JURNAL KAJIAN BALI
Journal of Bali Studies
p-ISSN 2088-4443 # e-ISSN 2580-0698 Volume 15, Number 01, April 2025

Tantric Elements in Balinese Hindu Rituals

Ida Bagus Putu Suamba*
Politeknik Negeri Bali, Indonesia
DOI: https://doi.org/10.24843/JKB.2025.v15.i01.p16

Abstract: Ritual forms an integral part of Balinese life; however, most Balinese do not realize that the ritual they practice is a blend of Vedic and Tantric elements expressed in local culture. This research aims to highlight the Tantric aspects of Balinese religion, which are usually mislabeled as mere Vedic rituals. A qualitative methodology was employed to analyze textual traditions and ritual practices. Data was collected, categorized, and analyzed to address the main elements of Tantrayāna worship and how they are present in Balinese ones. Ubiquitous ritual elements such as *maṇḍala, yantra, pañca makāra, akṣara* and scales based on the human body are from the Tantra tradition. This article explores these individually, along with the generic structure of Balinese Hindu rituals.

Keywords: Vedic; tantric; Hindu ritual; *akṣara*; *yantra*; Bali

1. Introduction

Balinese rituals always take into consideration factors such as time, place, substance (*dravya*), procedures, and the conduit of the priest who performs them. The presence of such elaborate elements, along with their preparation and systems, are actually based on philosophical principles known as *tattva*. This underlying *tattva* principle is unknown to the commoner. As, Karja and Feldman (2024) remarked, "the relevance of tantric concepts moving together smoothly with theo-aesthetic, aesthetic transcendence, and self-discovery; which resonate deeply in today's artworks…" This approach mirrors tantric art principles, aiming to make that is visually striking and spiritually deep guide by the divine inner creativity force, *taksu"* (2024, p. 343). Mystical and esoteric elements are deeply embedded in these rituals, which unite people in a religious spirit due to their necessity in Balinese public life. Although the term *'tantra'* is unfamiliar to most Balinese, Tantric elements are present in their rituals, making it difficult to categorize them as purely Tantric or Vedic.

* Corresponding author's email: bagusputusuamba@pnb.ac.id
Submitted: 14 January 2025; Accepted: 5 April 2025; Published: April 2025

Instead, they represent an amalgamation of Indian traditions that have arrived in Indonesia. As a result, Bali's ritual tradition is heterogeneous, inclusive, and unique, guided profoundly by Śaivism. Sartini (2017, p. 118) states that all of these rituals carry symbolic meanings and embody local wisdom in the form of cultural values, which are adhered to and followed as guiding principles.

The influence of Tantrayāna in Indonesia became widespread due to its inclusive and adaptable nature. It incorporates existing indigenous traditions while also transcending them, elevating them to a finer or higher level of consciousness. The concepts of orthodoxy and heterodoxy blend over time, influencing various traditional practices that continue to shape religious and cultural life today. As a result, understanding Tantra—or any similar term used to describe this phenomenon—becomes challenging when removed from the cultural and philosophical contexts in which it has developed.

Tantra, in various forms, reached this archipelago through the waves of Indian influence beginning in the first millennium. Its imprint appears across diverse traditions, pervading both Vedic and non-Vedic streams, including Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism, contributing to the formation of a new tradition expressed through local culture. Studies specifically focusing on Tantric rituals remain limited, if not scarce. However, interest in deeper research has gradually emerged over the past few decades.

The aim of this article is to explore elements of Tantrayāna in the five kinds of ritual (*pañca mahā yajñā*) that pervade the public sphere of Balinese religion, and to look at subtle ideas or principles of Tantra in them. This analysis will not focus on one ritual, but rather generic elements of Tantrayāna in them.

2. Literature Review

Previous research in Balinese rituals did rightfully identify its Tantric foundations, however it lacked a discussion on the Tantric tradition involved. Even though Tantrayāna as a separate school is proven in archeological and epigraphic findings, most researchers merge these Tantric ideas into the larger Vedic, Puranic or Śaivite juggernauts. Suamba (2019) has traced these findings to provide a better timeline of Tantra in the country. This might be caused by the fact that the practitioners themselves are not aware that the rituals they perform have, to some extent, been influenced or shaped by Tantric thought. Reicle (ed.) (2010), for example, touched on some elements of the rituals with their display of colorful pictures. This phenomenon has been acknowledged by researchers as early as the beginning of the 19th century, and scholarly interest in this field has gradually increased—an observation also noted by Hatley (p. 2).

