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The Sacredness of Barong from the Perspective of the Philosophy of Art: Understanding the Relationship between Aesthetics, Ritual, and Spirituality

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ABSTRACT
Barong is a form of sacred art that holds an important position in Hindu religious practices and the aesthetic life of Balinese society. It is understood not merely as an artifact or artistic performance, but as an integral part of the symbolic, ritual, belief, and spiritual systems of its supporting community. This article aims to analyze the sacredness of Barong from the perspective of the philosophy of art, focusing on the relationship between aesthetics, ritual, and spirituality. The study employs a qualitative approach using philosophical hermeneutics. Data were obtained through observation, interviews with artists, religious leaders, and community members, as well as a review of Balinese religious and cultural literature. The findings indicate that Barong's sacredness emerges from the inseparable interplay of aesthetic, symbolic, ritual, and spiritual dimensions. Aesthetic value transcends visual beauty, becoming a medium for transcendental experience through ritualization, symbolic interpretation, and spiritual engagement. Thus, Barong represents sacred art that integrates beauty, religious devotion, and cosmological consciousness within a unified philosophical framework.

KEYWORDS
Barong, Estetika, Filsafat Seni, Ritual, Sakralitas

Introduction

Art in the lives of Balinese Hindu communities does not merely function as an expression of beauty, entertainment, or cultural representation, but also constitutes an integral part of religious practices. Art is manifested in various forms of rituals, symbols, movements, music, and means of worship that connect human life with the spiritual dimension. In this context, Barong occupies an important position, as its existence is associated not only with artistic expression but also with beliefs concerning protective powers, cosmic balance, and the relationship between human beings and sacred reality. Barong is understood as an artistic

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phenomenon that simultaneously encompasses aesthetic, religious, social, and philosophical dimensions.

The value of a work of art from the perspective of the philosophy of art is determined not only by its material form and sensory beauty but also by the experience, symbols, and meanings it conveys. Dewey's thought [1934] positions art as an experience formed through the relationship between the artwork, the artist, the environment, and the recipient. Meanwhile, Langer [1953] views art as a symbolic form capable of expressing experiences and feelings that cannot always be articulated through conceptual language [17]. This framework is relevant to understanding Barong, as its visual form, colors, ornaments, movements, and musical accompaniment do not merely generate an aesthetic experience but also convey religious meanings that are embedded in the life of the community. Within the context of Balinese Hinduism, this aesthetic dimension can be associated with the principle of satyam, sivam, sundaram, which signifies the interconnectedness of truth, purity or virtue, and beauty.

A number of studies have examined Barong from the perspectives of art, ritual, mythology, and sacredness. Wirawan [2019], through a theo-philosophical study of aesthetic mysticism, explains that Barong-Rangda is understood not only as a sacred symbol but also experienced through ritual practices and performances of sacred art [29]. A study by Sukerna and Setiawan [2024] demonstrates that the sacred dimension of Barong Ngelawang Sungsungan is formed through the interrelationship between mythology, the process of sacralization, and its performance in religious ceremonies. Another study concerning the transformation of Barong Ngelawang in the Ubud area also reveals that the Barong tradition may undergo changes in function, space, and meaning when confronted with the development of tourism and social change. These findings indicate that Barong is a dynamic phenomenon, as its meaning is shaped by the relationship between artistic form, ritual context, belief, and the social practices of the community [24].

Nevertheless, studies on Barong have tended to place mythology, ritual processes, performance functions, or social change as their primary focus. The conceptual relationship between aesthetics, ritual, and spiritual experience as constitutive elements of Barong's sacredness has not always been explained comprehensively from the perspective of the philosophy of art. Thus, there remains an opportunity to examine how the artistic beauty of Barong acquires sacred meaning through ritual, how ritual transforms aesthetic experience into spiritual experience, and how such experiences shape human relationships with the community and the environment [18]. This study offers novelty by viewing the sacredness of Barong as an interconnection between aesthetic, ritual, and spiritual dimensions, rather than as a quality inherent solely in Barong's material form or in the performance of its ceremonies.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze the sacredness of Barong from the perspective of the philosophy of art, with particular emphasis on the relationship between aesthetics, ritual, and spirituality. This study is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of the philosophy of art, philosophy of religion, and Balinese cultural studies, while also broadening the understanding of sacred art as a medium for religious experience, the formation of communal identity, and the cultivation of harmony in life. In this context, Barong is understood not merely as an aesthetic object or traditional performance, but as a

