

Factors Shaping the Representation of Power and Global Multiculturalism in the Ornaments of Puri Agung Karangasem

I Nyoman Laba^a, I Wayan Adnyana^a, I Ketut Muka^a, I Wayan Suardana^a

^aInstitut Seni Indonesia Bali

ABSTRACT

This study examines the strategic incorporation of European architectural ornamentation in Puri Agung Karangasem as a means through which the Karangasem monarchy engaged with the shifting political landscape of the early twentieth century. Rather than viewing Balinese architecture as a homogeneous cultural form, the research demonstrates that the palace complex embodies a deliberate synthesis of Balinese spatial principles and Western aesthetic elements introduced during the colonial period. This hybrid visual configuration is interpreted as a mode of cultural diplomacy that enabled the ruling elite to negotiate political legitimacy and articulate modernity within the hierarchical structure of Dutch colonial governance. Through visual analysis and historical contextualization, the study argues that European-inspired motifs were mobilized not merely as decorative additions but as symbolic instruments that mediated power relations, projected cosmopolitan identity, and framed the monarchy's engagement with global cultural flows. The findings contribute to broader discussions on architectural hybridity, colonial modernity, and the role of visual culture in shaping political narratives.

KEYWORDS

Architectural Hybridity, Colonial Modernity, Visual Culture, Cultural Diplomacy, Puri Agung Karangasem



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Introduction

Puri Agung Karangasem is one of the most significant palace complexes in Bali, distinguished by a unique visual configuration shaped by relations of power, cultural acculturation, and early twentieth-century global currents. Contrary to the common assumption that Balinese palace architecture represents a static and homogeneous cultural form, Puri Agung Karangasem reveals an aesthetic complexity that embodies a continuous dialogue between local traditions, Dutch colonial influence, and broader global artistic developments. The Puri's historical construction during the reigns of Anak Agung Gede Jelantik (1908-1916) and Anak Agung Anglurah Ketut Karangasem (1916-1945) coincided with a period of intense colonization, expanding political-economic penetration, and growing cultural mobility in Southeast Asia [1], [2].

Within Balinese architectural and cultural studies, numerous scholars have examined how colonial intervention, migration, and intercultural exchange produced diverse forms of visual hybridity [3], [4], [5]. Yet Puri Agung Karangasem occupies a more intricate position, as its ornamentation not only preserves local aesthetic principles but also integrates European elements—such as Doric-Ionic columns, neoclassical symmetry, and Baroque motifs—alongside Chinese, Islamic, and Javanese design features creatively embedded within a traditional Balinese framework. This constellation positions the palace as a salient example of “visual cosmopolitanism” and “aesthetic hybridity” in the context of colonial Asia.

The palace’s distinctive visuality cannot be separated from early twentieth-century political conditions. Following the incorporation of the Karangasem Kingdom into the administrative structure of the Dutch East Indies, palace visuality became a strategic arena for negotiating authority. Under colonial rule, visual symbols served as essential instruments through which local rulers articulated loyalty, asserted legitimacy, and positioned themselves within colonial hierarchies [6], [7]. Hybrid ornaments that combined Balinese iconography—such as singa ambara raja, naga, or karang sae—with European and Chinese motifs must therefore be understood as politically charged aesthetic expressions.

Beyond political factors, the Karangasem elite’s perception of Western modernity as an emblem of progress played a critical role in the adoption of European architectural styles. Modernity signified openness, administrative competence, and the capacity to align with colonial governance structures [1]. Visual choices such as classical columns, symmetrical façades, modern concrete-casting techniques, and stained glass reflected deliberate aesthetic strategies to project a progressive and globally attuned royal identity.

Cultural exchange further shaped the palace’s ornamental vocabulary. The kingdom’s sustained interactions with Chinese, Javanese, Indian, and European communities fostered the circulation of artistic motifs and construction technologies. Early twentieth-century globalism—marked by heightened mobility of people, ideas, and goods—introduced new ornamental possibilities through printed pattern books, imported materials, and modern building techniques [8]. These transnational flows underscore the extent to which the palace’s ornamentation emerged from intersecting intercultural networks.