The textual tradition appears uninterested in explicitly using Tantric terminology, despite being deeply infused with Tantric ideas. However, references to "*tantras*" and related terms do appear, including a prose (*kakavin*) manuscript titled *Smara Tantra* and a *tutur* text called *Smara Réka*. In this context, the essence of these traditions holds greater significance than their outward expressions. Engaging with their deeper meaning requires effort to interpret the symbolism embedded in words and ritual offerings (*bantên*). One must avoid becoming trapped in formal terminology while overlooking the subtle Tantric ideas that permeate the tradition.

Hooykaas (1966) and recently Stephen (2005, pp. 116-117) studied Tantric elements in the practices of Śaiva priest worship in Bali known as *sūrya-sévana*. Some Indonesian scholars have also attempted to identify such elements. Surasmi wrote *Jejak Tatrayāna di Bali* (Imprints of Tatrayāna in Bali) (2007). Budi Utama with *Lokalisasi Tantra di Bali* (Localized Tantric Practices of Bali) (2001), elucidated the multifaceted nature of *tantra*, transcending mere associations to sexual practices. Ngurah Nala wrote *Aksara Bali dalam Usada* (Balinese Script in Traditional Healing) (2006) which explores the use of *akṣara* in Balinese healing practices. Ruta and Karja wrote *Balinese Hindu Philosophy in Mandala Painting* (2023) which discusses the artwork of I Dewa Nyoman Batuan who incorporate the dualistic philosophy of opposites (*rwabhinéda*), with a strong Tantric nuance. Young scholars have explored forgotten treasures of Tantra, like Putu Yudiantara who published his book entitled *Ilmu Tantra Bali* (2019) and Ketut Sandika with *Tantra: Ilmu Kuno Nusantara* (2019).

The existence and role of *akṣara,* sacred letters and sounds are acknowledged. It is likely every ritual involves *akṣara*, especially the *bījākṣara* and *praṇava mantra*s, usually inscribed on wood, clay, structures, the ground, and even on the human body. Suamba (2019) noticed some scholars who dedicated to the study *akṣara* in Balinese ritual traditions: Suamba (2004), Sweta (2012), Agastia (1996, 1997, 1998, 2003, 2004, 2012, 2014), and Fox and Hornbacher (2016) who studied scripts in relation to the materials used in practice.

Reichle's (2010) edited volume, *Bali: Arts, Ritual, Performance,* explores Balinese ritual in depth. The contributors observe and discuss Tantric elements within offerings (*bantên*), such as *yantra*. The book also examines comparative aspects of Tantric traditions across India, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

These writings have shed light on how Tantra has not only arrived and been practiced in this archipelago but has also influenced Balinese rituals in various forms. A more detailed study is necessary to understand how Tantra extends beyond textual traditions to shape ritual practices.

3. Methods and Theory

3.1 Method

This philosophical study employs a qualitative approach to examine Tantric elements in Balinese Hindu rituals, focusing on the philosophy of religion as expressed through ritual practices. It analyzes relevant *tutur* (ritual texts) and *kalpa śāstra* texts alongside direct field observations to gather sufficient data for analysis.

Field research included the observation of major public rituals, such as the *Karya Agung Nangun Ayu*, performed on August 30, 2011, at Pura Dalem Agung Tampuagan, Tembuku, Bangli; the *Karya Agung Mêmungkah Ngêntêg Linggih* and *Pêdudusan Agung* at Pura Puseh Katyagan, Kamasan, Klungkung, on March 20, 2024; and the *Tavur Pañca Bali Krama* as part of the *Karya Mapêdudusan Agung*, held on February 7, 2025, at Pura Gunung Lebah Campuhan, Ubud, Bali. The researcher closely observed these rituals in detail, gaining direct experiential insight into elements that may be Tantric in nature.

Data collection involved interviews with key ritual participants, including *wiku yajamana, viku tapini*, and *sarati/tukang bantên*, who are responsible for preparing sacred offerings. Additional interviews were conducted with priests, *pêmangku*, scholars, and ritual practitioners involved in organizing the *yajñā*, regardless of its scale.