philosophical medium that brings together experiences of beauty, sacredness, and transcendence.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach using the method of philosophical hermeneutics to understand the position of Barong as sacred art within Balinese Hindu cosmology. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study focuses on meanings, religious experiences, symbols, ritual practices, and the worldview of the community, which cannot be adequately explained through quantitative data alone. Philosophical hermeneutics is employed to interpret the relationship between Barong's artistic form, mythological narratives, sacralization practices, and the spiritual meanings embedded within the community. These meanings are analyzed by taking into account the cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts, as well as the experiences of the community that sustains the tradition.

Research data were obtained through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary study. Observations were conducted on the forms of Barong, performance activities, ritual practices, storage spaces, and community involvement in the maintenance and use of Barong. Interviews were conducted purposively with religious leaders, pemangku (ritual officiants), desa adat administrators, artists, and penyungsung community members who possess an understanding of Barong's position. Documentary study was used to complement the data through photographs, religious texts, lontar manuscripts, and relevant scholarly literature. Data analysis was conducted through several stages, namely data reduction, thematic categorization, philosophical interpretation, and conclusion drawing. The data were organized into themes including the meaning of Barong, aesthetic forms, symbolism, mythology, ritualization, sacralization, spiritual experience, and its relationship to Balinese Hindu cosmology.

Result

The Position of Barong in the Religious Life of the Community

The findings of the study indicate that Barong occupies a position that extends beyond that of a mere performing art. In the lives of Balinese Hindu communities, Barong appears in various contexts, both as part of artistic expression, a cultural symbol, and a medium used in religious practices. Barong's position as a sacred medium is evident in the ways it is treated by the community, particularly through acts of respect, maintenance, storage, use, and participation in ceremonial sequences. Barong used in a religious context is not treated in the same manner as ordinary performance equipment. Certain regulations govern its place of storage, the timing of its performances, those permitted to carry or dance it, and the ceremonial sequences accompanying its use. This demonstrates that Barong's position is shaped by the system of beliefs and ritual norms prevailing within the community that sustains the tradition.

In practice, Barong is also understood as a symbol of protective power. This interpretation is related to the community's beliefs concerning the relationship between human beings, sacred forces, ancestors, and the environment. The presence of Barong in ceremonies is not intended

merely to provide a spectacle, but also to strengthen religious relationships and maintain the balance of communal life. These findings demonstrate that Barong's status as sacred art is determined not only by its physical form, such as its mask, costume, colors, or ornaments, but also by the context in which it is used. The same artistic form may acquire different meanings when situated within a ritual space, a cultural performance, or a tourism-related activity.

The Aesthetic Form and Artistic Expression of Barong

From an aesthetic perspective, Barong exhibits a unity of visual elements, movement, sound, and dramatic expression. The visual elements can be observed in the shape of the head, facial structure, eyes, teeth, fur, crown, ornaments, and combination of colors that construct a particular character. These elements not only demonstrate the artistic skills of their makers but also constitute part of a symbolic system understood by the community. The aesthetics of Barong are also manifested through the movements of the dancers. Barong's movements tend to be strong, dynamic, expressive, and occasionally characterized by changes in tempo in accordance with the gamelan accompaniment. These movements create the impression that Barong is alive, allowing the audience to perceive it not merely as an inanimate object but as a figure possessing character and expressive power. Gamelan accompaniment also contributes to the formation of Barong's aesthetic experience. Gamelan music does not merely function as an accompaniment to movement, but also establishes a dramatic atmosphere, heightens tension, reinforces the sacred character, and directs the community's attention toward the ongoing procession. The relationship between movement, music, costume, and performance space produces a comprehensive artistic experience [9].

