflections and cultural memories (Rubinstein, 2000; Creese, 2004). Thus, in Bali, music is not only heard but also read, interpreted, and remembered; it manifests as both sound and text—shaping emotion, rhythm, and meaning. *Sandyagita* continues this lineage while introducing creative renewal that sustains collective memory in a changing world.

In recent decades, Balinese artists and scholars have actively explored new artistic pathways in response to globalization and intercultural interaction. The tension between maintaining tradition and fostering innovation remains central in the evolution of contemporary Balinese art (Tenzer, 1998; Bandem, 2013). *Sandyagita* embodies this creative tension: it retains traditional aesthetics and philosophical depth while embracing innovation through vocal experimentation, new timbral textures, and textual reinterpretations. This dynamic equilibrium illustrates how Balinese artists preserve cultural wisdom through continual renewal—transforming memory into creation.

From an academic perspective, the study of *Sandyagita* opens multiple layers of interpretation. At the musical level, it involves analyzing melody, rhythm, and the interplay between voice and instruments. At the literary level, it requires examining the poetic structures and symbolic meanings embedded in its texts. At the cultural level, *Sandyagita* must be understood within ritual, aesthetic, and social frameworks that reflect the Balinese philosophy of *Tri Hita Karana*—the harmonious relationship between human, nature, and the divine. This multidimensional approach positions *Sandyagita* as both an artistic and intellectual heritage that embodies *wisdom memories* sustained through performance and creativity (McPhee, 1966; Harnish, 2007).

Although *Sandyagita* has gained increasing recognition within Balinese performing arts, it remains underexplored in scholarly discourse. Research on *gamelan*, dance, and ritual music is extensive, yet studies on vocal-instrumental genres like *Sandyagita* and their relation to *Gegitaan* are still limited. This gap highlights the importance of deeper academic inquiry—not merely for documentation but for understanding *Sandyagita*'s role in shaping cultural continuity and collective memory in the 21st century.

Moreover, the exploration of *Sandyagita* contributes to broader discussions on how local traditions interact with global artistic movements. As Balinese musicians engage in international collaborations and cross-cultural dialogues, *Sandyagita* serves as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy and memory preservation (Dibia & Ballinger, 2004). It demonstrates how Balinese artists reinterpret ancestral wisdom to sustain identity in the modern world.

Therefore, this paper aims to examine *Sandyagita* as a vocal-instrumental genre that synthesizes tradition, innovation, and cultural memory. Specifically, it seeks to trace the historical and cultural background of *Sandyagita* within Balinese vocal traditions, analyze its musical and textual structures as forms of creative synthesis, and explore how *Sandyagita* reflects the continuity of *wisdom memories* through the dialectic of tradition and innovation in Balinese performing arts. Through this exploration, the study highlights *Sandyagita* as a living embodiment of myth, world, and memory—an artistic bridge connecting ancestral wisdom with contemporary creativity in Balinese music.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach from an ethnomusicological perspective, utilizing descriptive-analytical methods. Data was collected through literature study on Balinese music and *Sandyagita*, observation of *Sandyagita* performances in both ritual and innovative stage contexts, and in-depth interviews with Balinese musicians, composers, and *karawitan* experts. The analysis examines musical aspects (melody, rhythm, tuning system), textual aspects (content of the *gita*, literary language), and contextual aspects (socio-cultural functions). This approach was chosen

because *Sandyagita*, as a Balinese vocal-instrumental genre, cannot be separated from the cultural, social, and aesthetic contexts in which it has evolved. Therefore, the analysis not only focuses on musical structures but also explores the texts, symbols, functions, and cultural meanings embodied within it.

The research was conducted in several regions of Bali that serve as centers for *Sandyagita* and *Gegitaan* performances, with observation focusing on art communities, vocal-instrumental ensembles, ritual and non-ritual contexts (such as traditional ceremonies, art festivals, and innovative concerts), and academic and institutional environments. Data sources consist of primary data (obtained through direct observation and in-depth interviews with artists, composers, and cultural figures) and secondary data (gathered from literature studies, including Balinese literary texts, *lontar* manuscripts, and academic works on Balinese music). Several data collection techniques were employed, including participatory observation, in-depth interviews using a semi-structured method, textual analysis focused on lyrics and literary sources, and audiovisual documentation. Data were analyzed through several stages: musicological analysis, literary and semiotic analysis, contextual analysis, and ethnographic interpretation. To ensure data validity, this study applies triangulation techniques (both source and method triangulation) and member checking, aiming to capture the complexity of *Sandyagita* not merely as a musical product but as a living, dynamic, and meaning-rich cultural practice.

Although previous studies on Balinese vocal-instrumental music have been conducted by several scholars, the focus on *Sandyagita* as an innovative vocal-instrumental phenomenon remains relatively limited. This gap highlights the importance of deeper academic inquiry, not only for documentation but for understanding *Sandyagita's* role in shaping cultural continuity. Therefore, the theoretical framework of this study includes: Ethnomusicology (viewing music within its cultural, ritual, and social contexts), Balinese musical aesthetics (referring to the concepts of *taksu*, *rasa*, and harmony), and the Theory of cultural innovation (Hobsbawm, 1983), which emphasizes the process of creating new traditions grounded in cultural roots.