Secondary data were drawn from photographs and visual documentation of rituals, palm-leaf manuscripts (*lontar*), books, and journal articles. These materials were systematically gathered, compiled, categorized, and interpreted to address the core research questions. Focus group discussions were also conducted to deepen the understanding of the subject matter.

3.2 Theory

Tantric traditions sometimes oppose the orthodoxy of Vedic traditions. The *Karma Kanda*, the ritualistic path as ordained in the *śrauta* literature of the Vedic *saṁhitās*, are not concerned with obtaining magical prowess. The Tantra traditions, however, also involves rituals, but also involve *déva*, substance, *akṣara*, *mantra*, *pañca makāras* [which consists of intoxicated drink (*mada*), meat (*māṁsa*), fish (*matsya*), cereals (*mudrā*), and sexual intercourse (*maithuna*)], *maṇḍala*, *yantra*, *nyasa*, and *yoga* (Woodroffe, 2008). The last is absent from the formulation of the three frames (*tri kêrangka*) of Balinese religion—*tattva* (philosophy/theology), *śīla* (ethics), and *upacāra* (rituals)—despite *yoga* being deeply embedded within all three. The present researcher refers to this integration as *tri yoga* (Suamba, 2016, p. 75), while Keniten, drawing from the *Atharva Veda* (XII, 1.1), describes them as *tri pṛthivīm dhārayanti* (2021, pp. 16-18).

Owing to these facts, rituals in Balinese tradition cannot be classified as purely Vedic or Tantric, rather the combination of the two expressed in the Balinese culture. This, is what Hatley (2020) remarks as, "paradoxically, tantric traditions are not always recognized as such, for their success was such that the boundaries between orthodoxy/orthopraxy and Tantra are blurred over time, especially in ritual" (p.2); a meeting of *nigama* and *āgama* traditions when we look at various thoughts that compose this tradition. This classification has been discussed by Gupta (1979, p. 124); he classified it into three categories, viz. *vaidiki, tantriki*, and *miśra*, the last being a synthesized form. This phenomenon likely occurs in the Balinese ritual tradition, where the contribution of local culture plays a significant role.

It is evident that, for a Balinese, ritual is an integral part of Balinese Hinduism. This implies that it is not solely a path of knowledge (*jñāna kanda*), ritual (*karma kanda*), or meditation/ contemplation (*upāsana kanda*) as described in the Vedas, but rather a meeting point that has been encapsulated within indigenous culture. As described by Prajnanananda (2006, p. 4), "path of action is extremely elaborate and systematic. It involves many ritualistic practices that help a seeker to achieve inner purification. The path of knowledge is the last part of Vedas that highlights the philosophical and intellectual understanding of life itself and the goals are to be achieved through self-inquiry and meditation". Despite its vividness and grandeur, Balinese people do not commonly realize that the rituals they practice contain elements of Tantra. They often perceive these rituals as purely Vedic, Śaiva, or Śaiva-Buddhist. However, within these practices, some local terms, such as *pangiva*, *panêngên*, and *kavisésan*, are associated with Tantra, particularly with left-hand practices.

Commenting on the liberal nature of Tantrayāna, Jones and Ryan (2007, p. 436) state, "to be sure, many 'tantric' elements infuse ordinary ritualistic, temple-oriented Hinduism. But the key to identifying tantrism are the distinctive rituals and practices that form a complex, usually taught to small groups of adepts by a special guru for a personal rite." Despite practicing ritual, Balinese people do not feel estranged or isolated from the community for engaging in esoteric practices, especially those related to *ke-adhyatmikan* or *kawisésan*, which are not public in nature. Public rituals, such as the five kinds of ritual (*pañca mahā yajñā*) described in textual traditions (e.g., the manuscripts *Déva Tattva, Tapéni Yajñā, Bhama Kṛtih, Sundarigama,* and *Yama Purwa Tattva*), are not associated with the negative stigma of Tantra, as may be seen in India or elsewhere. These rituals represent the outer form of *upakāra*, while the core lies in its deeper structure of *tattva*, the metaphysics or theology, the knowledge of realities. In other words, rituals are performed with a metaphysical basis; they are an extension of metaphysical principles across three dimensions. As quoted by Davis (2000, p.