The findings also indicate that Barong's aesthetics are closely related to religious symbolism. The form, colors, and expressions of Barong are not selected solely on the basis of aesthetic considerations, but also according to particular meanings concerning power, protection, balance, and the relationship between human beings and the universe [30]. Thus, the aesthetic elements of Barong serve both representational and spiritual functions.

The Ritualization and Sacralization of Barong

The findings indicate that the sacredness of Barong is formed and maintained through a process of ritualization. Barong does not automatically become sacred merely because it is created in a particular form. Its sacred status is associated with processes of purification, consecration, ritual use, and recognition by the religious community [27]. In several Balinese traditions, the sacralization of Barong is associated with specific ritual stages, such as purification, ngereh or ngerehang, and other ceremonies adapted to the traditions of each desa adat.

Ritualization is also evident in restrictions on the use of Barong. Barong that has been consecrated is generally presented only at particular times, in designated places, and for specific purposes. Its performance may be associated with religious ceremonies, prayers for safety, the warding off of misfortune, the honoring of sacred powers, or other ritual activities recognized by the community. Within this process, pemangku (ritual officiants), customary leaders, dancers, musicians, and community members perform interconnected roles. The pemangku or ritual leader is responsible for religious aspects, the dancers perform the performative function, the accompanying musicians support the procession, while the

community provides social legitimacy and sustains the continuity of the tradition. Thus, the findings demonstrate that the ritualization of Barong is a process involving the art object, ceremonial procedures, practitioners, space, time, and collective beliefs. The sacredness of Barong is maintained through the repetition of rituals and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge [1].

Barong as a Medium of Spiritual Experience

The findings indicate that the presence of Barong in rituals generates spiritual experiences for the community. These experiences emerge through feelings of reverence, solemnity, emotional profundity, sacred awe, faith, and a sense of closeness to forces regarded as transcendent. Spiritual experiences are not confined to pemangku (ritual officiants) or dancers, but are also experienced by community members involved in the preparation, implementation, and witnessing of the rituals. These spiritual experiences are shaped by various elements, including the atmosphere of the sacred site, gamelan sounds, Barong's movements, prayers, offerings, ritual attire, and communal participation. Taken together, these elements create an atmosphere distinct from that of profane performances. The community does not merely observe Barong as a spectacle but experiences it as part of a religious relationship [8].

Barong serves as a medium for conveying prayers for safety, protection, balance, and harmony. In this context, Barong is understood as a means of mediation that connects human beings with sacred forces. However, Barong is not always understood literally as God or a deity, but rather as a symbol or ritual vehicle that enables the presence and interpretation of transcendent forces. Spiritual experiences mediated through Barong also possess a social dimension. The performance of rituals requires cooperation, mutual assistance, adherence to regulations, and the involvement of various parties. Therefore, the experience of transcendence is not merely individual but also communal, as it cultivates an awareness that individuals are part of a religious community [6].

The Relationship between Aesthetics, Ritual, and Spirituality

The findings indicate that aesthetics, ritual, and spirituality in Barong constitute three interrelated aspects. Aesthetics provides form and expressive power, ritual provides sacred context and legitimacy, while spirituality provides depth of meaning and religious experience. Barong cannot be fully understood if it is viewed solely in terms of its formal beauty. Barong rituals cannot be separated from the artistic expressions that make religious experience concrete, communicative, and emotionally resonant. This relationship demonstrates that sacred art operates through the integration of material form, ritual action, and inner experience [7].

The findings also indicate that the sacredness of Barong has ethical implications. Reverence for Barong is associated with adherence to norms, respect for others, the preservation of tradition, and an awareness of the need to maintain environmental balance. Thus, Barong functions not only as a medium of aesthetic and spiritual experience but also as a means of cultivating social and ecological values [12].

Discussion

Barong as Sacred Art in Balinese Hindu Cosmology

The findings concerning Barong's position as a religious medium indicate that art in Balinese Hindu society is not always clearly separated from religion. Art can constitute an integral part of worship practices, the communication of religious symbols, and the formation of sacred experiences. In this context, Barong possesses not only artistic value but also symbolic and theological significance [26].