Result and Discussion

1. Historical Background and the Position of *Sandyagita* in Balinese Vocal Tradition

The findings reveal that *Sandyagita* is rooted in the rich Balinese vocal traditions such as *kidung*, *kakawin*, and *gegitaan*. However, unlike the classical genres that are ritualistic and use Old Javanese (Kawi) or Sanskrit, *Sandyagita* demonstrates a more open orientation toward innovation in language, musical structure, and performance context.

Historically, the emergence of *Sandyagita* was influenced by two interrelated factors. First, the continuity of Balinese vocal traditions that are deeply embedded in Hindu ceremonies, ensuring that *Sandyagita* retains its sacred nuance and connection to mythic memory. Second, the rise of creative movements among Balinese artists since the late twentieth century, which fostered experimentation aligned with globalization and modern art education (Dibia, 2012; Bandem, 2013).

Thus, *Sandyagita* can be viewed as the result of a dialectic between the preservation of traditional values and artistic innovation—a manifestation of living memory that connects the mythic past with the creative present.

2. Musical Structure of Sandyagita

Musicological analysis of *Sandyagita* identifies a crucial set of characteristics that firmly establish its position as a creative synthesis within the Balinese musical tradition. Its vocal melody is distinguished by harmonic choral patterns typical of Balinese vocal ensembles, further enriched by melismatic ornamentation that evokes the classical heritage of *kidung* and *kakawin*. Crucially, this ornamentation is reinterpreted to align with contemporary expressive demands.

In terms of rhythm and tempo, *Sandyagita* demonstrates significant flexibility. Both elements are dynamically adjusted to precisely follow the textual flow and the nuance of the vocal delivery, with the instrumental accompaniment functioning primarily to accentuate important textual points. This rhythmic adaptability is central to the genre's expressive power.

The vocal-instrumental interaction transcends mere accompaniment to establish a form of equal musical dialogue. The accompanying *gamelan* ensemble, frequently *Gong Kebyar*, acts as a creative partner rather than a subordinate element, working to reinforce the musical atmosphere and broaden the melodic palette. Regarding texture, *Sandyagita* often employs layering, combining solo voice with instrumental responses and, at specific junctures, integrating the choral sections of the *gegitaan* tradition to generate a rich polyphonic resonance. Collectively, these musical features underscore that *Sandyagita* is far from a passive adaptation of older vocal genres; instead, it represents a profound creative synthesis that revitalizes inherited forms, effectively transforming tradition into a vibrant and living world of musical memory.

3. Text and Literary Context

From a textual and semiotic standpoint, *Sandyagita* draws inspiration from a diverse range of literary sources. These sources encompass classical texts such as *kakawin* or *kidung*, which are profoundly rich in moral and cosmological meaning, alongside modern texts composed by contemporary Balinese poets that reflect themes of humanism,

harmony, and ecological consciousness. Furthermore, innovative compositions explicitly blend Balinese, Indonesian, and even foreign languages, thereby facilitating cross-cultural dialogue. In every manifestation, the text functions as a vessel of memory (*smrti*), effectively bridging the mythic imagination with lived experience. When performed within ritual contexts, the text serves to reactivate the sacred cosmology; conversely, in a concert setting, it transforms into an intercultural dialogue between Balinese philosophical thought and the modern world.

4. Performance Contexts: Ritual and Innovation

The research identifies two primary contexts for the practice of *Sandyagita*. Firstly, its ritual context, where it is performed as an offering (*yadnya*) essential for maintaining harmony among humans, nature, and divinity, thereby sustaining the continuity of mythic and spiritual memory. Secondly, the contemporary context, where *Sandyagita* is presented at art festivals, concerts, and within international collaborations, functioning as a vital space for aesthetic innovation and intercultural communication. This dual presence profoundly illustrates how *Sandyagita* simultaneously inhabits the sacred and artistic realms, successfully embodying the memory of cultural wisdom while dynamically responding to the challenges and shifts of global change.

5. Tradition and Innovation: A Continuing Dialectic

a) *Sandyagita* within Tradition

Within its traditional framework, *Sandyagita* is deeply rooted in the historical foundations of *kidung* and *kakawin* traditions, which are consistently accompanied by *gamelan*. Beyond its artistic value, the genre fulfills essential functions, serving as a medium for ritual performance, moral reflection, and literary learning. In terms of musical traits, *Sandyagita* utilizes the Balinese *pelog* or *slendro* tuning systems. Performance practice places a strong emphasis on precise intonation, elaborate vocal ornamentation, and, critically, textual clarity. Notably, the instrumental component, typically provided by the *Gong Kebyar* ensemble, is designed to support and reinforce the vocal line rather than dominate it, underscoring the vocal tradition's central importance.

b) *Sandyagita* as Innovation

Sandyagita embodies a dynamic space of experimentation where Balinese artists reinterpret inherited traditions through contemporary creative practices. Its innovative aspects are evident across several dimensions musical, vocal, textual, and performative each contributing to the renewal of Balinese musical identity while sustaining its philosophical depth.