35), "Knowledge devoid of activity is not the preeminent means of attainment, nor is activity devoid of understanding the preeminent means. Therefore, successful attainment of liberation arises only through both of them together, just as a bird does not fly without two wings (*SPbh*, pp. 311-14)." In Balinese tradition, the concept of *rvabhinéda,* two different opposite principles, positions the self as the balancing force, striving toward liberation (*mokṣa*) as the *summum bonum* of life. Texts on *dharma kapatian* or *kalêpasan* illuminate the release of the self from bondage.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Balinese Ritual

The structure of the Balinese Hindu religion is known as *tri kérangka āgama* or *tri yoga* (Suamba, 2016, p. 17), the unity of knowledge, ethics and ritual, the latter being the outer layer of the tradition. For most, *yoga* is understood in the form of *saḍangga yoga*, the six-limbed practice of inward spiritually for self-transformation through performing *yama* and *niyama*, withdrawing the senses from their objects, meditation, and contemplation to reach the bliss and union with the Ultimate Self. The researcher, however, has chosen to call it *yoga* since the purpose of each section is to unite self with the Supreme Self. Thus, for commoners, ritual can be their path of self-realization. According to Gupta (1979, p.120), "Tantric *sādhana* (religious practices) consists of two parts: ritual worship (*pūjā*) and meditation (*yoga*). Both are of equal importance to every Tantrika". In Bali, however, *yoga* is not emphasized.

The innermost *tattva* portion of the *tri kérangka āgama* is the reasoning behind the *śāsana*/*śīla* and *upacāra.* Hence, the three are interdependent and related. The three pillars form a whole unit as a religion for which the Indonesian word "*agama*" is used, a term used in the country in place of *dharma*. This is similar to the Sanskrit term "*āgama*", much like the *āgama* literature of the South Indian Śaiva Siddhānta tradition, containing the *kriyā pāda* (ritual portion). In Bali, every ritual action can be traced back to the *tattva* found in the *tutur* literature. The ritual corpus, known as *kalpa śāstra,* contain the *plutuk* or *indik* manual texts used to prepare *bantên* (offerings) and the like. This can be equated with *paddhati* (ritual manual) within the *āgama śāstra* of South Indian Śaiva Siddhānta. Likewise, there is the *variga* for astronomy and *hasta kosala kosali* and *hasta bhūmi* for architecture.

Ritual and ethics may undergo changes or adaptations in practice. This is due to the principle of *deśa* (locality), *kāla* (time), and *patra* (situation/ condition) which regulate the application of Balinese Hinduism. The *tattva* essence, however, is unchangeable (Figure 1).

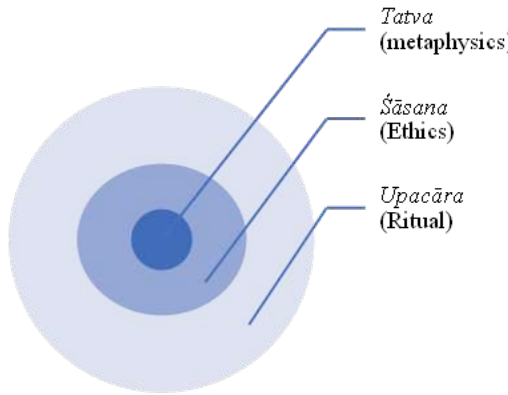

Figure 1. The structure of Balinese religion (see, Suamba, 2016, p. 17).

The rituals of this tradition are generally classified into five kinds: *deva-, pitr, manusa-, ṛṣi-,* and *bhūta -yajñā*. Gods, ancestors, humans, sages, and nature respectively. These are rooted in Vedas. The Vedic elements can be found in *pūjā pangastava, mantras* chanted by the priest to worship the Vedic gods, like Agni, Vāruṇa, Indra, Saraswatī, etc. The *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* is also found in Bali. Despite the large number of ritual texts known as *kalpa śāstra* (such as *Déva Tattva, Yajñā Prakṛti, Bhama Kṛtih, Yama Tattva, Sundarigama,* etc.), the Vedic *griha sūtra* or *śrauta sūtra* are not to be found.

Rituals can be categorized into three types based on the scale of offerings: *kanistha* (small), *madhya* (medium), and *uttama* (large). A devotee may choose among these based on their means, time, sincerity, and the availability of materials. However, the influence of local culture makes these rituals both unique and inclusive, while the presence of Vedic traditions remains recognizable. In the historical Brahmanic religion, as upheld by *mīmāṁsā darśana*, the primary goal of performing *yajñā* is to attain heaven (*svarga*). In the Balinese tradition, however, rituals serve not only as a means to *svarga* but also as a path toward liberation (*mokṣa*), reflecting an integrated approach that harmonizes knowledge, action, and *yoga*.