Mircea Eliade explains that the sacred can manifest through particular objects, spaces, times, and actions that acquire special meaning in religious life. An object is not understood solely on the basis of its materiality, but also through its relationship with a reality regarded as sacred. This perspective can be applied to understanding Barong as a material object that acquires sacred status through ritual processes, belief, and recognition by the community [10].

Wirawan explains that Barong-Rangda in the religious life of Balinese Hindus is understood not only as a sacred symbol but also experienced through ritual practices and sacred art performances. Barong is associated with theo-philosophical and aesthetic-mystical dimensions, demonstrating the relationship between artistic form, belief, and religious experience. From the perspective of Balinese Hindu cosmology, Barong can be interpreted as a symbol representing the relationship between human beings and the cosmic order. This interpretation should not necessarily be understood uniformly across all types of Barong, as each region and community may possess different mythologies, histories, and systems of meaning. Nevertheless, in general, Barong is often associated with the ideas of protection, sacred power, balance, and the order of life [11].

Barong's position as sacred art also demonstrates that sacredness is not merely an intrinsic quality naturally attached to an object, but rather a status formed through the relationship between the object, human beings, ritual, and belief. In other words, the sacredness of Barong is the result of a cultural-religious process that is continuously maintained by the community. This finding is consistent with the study by Sukerna and Setiawan on Barong Ngelawang Sungsungan, which demonstrates the interconnection between mythology, the process of sacralization, and performance. The study emphasizes that Barong, within a ritual context, functions as a sacred symbol associated with magical power, grandeur, divinity, and efforts to create a harmonious life.

Thus, Barong as sacred art can be understood as a form of culture that unites material and immaterial aspects. The materiality of Barong is manifested in its artistic form, while its immaterial dimension is evident in the beliefs, mythology, rites, spiritual experiences, and norms that accompany its use.

The Aesthetics of Barong as an Experience of Religious Beauty

The visual form, movements, music, and expressions of Barong demonstrate that its aesthetics are concerned not only with formal qualities but also with the experience created through the performance as a whole. The beauty of Barong emerges through the relationship between the

art object, performers, space, sound, movement, and the community that experiences and interprets it. John Dewey's concept of art as experience is relevant to explaining this phenomenon. According to Dewey, art should not be understood merely as an object detached from life, but as an experience formed through the interaction between the artwork, the environment, the artist, and the recipient. In the context of Barong, aesthetic experience occurs when the community encounters its visual form, the dancers' movements, gamelan accompaniment, the ritual atmosphere, and the emotional responses that accompany them [3].

Art can also be understood as a symbolic form capable of expressing experiences and feelings that cannot always be articulated through conceptual language. The form of Barong, its facial expressions, bodily movements, and music can be interpreted as symbols conveying ideas of power, protection, tension, courage, and balance. The symbolism of the visual form of Barong Ket also demonstrates that its formal and chromatic elements serve not only aesthetic functions but also carry religious and cosmological meanings [13]. Barong Ket is understood as a visual form representing the duality and harmony of opposing forces within the framework of Rwa Bhineda.

The beauty of Barong, within the context of Hindu aesthetics, can be associated with the principle of satyam, sivam, sundaram. Sundaram refers to the dimension of beauty, sivam relates to purity, virtue, or goodness, while satyam concerns truth. These three aspects demonstrate that beauty in sacred art does not stand alone but is interconnected with religious and ethical values. Thus, the beauty of Barong is not merely decorative beauty [19]. Rather, it functions as a means of cultivating a religious atmosphere and directing the community's attention toward deeper meanings. Art becomes a medium through which people experience something that is not only sensorially pleasing but also awakens inner awareness.

The Ritualization of Barong as a Process of Forming the Sacredness of Art

Processes of purification, ritual use, the involvement of practitioners, and the regulation of space and time demonstrate that the sacredness of Barong is formed through mechanisms of ritualization. Ritualization establishes boundaries that distinguish sacred Barong from profane artistic objects or performances. From the perspective of Émile Durkheim, ritual functions to strengthen group solidarity and reaffirm collectively held representations. Ritual is concerned not only with the relationship between human beings and sacred forces but also with cultivating an awareness that individuals are members of a moral community. When applied to Barong, ritual performance becomes a means of strengthening collective beliefs while reaffirming communal identity [4].