Despite the Puri’s historical and artistic importance, scholarly attention to Puri Agung Karangasem has largely focused on its architectural history, traditional aesthetics, and sociocultural functions. Specific studies examining the determinants shaping its representation of power and global multiculturalism remain limited. Yet ornamentation, as a visual language, plays a pivotal role in articulating ideology,

identity, and relations of power [9], [10]. To study ornament is to interpret a “visual text” that records colonial dynamics, elite negotiations, and the cosmopolitan aspirations of the kingdom.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to identify and analyze the principal factors that configure the visual system of Puri Agung Karangasem as an expression of political power and global multiculturalism. Through qualitative visual analysis, archival research, and interviews with palace descendants, the study demonstrates that the palace’s ornamentation constitutes not merely decorative aesthetics but a historical archive that encodes political strategies, cultural dialogues, and the early twentieth-century currents of global interaction.

Literature Review

Puri Agung Karangasem serves as a focal point in studies of Balinese multiculturalism due to its architecture and ornamentation, which integrate both local and foreign influences. Previous research indicates that the palace’s spatial layout and building forms do not strictly adhere to traditional Balinese patterns, but rather display hybridity resulting from the interaction between Balinese cosmology and Western colonial influences [11], [12], [13]. Within this context, architecture and ornamentation function as symbolic spaces for negotiating power and political legitimacy.

Cultural acculturation is evident in structures such as *Gedong Maskerdam* and *Bale Gili*, which combine Balinese, Chinese, and Western (Dutch) styles [14]. This approach is considered a strategic representation by the Karangasem rulers to project a modern and progressive image of authority [15]. Craft expressions further serve as visual narratives articulating ideological power rather than merely aesthetic purposes [16], [17]. The Puri’s spatial organization approximates the *Tri Mandala* principle, differing from the Sanga Mandala pattern typical in other major Balinese Puri, reflecting a hybrid visual identity while maintaining sacredness [18], [19], [20]. The application of *Tri Hita Karana* principles illustrates how cultural heritage is managed spiritually, socially, and ecologically [21].

The adoption of reinforced concrete technology and cement casting techniques since the 1910s demonstrates an ability to incorporate global innovations without compromising traditional aesthetic values [22]. Bureaucratic and diplomatic systems of the kingdom also shaped complex visual symbols [23], [24], aligning with theories of cultural hegemony and visual power relations [25]. Acculturation with Chinese culture, along with Baroque European elements and Islamic geometric patterns, strengthens the visual multicultural dimension of the palace [26], [27], [28], [29].

Visual culture and representation theories emphasize that the Puri’s ornamentation constitutes an ideological text projecting the ruler’s authority, collective Balinese

identity, and global cultural interactions [9], [30], [31], [32], [33]. Visual elements such as crowned lions, Chinese flora motifs, and Doric-Ionic columns serve as articulative media of power and global multiculturalism, positioning Puri Agung Karangasem as a site of negotiation between local tradition and global influences.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, integrating visual analysis with historical inquiry to examine the determinants of political power and global multiculturalism in the ornamentation of Puri Agung Karangasem. The Puri's architectural and decorative elements are treated as visual texts, containing aesthetic, symbolic, and ideological meanings that require contextual interpretation. Primary data were collected through systematic observation of key palace structures, including *Gedong Maskerdam*, *Bale Gili*, and the *Kori Agung* gates. Documentation involved photography, structural measurement, and detailed recording of motifs reflecting Balinese, Chinese, European, and Islamic influences. Complementary in-depth interviews with palace descendants and local cultural custodians provided genealogical insights and historical perspectives on design strategies implemented by rulers and artisans.

Secondary data were drawn from historical archives, Dutch colonial reports, and scholarly literature on Balinese architecture, colonial politics, and visual representation theory. Triangulation ensured interpretive validity by cross-referencing visual evidence with historical narratives and informant accounts. Data analysis proceeded through categorization of visual elements by stylistic origin and symbolic function, interpretation through Stuart Hall's representation theory, Foucault's power framework, and Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and third space, and synthesis to elucidate the interplay of local authority, colonial influence, and global artistic currents in shaping the palace's hybrid and multicultural ornamental language.

Integration of the Karangasem Kingdom into the Colonial Structure of the Dutch East Indies

The power dynamics of the Karangasem Kingdom in the nineteenth century reflect a complex dialectic between local resistance and adaptation in response to Dutch colonial expansion. The transition from a traditional political system based on the Balinese confederation to a modern colonial order necessitated strategic measures by the royal elite to preserve legitimacy while accommodating colonial dominance [23]. This transformation unfolded across three critical phases.