In preparing and arranging the *bantên* (Photo 1), a female ritual specialist called *wiku tapini* assisted by her *sarati*, *bantên* makers, prepare the offerings as laid in the *plutuk* or *indik* texts. These texts are the *Raré Angon, Déva Tattva, Déva Śāsana* (or *Krama Pūra*), *Tapéni Yajñā*, etc. She always consults with the *yajamana* priest, the leader of the ritual, in preparing the *bantên*. This is to match the *bantên* with the *mantra* chanted by the priest.

Photo 1. *Bantên deva-devī* reprensents *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* (Source: IBP. Suamba, 2024).

4.2 Maṇḍala

When performing any ritual, the first step is to establish a suitable space, known as a *maṇḍala*. While most Balinese may not be familiar with this term, they commonly use words such as *karang*, *palêmahan*, and *gênah*, all of which refer to a designated land area with clear boundaries (*vatês*). In traditional Balinese villages, the *vatês palêmahan déśa* (village boundary) can be understood as a larger expression of the *maṇḍala* concept. Within this space, both daily life and ritual activities take place.

A *maṇḍala* serves as the sacred ground for ritual (*pūjā*) and often takes a concentric form, as seen in the *tavur kasanga* ritual, a *bhūta yajñā* ceremony. Before a ritual begins, a priest performs *nyukat karang* or *nyukat gênah*, which essentially marks and sanctifies the *maṇḍala*. The central point of the *maṇḍala* is first determined, and from there, directions are extended along the east-west and north-south axes (*dik*), as well as the southeast-northwest and southwest-northeast axes (*vidik*). This process is described in the *Hasta Bhūmi* manuscript.

A ritual cannot take place without a clearly defined *maṇḍala*, which is ultimately a sacred space (*deśa*). The boundaries of the *maṇḍala* are physically marked, often with lines drawn using white lime powder, as seen in *tavur* rituals. Within this enclosed space, offerings (*bantên*), which function as *yantras*, are arranged according to ritual manuals. Since *bantên* are considered manifestations of the divine, as mentioned in the *Deva Tattva* text, the *maṇḍala* itself must be free from spiritual impurity (*lêtêh*).

In Balinese texts, a *padma maṇḍala* is based on the metaphysical union of two fundamental cosmic forces: *puruṣa* (consciousness) and *prakṛti* (material reality). Their interaction is believed to be the foundation of all creations. According to the *Wṛhaspati Tattva*, when Parama Śiwa, in the state of Sadā Śiva, begins His divine activity, He does so through His inherent power, known as *cadu śakti*. Lord Sadā Śiva expresses His power in the form of *mantra*, and when He manifests through these sacred sounds, His dwelling is called *padma* (lotus). A *maṇḍala* is a spatial representation of this *padma*, embodying divine energy. When a deity is placed at the center of a *maṇḍala*, its spiritual radiance extends outward in all directions, symbolizing the spread of divine light and presence across the sacred space.

A *maṇḍala* is often associated with *yantra.* Rao states:

> "… The *maṇḍala* is the natural extension of the central light point (*bindu*). … The constituent areas of the *maṇḍala* are grouped around the central point and have thus a certain symmetry of arrangement, suggesting harmony, and balance (Rao, 1988, p.16).

In Balinese ritual practice, the center of a *maṇḍala* is crucial because it serves as the starting point for arranging the *bantên* according to the directions of *dik* (cardinal directions) and *vidik* (intercardinal directions). In the concept of nine protective deities (*dévata nava sangha*), the center of the *maṇḍala* represents the cosmic realm, presided over by Lord Śiva as the supreme deity. A clear example of this *maṇḍala* structure can be seen in the Besakih temple complex on the slopes of Mount Agung.

The use of *maṇḍala*, whether in small or large spaces, is meant to establish and maintain spiritual purity (*suddha*), which is essential not only for rituals

but also for daily life. One of the key rituals performed within a *maṇḍala* is *macaru* or *tavur*, a type of *bhūta yajñā*. In this ritual, negative forces or spirits (*bhūtas*) from the nine directions are summoned and given offerings (*caru*), which typically consist of animal flesh, blood, rice, specific ritual ingredients, intoxicating drinks, water, flowers, and leaves (Photo 2). These offerings are believed to satisfy the *bhūtas*, transforming their nature from chaotic and harmful to peaceful and harmonious, ensuring they do not disturb human life or the surrounding environment.