Ritual can create specific spaces and times that differ from everyday routines. In the context of Barong, ritual space, attire, music, movement, and ceremonial arrangements create a liminal atmosphere that enables the community to experience a shift in position and consciousness. Barong appears within a space that has been religiously structured, and therefore the meaning of its performance cannot be equated with that of an ordinary performance. Barong-Rangda is danced by designated practitioners within ritual spaces and sacred art performances [14]. This demonstrates that the process of sacralization involves the distribution of roles, authority, and particular forms of conduct.

The ritualization of Barong also demonstrates that sacredness is a performative process. Sacredness is not merely expressed through belief but is repeatedly embodied through actions such as carrying, menyungsung (reverentially honoring and caring for a sacred object), worshipping, dancing, accompanying, storing, and treating Barong in accordance with established regulations. Through this repetition, Barong's sacred status is continuously maintained and transmitted across generations.

Barong as a Medium of Spiritual Experience and Transcendence

The findings concerning experiences of solemnity, faith, reverence, and a sense of closeness to sacred forces demonstrate that Barong functions as a medium of spiritual experience. These experiences emerge because Barong is not merely presented as an object to be observed, but as part of a religious act involving the body, emotions, sound, symbols, space, and community. In Barong rituals, such experiences may arise through facial expressions, powerful movements, the atmosphere created by music, the sacredness of the space, and beliefs concerning the presence of sacred forces. Feelings of fear or awe in this context do not necessarily signify ordinary fear, but may constitute a form of reverence toward something regarded as transcending human existence [5].

Barong can also be understood as a symbolic medium connecting the empirical world with the transcendent world. The symbol of Barong enables the community to experience and interpret ideas of protection, balance, power, and sacredness through a form that can be seen and experienced [15]. In this sense, Barong serves as a means of mediation, not because its materiality is identical to God, but because it is situated within a ritual and belief structure that enables an experience of the sacred.

Barong Ngelawang functions as a sacred symbol that reinforces respect for the law of cause and effect and supports the creation of a harmonious life. Spiritual experience through Barong has ethical consequences and is not merely an emotional or mystical experience. Transcendence in the context of Barong should also not be understood solely as a vertical relationship between human beings and God. Transcendence has a horizontal dimension because religious experience encourages individuals to move beyond personal interests toward concern for the community and the environment [23]. Through rituals, the community cultivates togetherness, mutual assistance, respect for tradition, and social responsibility.

These experiences can be associated with the concept of bhakti, namely devotion and surrender to God. Bhakti is expressed not only through prayer but also through service, the fulfillment of duties, reverence for sacred objects and means of worship, and participation in communal life [20]. Therefore, community involvement in Barong rituals can be understood as a form of religious devotion that connects aesthetic experience with spiritual practice.

When Barong appears in the ngelawang tradition, this practice demonstrates that spiritual experience is not limited to the temple (pura) space. The presence of Barong within the community can transform everyday spaces into spaces possessing religious significance. Roads, house yards, territorial boundaries, and residential environments become part of the ritual space when Barong passes through or visits them in a sacred context. The sacralization of space occurs when a space acquires a center of religious orientation and becomes a place of encounter

between human beings and the transcendent [21]. Ngelawang can therefore be understood as a form of extending sacred space into everyday life. The presence of Barong reminds the community that lived space is not merely an economic and social space, but also possesses a spiritual dimension. The practice of ngelawang is related to mythology, the process of sacralization, and performance. This demonstrates that Barong's movement through communal spaces is not merely artistic but also possesses religious and social functions.

Philosophical Synthesis: The Sacredness of Barong as a Unity of Aesthetics, Ritual, and Spirituality

One of the important contributions of this discussion is the understanding that the sacredness of Barong not only generates spiritual experiences but can also shape ethical and ecological orientations. When Barong is understood as a protective symbol and as part of the cosmic order, reverence for Barong may imply respect for the environment within the sphere of community life. From the perspective of Tri Hita Karana, the relationship between humans and God, fellow human beings, and nature constitutes an inseparable unity. Barong rituals can strengthen the parahyangan dimension through worship, the pawongan dimension through mutual cooperation, and the palemahan dimension through awareness of the need to preserve the spaces in which people live [2].