The first phase, confrontation (1826-1849), marked initial contact characterized by tensions between colonial economic interests and local sovereignty. Despite the 1841 agreement achieved through the Dutch *divide et impera* strategy [34], the Karangasem

Kingdom maintained customary practices, such as *tawan karang*, as symbolic forms of resistance. Military resistance peaked during the Jagaraga Wars I-II (1848-1849), demonstrating a firm anti-colonial stance [29].

The second phase, co-optation (1849-1896), emerged following military defeat, placing Karangasem under the influence of the Mataram-Lombok Kingdom as a Dutch ally. This subordinate position stimulated the development of new cultural strategies, including adaptation of colonial administrative elements, preservation of traditional structures, and cultural diplomacy, aimed at sustaining local identity while navigating colonial demands [35].

The third phase, hybridity (1896-1950), began with the appointment of I Gusti Gde Jelantik as *stedehouder I* (1896), creating an ambivalent power formation. The construction of Puri Agung Karangasem functioned as a medium for political articulation through the integration of Western technologies with Balinese cosmology (*Tri Hita Karana*), the synthesis of European, Chinese, Indian, Javanese, Islamic, and Balinese architectural styles, and the performativity of power in symbolic spaces [21]. Visual analysis of the Puri Agung Karangasem ornaments reveals complex representational strategies: cosmological symbols reinforce traditional legitimacy, global elements signal adaptive capacity, and aesthetic hybridity embodies the negotiation between local and global identities.



Figure 1 (a, b, c): Photographs of the Kori Agung, Gedong Maskerdam, and Bale Gili illustrate the acculturation of Balinese and global visual cultures.

Source: Author's documentation, 2024

The incorporation of Karangasem into the colonial framework in the early twentieth century created a strategic imperative for the kingdom to demonstrate loyalty and political stability. Architectural forms and ornamental designs became instruments of visual communication expressing the kingdom's capacity to adapt to the colonial order while asserting local authority before the Dutch administration. The use of neoclassical columns, Indische Empire spatial arrangements, and the placement of European motifs reflect both negotiated political positioning and the assertion of legitimacy.

This transformation illustrates how colonial pressures catalyzed cultural creativity within the Karangasem elite. Through symbolic adaptation and global aesthetic integration, the kingdom preserved its symbolic autonomy while responding to early twentieth-century modernity, rendering Puri Agung Karangasem not merely an architectural complex but a visual archive documenting power relations, political strategies, and colonial cultural dynamics.

The Karangasem Elite's Belief in Western Modernity

The early twentieth-century perception of Western modernity among the Karangasem elite played a pivotal role in shaping the visual and symbolic language of Puri Agung Karangasem. Modernity was conceptualized not merely as technological or economic progress but as an emblem of adaptability, administrative competence, and political legitimacy within the Dutch colonial framework. This worldview prompted the selective adoption of European architectural aesthetics, including neoclassical forms, Doric-Ionic columns, symmetrical façades, Baroque ornamentation, and modern construction methods such as cast concrete [36], [37].

The integration of Western elements functioned as a deliberate strategy to project an image of a progressive, educated, and cosmopolitan monarchy while retaining rootedness in Balinese cultural identity. By appropriating foreign aesthetics selectively, the Karangasem elite demonstrated their capacity to leverage external knowledge and practices to strengthen political and social legitimacy. This strategy also reflected an awareness of global aesthetic standards, serving as a visual medium to communicate sophistication to both colonial authorities and local elites.

Modernity was not merely decorative; it conveyed political and cultural legitimacy. European architectural motifs, combined with local symbols—such as *singa ambara raja*, Balinese floral patterns, and Chinese motifs—illustrated the elite's negotiation of a dual identity that balanced local tradition with global modernity. This hybrid approach enabled the palace to function as a performative political stage, simultaneously displaying loyalty, administrative competence, and progressive identity.

Furthermore, the adoption of Western modernity coincided with early twentieth-century global flows of ideas, materials, and artistic styles. Access to printed pattern books, imported construction materials, and innovative building techniques allowed palace designers to experiment with combinations of local and global aesthetics. Consequently, Western elements became instruments of power representation and cosmopolitan aspiration, while local symbols maintained cultural continuity [23].