Photo 2. *Bantên tavur* used in the Karya Mêpêdudusan Agung, Mêpêsêlang, Tawur Pañca Bali Krama, lan Mêpêdanan of Pura Gunung Lêbah, Ubud, Bali held 7th February 2025 (Source: IBP. Suamba, 2025).

4.3 Yantra

The term *"yantra"* is typically Tantric. It has many meanings and its physical manifestation is expressed variously in its culture where Tantrism grows. Battacharyya (1990, p. 172) states:

> "…*yantra* as a symbol of deity. It is generally in the form of a diagram or geometrical pattern serving as a chart for revealing the characteristics of the deity. *Yantra* is variously interpreted as instrument, the body and abode of a deity, amulet, mental faculties, pure consciousness, doctrinal intricacies, microcosm of human body and so on. *Yantra* are drawn or engraved on cloths, paper, leaves, stones and metals".

Another definition of Tantra is provided by Kiss, who states that "*Yantras* may have various applications such as being 'implements during a worship ritual' or 'during a practitioner's regular Tantric worship of a deity,' and can be used for desire-oriented rites (*kāmya*), often worn as amulets for protection" (Bühnemann 2003, p. 32 in Kiss, 2014, p. 205). A closer examination of the term "*yantra*" reveals multiple interpretations depending on the tradition prevalent in different regions, however they generally refer to a geometric pattern.

Yantras are present in Balinese Hinduism through the *bantên*, also known as "*vevantênan*," which refers to the offerings used in various ritual practices. For example, in the preparation of the *bantên dakṣiṇā* or *dakṣiṇā pêjati*, different materials and shapes are employed, including square, triangle, and circle, often in combination, reflecting the yantric influence on the ritual structures and forms. The *bantên* itself takes the shape of a geometric *yantra*. Circles (*tamas*), squares (*cê(m)pér*), and triangles (*ituk-ituk*) are combined together in aesthetically pleasing ways. Similarly, religious structures are also fashioned with the *yantra* pattern in mind. We have the *padmāsana* shrine, a combination of a triangle (*anantāsana*) as the base, a square (*singhasana*) in the middle part, and a circle (*padmāsana*) crowning the upper section.

Bantên as a *yantra* symbolizes both the deity and the world (*bhuwana*), as described in the *Déwa Tattva* and *Yajñā Prakṛti* manuscripts, *sahananing bêbantên pinaka raganta, tuwi pinaka warna rupaning ida bhaṭara, pinaka anda bhuwana* (every *bantên* is taken as the body of the deity, as the complexion and performance of the deity, and also represents the macrocosm). For example, the *bantên deva-devī* (Photo 1), usually placed in a temporary bamboo shrine (*sanggar sūrya/ sanggar tavang*) during the *déva-yajñā* ritual, manifests gods and goddesses. Similarly, the *bantên sarad* symbolizes the universe (*bhuwana*).

These *bantên* are structured into three parts, known as *tri angga ning yajñā*: *uttama angga* represents the head (*huluning yajñā*), such as the *bantên* placed in the *sanggar tawang* shrine; *madhya angga* represents the body (as *angganing yajñā*),

like the *bantên* placed in front (*ayun*); and *kanistha angga* represents the legs (as s*ukuning yajñā*), as seen in the *tavur* or *caru*. A *bantên* specialist is responsible for selecting the substances, composing the *bantên*, and arranging it in the proper place.

In contrast to the Indian tradition, *yantra* in Balinese interpretation is understood as a three-dimensional *bantên*, made from a variety of materials (*dravya*), which may also include sacred letters (*akṣara*) inscribed at specific points during a ritual. These rituals follow a structure based on the formation of the three parts of the human body (*tri angga*), the head (*hulu*), body (*madhya*), and feet (*sor*). The materials used in these rituals are categorized according to the five elemental principles, the *pañca mahā bhūt*a; (1) *Pṛthivī* (earth or solidity): Cakes, flowers, cereals, leaves, wood, bamboo, incense sticks, cloth, metal, stone, coins, etc.; (2) *Apaḥ* (liquid): Plain water (*tīrtha*), liquor (*arah, tuak, brêm*, fermented rice), and other liquids; (3) *Téja* (heat): Fire-related materials; (5) *Vāyu* (wind), and (5) *Akaśa* (space/void). Some parts of the *bantên* are accompanied with a *rêrajahan*, a drawing of a particular figure/image along with its respective *akṣara* and *modré* patterns. *Ulap-ulap*, for example, is considered a *rêrajahan* and used in the purification ritual of a new building.

