

## Barong and Rangda as Cultural Symbols: Dualism, Conservation, and Social Harmony

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamic relationship between myth, ritual, and cultural philosophy in Balinese tradition, focusing on the symbolism of Barong and Rangda as embodiments of the rwa bhineda concept, the duality of opposing yet complementary forces that sustain cosmic harmony. In Balinese society, myth is not a relic of the past but a living source of ethical, ecological, and spiritual wisdom manifested through rituals, performing arts, and daily practices. The Barong-Rangda performance functions as a sacred drama that restores balance between good (dharma) and evil (adharma), while also serving as a moral and social reminder of unity and mutual respect. Over time, the transformation from sacred ritual to profane performance illustrates the adaptive nature of Balinese culture in maintaining spiritual integrity amidst modernity and globalisation. The study highlights how myth operates as a cultural framework that guides conservation values, ecological awareness, and interhuman tolerance. Ultimately, the Barong-Rangda myth represents a universal message of harmony, affirming that true solidarity arises not from uniformity but from the willingness to coexist in diversity, thus reinforcing Bali's enduring philosophy of balance between humanity, nature, and the divine.

### KEYWORDS

Barong and Rangda,  
Cultural, Symbol,  
Dualism



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### Myths as Heritage and Living Wisdom

Myths are a crucial element of culture, not only passed down from generation to generation but also serving as a source of wisdom for community life. They come in various forms, such as folktales, ritual ceremonies, and cultural symbols. Myths remain relevant in shaping values, behavioural patterns, and human relationships with each other and their environment. [1] As a cultural heritage, myths serve as archetypes that guide humans in their daily lives and interactions with their environment. Through myths, humans are introduced to cosmic powers beyond themselves, while also being taught moral and spiritual values that govern relationships between humans and with the universe. These values serve as ethical and behavioural guidelines, which then shape traditions and customs passed down from generation to generation.

Myths serve not only as stories of the past but also as a legacy of knowledge and wisdom. Through myths, societies transmit ecological and ethical values, respect for nature, and an awareness of the interconnectedness of all beings. Myths serve as a reflective tool that helps humans understand themselves within the cosmic order and cultivate wisdom in dealing with environmental change. Thus, myths serve as a bridge between cultural heritage and ecological wisdom, remaining relevant in shaping collective consciousness in the modern era [2].

In the Balinese context, myths are not merely narrative legacies, but rather a living part of social practices, rituals, and artistic expression. They serve as moral, spiritual, and ecological guides that guide harmony between humans, nature, and divine forces. Through rituals such as sacred dances in yadnya ceremonies, Balinese people continue to reinterpret cosmic values amidst changing times. In the realm of art and culture, myths serve as a source of inspiration and expression of life values, guiding works to be rooted in symbolic and spiritual meaning. Representations such as the Barong and Rangda emphasise the principle of *rwa bhineda*, the balance of two complementary forces, and serve not only as conveyors of cosmological and ethical values but also as guardians of Balinese cultural identity in the modern era.

Clifford Geertz explains the relationship between myth and ritual, stating that myth functions as a symbolic structure that provides a conceptual framework for society in understanding the order of the cosmos, power, and morality. Myths are not simply sacred stories passed down, but serve as a symbolic basis for collective action and social legitimacy. Meanwhile, ritual is a concrete manifestation of myth, embodying symbolic values through actions, processions, and aesthetic forms that live within society. In Geertz's analysis of Balinese religion and culture, the religious system is not centred on abstract dogma or belief, but rather on structured ritual actions laden with symbolic meaning. Through ceremonies, sacred dances, and offerings such as *odalan* and *banten* (traditional offerings), Balinese society continually relives myth in real-life experiences, reinforcing social order and cosmological harmony (*rwa bhineda*). Myth and ritual form a unity, myth as spoken meaning, and ritual as practised meaning, both mutually sustaining and strengthening the continuity of Balinese culture amidst the dynamics of modernity [3]. As also conveyed by Bandem and deBoer, art and ritual in Bali cannot be separated from the belief system that underlies it. Every aesthetic form contains deep religious and social meaning [4].

### Barong & Rangda Symbolism: Cosmic Drama

The battle between Barong and Rangda in Balinese tradition is not merely a theatrical spectacle, but rather a cosmic drama that represents the balance between the forces of good (*dharma*) and destructive forces (*adharma*). Barong, as a symbol of goodness and protector of society, symbolises positive energy, protection, and harmony in the

universe. Conversely, Rangda represents chaos, lust, and the forces of destruction that are also part of the cosmic order. Their conflict never achieves absolute victory, because in Balinese cosmology, the balance of the universe can only be maintained through the existence and interaction of two complementary forces (*rwa bhineda*). [5] The concept of *Rwa Bhineda* is represented through sacred drama that plays an important role in the order of life of Balinese Hindu society, especially in the implementation of the *Piodalan* ceremony as a medium to restore spiritual and social balance. The figures of Barong and Rangda function not only as mythological representations but also as symbols of unity and reminders of the value of togetherness. In accordance with the philosophy of Balinese society, namely "*sagilik-saguluk salunglung sabayantaka*, which emphasises the importance of harmony between Hindus. Thus, the Barong-Rangda performance is not only aesthetically valuable, but also has religious and social functions, namely strengthening public awareness of the importance of maintaining balance between two opposing forces, both in the individual spiritual realm and in communal social life.