Figure 2 (a, b, c): Motifs of *singa ambara raja*, crowned lion, and coral-lion ornament after processes of reframing, recasting, and mobilising.
Source: Author's documentation, 2024.

Historical and visual analyses reveal that the Karangasem rulers' engagement with Western modernity was a conscious strategy to project complex political, social, and cultural identities. Following the post-colonial administrative transformation of 1849 and the establishment of the *stedehouder* system in 1896, I Gusti Gde Jelantik (1896-1908) and I Gusti Bagus Jelantik (1908-1950) strategically integrated Western architectural elements, particularly Indische Empire Style adaptations at *Gedong Maskerdam*, reflecting modern construction techniques and visual assertions of equality with colonial authorities. Cultural diplomacy, including ceremonies that combined traditional gamelan with European protocol, as well as spatial naming referencing European cities and key regional centers, further demonstrates how visual and performative strategies reinforced geopolitical networks and elite authority [23].



Figure 3 a & b. I Gusti Gde Jelantik (Stedehouder I, 1896-1908) and I Gusti Bagus Jelantik (Stedehouder II, 1908-1950) played central roles in the creation of multicultural ornamentation and architecture at Puri Agung Karangasem.

Source: Collectie Tropenmuseum-10001920

Analysis of Puri Agung Karangasem ornamentation identifies three layers of adaptation: technological—through reinforced concrete and cast ornamentation [12], [38]; aesthetic—through the fusion of Doric-Ionic columns with Chinese, Javanese, and Islamic motifs; and symbolic—through the integration of *Tri Hita Karana* cosmology

within colonial spatial arrangements. Collectively, these strategies produced a distinctive visual identity that simultaneously embodied tradition and modernity, articulating the Karangasem elite's negotiation between local heritage and colonial-modern cosmopolitanism.

The Dialectics of Power between Local Elites and Colonial Administration

The interaction between the Karangasem royal elites and the Dutch colonial administration in the early twentieth century generated a complex power dynamic, where Puri Agung Karangasem functioned as a symbolic negotiation arena. This relationship was dialogical rather than purely hierarchical; every architectural element and ornament embodied a strategy of representation that affirmed local legitimacy while demonstrating readiness to accommodate colonial structures [39], [40]. The hybrid visual language, integrating Balinese iconography, Chinese motifs, and European aesthetics, materialized this negotiation and reflected the elite's awareness of the political, social, and aesthetic demands imposed by the colonial authorities.

The Puri's spatial and ornamental arrangements served as performative instruments to assert authority. Traditional symbols such as *singa ambara raja*, dragons, and *karang sae* maintained cosmological legitimacy, whereas Doric-Ionic columns, symmetrical facades, and Baroque ornamentation signaled adaptability and global connectivity [23], [36]. This combination projected the image of competent and progressive rulers capable of negotiating political positions within the colonial context.

Historical analysis indicates that this power relationship evolved through continuous negotiation. The colonial administration demanded loyalty and conformity to modern governance norms, while local elites maintained cultural identity and traditional cosmology as the foundation of legitimacy. The resulting symbolic hybridity functioned as a mediatory strategy between dominant power and local autonomy, producing a unique aesthetic language that selectively merged foreign and local elements to articulate authority [2], [5].

Furthermore, this negotiation process served as a medium of political communication toward both the colonial authorities and other local communities. Palace ornamentation became a visual text demonstrating adaptability, identity resilience, and progressive aspirations. The pre-colonial hierarchical political structure and subsequent decentralization in the nineteenth century spurred cultural contests of power, expressed through rituals and art as legitimization strategies [20], [41], [42].

Dutch colonialism compelled the Karangasem rulers to employ a *soft power* approach. I Gusti Gde Jelantik (Stedehouder I, 1896-1908) tactically collaborated with the Dutch

to maintain cultural autonomy and political stability, often misinterpreted as betrayal but effectively a rational calculation [23]. Puri Agung Karangasem became a site for symbolic power articulation through the integration of European, Chinese, and Balinese architectural forms, including projects such as Taman Soekasada Ujung and cast concrete ornaments by architects Van der Hentz and Loto Ang, assisted by Balinese *undagi*. This hybridity reflected identity negotiation under colonial hegemony [25], [43].