Bantên, like *yantras*, are believed to create spiritual powers or *siddhi*. According to Wenta (2023, p. 8), "a *siddha*, literally 'an accomplished one,' is first and foremost someone who possesses supernatural powers (*siddhis*) that allow him to gain control over the laws of nature." Various forms of *bantên*, when made and offered properly following the correct procedures, can generate *siddhi*, or spiritual power. For example, *bantên caru* or *tavur* in *bhūta yajñā*, when correctly prepared and offered, can produce positive power to neutralize negative influences caused by imbalances in both the microcosm and macrocosm. Therefore, those who prepare the *bantên* should keep his/her mind, word, and action pure as any spiritual impurity (*lêtêh*) attached to the *bantên*, makes it unfit for offering.

This idea is in line with Rao (1988, p. 11), who states, "The protective power that is supposed to be possessed by a *yantra* lies in the shape of the design; The shape, consisting of one or more geometric forms interwoven to constitute a whole pattern, is believed to represent the spirit or spirits that one seeks to communicate with, in order to derive strength and succor." In Balinese tradition, the power of any *bantên* can only be activated when the respective priest invokes the appropriate *mantra*.

Rao (1988, p. 11) further states:

> "the forms involving points, lines, triangles and squares represent energies in various modes. The point (*bindu*) is the focal aspects of energy.…When the spirit is also symbolized by a seed-syllable

(*bījākṣara*), this imperishable seed-syllable is inscribed on the point. The point is surrounded by successive enclosure, viz. a triangle, two triangles, intersecting, a circle, and so on. These forms indicate outward manifestation of the spirit so as to exert its influence in the desired manner... These lines of triangle are described as the aspects or attendants of the Spirit".

4.4 Pañca Makāra

One of the distinguished features of the left-hand Tantra (*vāmācāra*) is performing five actions (*pañca makāra*) as the spiritual discipline (*sādhana*). The existence and use of *pañca ma*'s in *bantên* can be explained as follows:

1. *Madya/mada* (intoxicants): In the *bhūta yajñā* ritual, intoxicating drinks like *arak*, *tuak*, and *brêm* are used to pacify *bhūta kālas* (negative spirits) that cause imbalance in the macrocosm and microcosm or disrupt human life. These drinks, along with plain water, are referred to as *tabuh/tatabuhan* and are sprinkled over the *sêgêh/caru/tavur*. Additionally, fermented rice (*tapé*) or cassava is sometimes used as a medium in *bantêns*, such as *bantên catur*, placed in the *sanggar tavang* or *sanggar agung* shrines during the *déva yajñā* ritual.

2. *Māṁsa* (flesh): In ritual practice, animals are used based on their habitat, which can be categorized into three groups. The first group includes animals that live in water, such as those in both sea and freshwater environments. The second group consists of animals that inhabit land, including both domestic pets and wild creatures found in plains and mountains. The third group is made up of winged animals capable of flight, while those with wings but unable to fly are classified as land animals. Various manuscripts, such as *Dangdang Bungalan, Dharma Kauripan, Bhama Kṛtih, Pêrémbon Bêbantên, Eka Daśa Rudra, Sodosiwikarana, Têgêsing Sarwa Bantên*, and *Tutur Tattwa Sang Hyang Ganitri,* provide guidance on the use of these animals in rituals.

3. *Matsya* (fish): The use of dry fish (*gêrang*) and various types of fish is common in rituals. In making the *bantên catur* for *deva yajñā,* nine types of fish are used: 1. *tênggiri*, 2. *kakap*, 3. *sudamala*, 4. *gulama*, 5. *bandêng* (milkfish), 6. *pakung* (small shrimp), 7. *baning*, and 8. *kuiya*.