Musical experimentation forms a core of Sandyagita's innovation. Composers and performers have begun to explore diverse instrumental combinations that extend beyond the traditional gamelan ensemble. While the Gong Kebyar remains an essential foundation, Sandyagita compositions possibly increasingly incorporate Western instruments such as piano, violin, flute, or electronic sound textures to create a broader sonic landscape. These hybrid orchestrations not only enrich the timbral palette but also serve as metaphors for cultural dialogue—bridging the local and the global, the ancestral and the modern. This fusion, however, is carefully crafted to maintain the modal sensibility of Balinese pelog and selendro scales, ensuring that innovation does not erase but rather amplifies the essence of Balinese tonality.

Vocal innovation also marks a significant departure from earlier traditions. Performers employ extended vocal techniques, including controlled improvisation, microtonal inflection, layered polyphony, and call-and-response patterns that evoke both communal participation and individual expression. These techniques reflect a recontextualization of *gegitaan* and *kidung* singing styles into contemporary frameworks, aligning oral tradition with modern performance aesthetics. The voice becomes not merely a medium of text delivery but a vehicle of emotional intensity, sonic exploration, and cultural reimagination.

In textual creativity, Sandyagita composers and poets engage in innovative literary practices. Beyond classical *kakawin* and *kidung* sources, new works frequently draw on modern Balinese and Indonesian poetry, exploring universal human themes—environmental harmony, social justice, spiritual renewal, and intercultural empathy. Multilingualism plays a key role here: texts may blend Balinese, Indonesian, and English, reflecting both global interconnectedness and the evolving linguistic reality of Balinese artists today. This approach situates Sandyagita not only as an artistic form but as a living dialogue between languages, memories, and identities.

Performatively, Sandyagita has expanded from ritual and local temple contexts into the professional stage, appearing at the *Bali Arts Festival*, university concert series, and international cultural diplomacy events. In these settings, it functions as an ambassadorial art form—projecting Balinese cultural wisdom to global audiences while absorbing new artistic influences in return. The staging often integrates choreography, digital media, and visual scenography, turning Sandyagita into an interdisciplinary performance that bridges tradition with contemporary theater aesthetics.

Through these innovations, Sandyagita exemplifies the resilience and adaptability of Balinese performing arts. It transforms inherited wisdom into living creativity, ensuring that Balinese cultural memory continues to resonate not only within temples and villages but also across the stages of the world.

c) The Dialectic of Tradition and Innovation

Sandyagita demonstrates that tradition and innovation are not opposites but complementary forces that coexist within the continuum of Balinese artistic expression. Tradition provides the ethical, spiritual, and aesthetic foundation derived from the island's mythic worldview — a cosmology where sound, word, and ritual are interconnected expressions of sacred order (*rta*). Within this worldview, the act of singing and playing instruments is not merely performance but a reaffirmation of memory — cultural, collective, and spiritual — that connects the present with ancestral wisdom.

Innovation, meanwhile, acts as a transformative energy that extends this memory into new cultural spaces and global discourses. Through creative experimentation, collaboration, and reinterpretation, Sandyagita artists revitalize ancient myths and musical idioms, allowing them to resonate in the modern world. The fusion of traditional vocal ornamentation with contemporary harmonic or instrumental textures does not erode authenticity; rather, it reanimates tradition as a living dialogue between past and present.

This dialectical process positions Sandyagita as a living archive of Balinese wisdom: rooted in mythic origins, embodied in artistic performance, and perpetuated through memory across generations. It reflects a dynamic model of cultural sustainability in which Balinese identity is neither static nor nostalgic, but continuously renewed through acts of remembrance and creativity. In this sense, Sandyagita becomes not only a musical genre but also a philosophical statement that the vitality of tradition lies in its capacity to transform, and the strength of memory lies in its ability to inspire innovation within the world.

Discussion

The findings affirm that *Sandyagita* performs dual roles: as a vessel of Balinese vocal memory and as a platform for creative transformation. It enriches Balinese performing arts by offering new expressive possibilities while remaining anchored in cultural philosophy.

Academically, *Sandyagita* challenges the binary of tradition and modernity. It reveals that innovation emerges not from rupture, but from remembrance and reinterpretation of ancestral wisdom. Thus, *Sandyagita* stands as a symbol of Balinese hybrid creativity an art form where myth, world, and memory converge into a living expression of cultural resilience and wisdom.

Conclusion

Sandyagita represents a distinctive expression of Balinese creativity that unites tradition and innovation to strengthen wisdom memories. Tradition provides the philosophical and aesthetic foundation reflected in musical forms, vocal styles, and ritual functions while innovation revitalizes these roots through new interpretations, artistic experimentation, and intercultural collaboration. Through this synthesis, *Sandyagita* becomes more than a musical genre; it serves as a living medium of cultural transmission that connects ancestral knowledge with contemporary creativity. Thus, *Sandyagita Vocal and Instrumental Bali: Tradition and Innovation for Strengthening Wisdom Memories* embodies a cultural strategy that preserves Balinese identity while engaging dynamically with the challenges of modernity and global art discourse.

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