This transformation confirms that Puri Agung Karangasem was more than a governmental center; it functioned as a visual text recording the dialectics of power, political strategies, and identity negotiation between colonial dominance and local resistance, as noted by Foucault [7], [44] and Girindrawardani et al. [45]. The Puri's architectural and ornamental hybridity demonstrates the Karangasem elite's capacity to navigate early twentieth-century colonialism and globalism through a visually expressive language laden with ideological significance.



Figure 4. The Dutch Royal Emblem reframed into the *karang singa bermahkota* ornament flanked by two crowned lion figures by the King of Karangasem.
Source: Author's Documentation, 2025

Early 20th-Century Globalism

Globalism in the early twentieth century played a pivotal role in shaping the visual language of Puri Agung Karangasem. The circulation of ideas, technologies, construction materials, and artistic styles across borders expanded the range of influences available to the local elite. Pattern books, imported building materials, modern construction techniques, as well as interactions with Chinese, Indian, Javanese, and European traders and artisans, provided avenues for ornament and architectural innovation. This visual transformation demonstrates that aesthetic evolution was not purely local but a product of global circulation traversing geographical and cultural spaces [23], [46], [47].

The incorporation of global elements into Puri Agung Karangasem reflects the adaptive capacity and creative agency of the Karangasem elite in negotiating their identity amidst colonial and global currents. European motifs, including Baroque and Neoclassical styles, Doric-Ionic columns, and modern concrete techniques, were selectively combined with local Balinese, Chinese, and Islamic symbols. This integration functioned to express political legitimacy, modernity, and cosmopolitan status. The visual strategy illustrates that globalism influenced not only form and ornamentation but also the articulation of power through aesthetic media [42], [48].

Beyond material aspects, globalism shaped symbolic paradigms. Ornaments adopting foreign visual elements signaled the Karangasem Kingdom's capacity to engage with global artistic trends while asserting a progressive image to colonial authorities and local communities. This process created a "third space," as theorized by Homi K. Bhabha, where cultural encounters produced hybridity, generating new meanings both as a symbol of adaptation and as an expression of multicultural identity [49], [50].

Visual analysis shows that integrating global elements did not erase Balinese traditions. Instead, foreign motifs were adapted to align with local cosmology and traditional symbolism, producing hybridity that balanced tradition, colonial influence, and modern aspirations. The Puri's ornamentation became a medium of power representation, cultural diplomacy, and cosmopolitan expression, reflecting the strategic utilization of global currents by the Karangasem elite to reinforce local legitimacy [39], [51], [52].

The construction of Puri Agung Karangasem from 1896 onward demonstrates how globalism was contextualized through architectural projects, including the integration of reinforced concrete techniques, European Baroque motifs, Islamic geometric symmetry, and hybrid Balinese, Chinese, and Javanese ornamentation. These adaptations were selective and creative, evidencing the strategic response to Dutch colonialism and proto-modern globalism while maintaining traditional identity [23], [29], [47].

In conclusion, early twentieth-century globalism functioned as a catalyst for aesthetic innovation, a medium for cultural transfer, and an instrument of visual politics. The hybrid character of Puri Agung Karangasem confirms that its ornamentation and architecture were more than decoration; they serve as visual archives documenting power negotiation, cross-cultural interaction, and global aspirations of the Karangasem elite under colonial conditions.

Conclusion

The architectural and ornamental design of Puri Agung Karangasem functioned as a strategic medium for negotiating power, legitimacy, and elite identity under colonial rule. By integrating traditional Balinese, Chinese, Javanese, and Islamic motifs with

European architectural styles and modern construction techniques, the palace embodies a hybrid visual language that signals both adaptation and cosmopolitan authority.

Engagement with Western modernity allowed the Karangasem elite to appropriate global ideas and technologies selectively, enhancing political stature while preserving local cultural roots. The interplay between local elites and colonial administration generated a dialogical power dynamic, positioning the palace as a performative space where authority, identity, and political strategy converged.

Global flows in the early twentieth century catalyzed aesthetic innovation and transcultural exchange, producing a visual hybridity that balanced tradition with modern aspirations. Puri Agung Karangasem thus exemplifies how local elites mobilized global and colonial influences to construct a progressive, culturally rooted, and politically resonant architectural narrative.

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