In rituals and sacred art performances, the Barong-Rangda battle serves as a reminder of the dynamics of human life, that good and evil cannot be separated, but must be maintained in harmony. Clifford Geertz interpreted Balinese ritual and art forms as symbolic systems that represent how society understands the world through cultural actions and expressions [3]. Through this symbolism, the Balinese people not only witness a mythological story but also experience a collective spiritual purification that balances the positive and negative forces in the social and spiritual order. [6] The fact that this struggle never ends symbolises that good and evil are integral parts of life that cannot be eliminated. Both were created by God (*Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa*) and must coexist to create cosmic balance.

### Transformation of Values: From Sacred Ritual to Profane Representation

The symbols of Barong and Rangda in Bali are highly sacred, especially if they are enshrined in Balinese temples. The Barong Swari manuscript mentions that Barong Ket and Rangda are enshrined in *Pura Dalem* (a Balinese Hindu temple) [7]. Barong and Rangda are made sacred through a series of purification ceremonies and special rituals such as *Melasti*, *Melaspas*, and *Pasupati* (*the ma-urip-urip ceremony*). Without these rituals, both would be mere (profane) art objects, not sacred. The transformation of values in the Barong-Rangda performance reflects Balinese culture's ability to adapt to changing times without losing its spiritual meaning. Originally rooted in religious ceremonies such as *Piodalan* and *Calonarang*, this performance has a sacred function, namely maintaining the balance between the forces of good (*dharma*) and evil (*adharma*) for the sake of cosmic harmony [5]. However, along with social and tourism

developments, Barong-Rangda also appears in a profane form, as part of the performing arts and cultural attractions that are accessible to the wider public.

The transition from sacred to profane is not a degradation of values, but rather an expansion of the context of meaning. When rituals are performed in public spaces, their spiritual and symbolic values are not lost but are reinterpreted through aesthetic and narrative forms. Thus, profanization plays a role in maintaining the continuity of tradition, keeping myths and symbols alive and relevant to the younger generation and the global world [3]. As explained by Sunarya, art and crafts in Bali have *taksu* (spiritual power) because they can integrate spiritual, social and aesthetic elements into expressive forms that are adaptive to change [8]. Bandem and deBoer also emphasise that Balinese rituals and performances always operate in a dialectic between sacredness and entertainment, the boundaries between the two being fluid and complementary [4]. Thus, the transformation of values in Barong-Rangda shows that Balinese culture understands change not as a threat, but as a space to renegotiate the meaning of sacredness in the context of modernity.

### Conservation Values & Wisdom

This myth teaches that humans should not destroy the order of nature, but rather manage and balance the life energy within it. Conservation, in this view, is not limited to the physical preservation of nature but also encompasses the maintenance of traditions, cultural values, and spiritual balance. As explained by Sunarya [8], the concept of balance in Balinese culture is rooted in the view of *rwa bhineda*, which emphasises the integration between two opposing forces as the basis for creating *jagadhita* or well-being in life.

Ancestral wisdom guides humans to understand that every force, even those that appear destructive, has a role in maintaining the cosmic cycle of life. This is reflected in various sacred practices and symbolism, such as the Barong-Rangda performance, which depicts the eternal battle between dharma and adharma. Kapela [9] emphasizes that the concept of *rwa bhineda* is not merely a metaphysical teaching, but rather an ethical guideline that shapes how Balinese people interpret the relationship between humans, nature, and supernatural powers. Thus, the value of conservation in the Balinese cultural context is holistic, encompassing a balance between humans, nature, and the spiritual dimension. Tafoya [10] mentions that rituals such as Barong Ngelawang are not just a form of entertainment, but are a collective spiritual act to maintain the balance of energy between the real world (*sekala*) and the unseen/intangible world (*niskala*). A similar view was expressed by Purwanto [11], that the Barong-Rangda myth contains mystical values that show how Balinese society maintains a harmonious relationship between positive and negative forces in the cosmos.

The concept emphasises that true conservation is not only an ecological endeavour, but also a cultural and spiritual act, based on the awareness to live in harmony with nature and the cosmic order. Sukerna dan Setiawan [12] added that the sacred dimension of the Barong Ngelawang Sungungan ritual demonstrates how tradition and spirituality go hand in hand to maintain cultural sustainability and the spiritual balance of society. Through this interpretation, myths become not only a legacy of stories but also ethical and ecological guidance relevant to the challenges of modern life.

## Conclusion

The battle between Barong and Rangda not only represents the conflict between good and evil but also depicts the inner and social conflicts inherent in human life. In Balinese philosophy, this conflict reflects a dynamic balance between two opposing poles, as Stephen emphasises [1], that the Barong-Rangda symbolism is part of the philosophical concept of *rwa bhineda*, two opposing but complementary forces in maintaining the order of the world.

Understanding this duality fosters tolerance and human solidarity, as differences are viewed not as threats but as essential elements in creating universal harmony. Balinese society does not seek to eliminate differences, but rather celebrates them as part of the balance of life. Thus, the Barong-Rangda myth instils an awareness that diversity is a natural state of the universe and must be accepted with mutual respect.

Through this myth, true solidarity is realised not through uniformity, but through a willingness to live side by side in diversity. Tafoya [10] states that the Barong-Rangda ritual displays the tension between opposing forces as a form of social reflection on conflict and cooperation in society. Likewise, Foley [13] states that this performance functions as a "*cosmic balancing act*" that not only maintains spiritual order but also teaches the values of tolerance, empathy, and social harmony. Thus, the symbolic battle between Barong and Rangda can be understood as a cosmic drama about humanity, where balance does not mean eliminating differences, but finding harmony amidst diversity. These values reflect the Balinese way of life, which places *rwa bhineda* as the spiritual foundation for creating a peaceful, tolerant, and balanced world.

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