Thus, the sacredness of Barong can function as a cultural mechanism that shapes environmental ethics. Nature is not viewed merely as a resource to be utilized, but also as part of an order of life that must be respected. Such an interpretation is relevant to ecotheological studies, particularly when religious symbols and rituals are employed to cultivate awareness of the interconnectedness between human beings and nature [22]. The sacredness of Barong can be understood as a philosophical construction consisting of several interconnected dimensions.

First, there is the ontological dimension, namely the position of Barong as a material object that acquires a special status through processes of sacralization and communal belief. Second, there is the aesthetic dimension, namely the form of beauty expressed through appearance, colors, ornaments, movements, music, and performance expressions. Third, there is the ritual dimension, consisting of ceremonial procedures, regulations, spaces, times, and participants that legitimize the sacred status of Barong. Fourth, there is the spiritual dimension, referring to the community's experience of cultivating a relationship with transcendent powers. Fifth, there is the ethical-ecological dimension, namely the moral and social consequences of reverence for Barong and the environment.

The sacredness of Barong cannot be reduced merely to mystical belief or artistic beauty. Rather, it constitutes an integrative process that brings together art, religion, society, and nature. From the perspective of the philosophy of art, Barong demonstrates that a work of art can become a medium of religious experience when beauty, symbolism, ritual, and spiritual awareness are present as an integrated whole.

The central argument proposed in this article is that the sacredness of Barong is formed through the interrelationship between aesthetics, ritual, and spirituality. Aesthetics provides the form of experience, ritual provides the legitimacy of sacredness, while spirituality provides transcendent depth. The interrelationship among these three dimensions subsequently

produces social and ecological implications, including the strengthening of solidarity, adherence to religious values, and awareness of the need to maintain the balance of life. This synthesis may serve as a conceptual contribution of the article because it positions Barong not merely as a traditional art object or religious symbol, but as a philosophical medium that connects the experience of beauty with the experience of sacredness and ethical responsibility.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion presented above, Barong in Balinese Hindu culture cannot be understood merely as an art object or performing art, but also as part of the community's religious system and cosmological worldview. As a work of art, Barong embodies visual beauty, movement, music, expression, and artistic symbolism. However, within a sacred context, these elements acquire deeper meanings because they are associated with mythology, beliefs, rituals, and the relationship between human beings and niskala forces—the unseen or spiritual realm. Barong as sacred art occupies a different position from Barong used solely for entertainment or tourism performances. This distinction is determined by its function, context of use, ritual processes, rules of treatment, and recognition by its supporting community. The sacredness of Barong is associated with the meanings of purity, protection, balance, and the order of life. From the perspective of Balinese Hindu cosmology, Barong becomes a symbol representing harmonious relationships among humans, God, fellow human beings, and nature, as reflected in the principle of Tri Hita Karana.

The sacred status of Barong is not automatically inherent in its material form; rather, it is established through a process of sacralization involving mythology, histories of origin, beliefs, purification, ritual consecration, and continuous maintenance by the community. The involvement of pemangku (temple priests), artists, dancers, musicians, penyungsung (ritual custodians or worshippers responsible for the sacred object), and members of the customary community makes Barong part of the collective memory and religious identity of the community. The sacredness of Barong is the result of a reciprocal relationship between the art object, ritual practices, and communal consciousness. Barong demonstrates that art in Balinese Hindu culture does not function merely to present beauty, but also serves as a medium for religious experience, the transmission of philosophical values, the preservation of cosmic balance, and the strengthening of social solidarity. Barong constitutes a unity of aesthetics, mythology, ritual, spirituality, and communal life. Therefore, understanding Barong as sacred art must be undertaken contextually by taking into account the local traditions of each desa adat (customary village), so that its meaning and status are not reduced to merely a cultural spectacle or decorative symbol.

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