4. *Mudrā* (seeds/grains, hand gesture): The use of seeds in rituals varies according to the level or type of *yajñā*. For a simple offering called *soda*, the *mudrā* elements include rice, beans, *komak*, coconut, *pangi*, *tingkih* (candlenut), and others. In preparing *dakṣiṇā pêjati*, symbolizing the Lord and the world, a variety of grains are used, such as rice, *tingkih*, *pangi*, coconut, egg, and a coin. Similarly, for the *upakāra* known as *bantên catur,* various seeds are used, including *jolêh*, *kêkara, komak* (in different colors), *cêlagi, waluh, inja lilit, maja kané, maja kêling*, *padma* fruit, *saga, phala,* and others. The *wiku tapini* understands

these objects and how to arrange them (*nanding*) in preparing a *bantên*. In the *Raré Angon* manuscript, nine types of young coconut fruit (*klungah*) are mentioned, which are used in the *pêdudusan* ritual of *déva yajñā* (Photo 3).

5. *Maithuna* (sexual intercourse): In a *bantên*, *porosan silih-asih* is used as a symbol of *maithuna*, composed of betel leaves, areca nuts, lime powder (*pamor*), and other elements. These symbols represent the union of the male (*puruṣa*) and female (*pradhāna*). Although not literal, this is a symbolic representation, as seen in *cakra pūjā,* and in the worship of Śiva and Śakti. It should be noted that the presence of the symbols is also seen in the indigenous cultures of Indonesia.

Photo 3. *Klungah nyuh gading* (yellow young coconut fruit) used in *pitṛ yajñā* (Source: IBP Suamba, 2024).

4.5 Akṣara

The *Tutur Aji Sarasvatī* manuscript discusses the origin of the sacred *akṣara* letters and its development into various letters both in the microcosm and macrocosm. The use of *akṣara* is significant in rituals as well as in the human body from a mystical perspective. Some parts of a *bantên* / *yantra* are inscribed with these letters at specific points. In the ritual of *pitṛ yajñā,* the use of *akṣara* can be seen in the *pangavak/avak-avakan*, a thin slate of wood drawn with a human body representing the dead, where sacred letters are inscribed in respective parts of the body. The letters known as *daśākṣara*, the ten sacred letters, are commonly used to represent different manifestations of Lord Śiva. The concept of *dévata nava sangha* is symbolized with a letter at the respective position, for example, *sa* for the east, *ba* for the south, *a* for the north, *ī* for the central, etc. The *daśākṣara* consists of the *pañca akṣara* and the *pañca brahma*. The *pañca akṣara* of *na-ma-śi-va-ya* is common accross *Śaiva* sects. The forms of *akṣara*, especially the *bījākṣara*, are used, sometimes with an unpronounced symbolized letter (*modré*). For proper pronunciation, there is a manual called *krakah modré*. The form of *modré* is often like calligraphy. Not only presented visually, *akṣara* is also chanted during the priest's *yoga*.

Stephen (2014, pp. 208-209) worked on the topic of *akṣara*, especially *daśākṣara* in their relation to *yoga* as perceived in Bali. Her study was based on the textual traditions in Bali. The author concludes that:

> "The *daśākṣara* are a phenomenon that not merely challenges but refutes such assumptions, being so deeply rooted in Balinese ritual life in practice, and in Balinese textual traditions, that is impossible for them to be recent importations. Ironically, Western scholars, and following them many Balinese intellectuals, have yet to realize that the *daśākṣara* practices are indeed *yoga* that the old Balinese *tutur* texts are full of accounts of *saḍanga yoga*".

What is interesting to note is that the practice of *yoga* in Balinese tradition involves the use of *akṣara*, in addition to various forms of ritual. This unique approach combines ritual, *yoga*, knowledge, and *akṣara*, setting it apart from other practices. However, the author views this through the lens of Tantra. Hornbacher (2016, p. 90) studied the role of *akṣara* and its effectiveness when inscribed on different media within Balinese rituals (Photo 4). She suggested that:

> "Despite this marginalization, *akṣara* are widely regarded as indispensable ritual elements, a topic on which reform Hinduism has had little to say. Thus, in speculative and ritual use, *akṣara* cannot be replaced by any other script system, because their visual shape is

more important than their phonetic value. Put another way, *akṣara* might be replaced by Roman letters if their exclusive purpose were the representation of speech".

The shapes of sound manifestation are categorized into three types: *akṣara vréhastra, svalalita,* and *modré*. *Modré*, with its calligraphy-like form, cannot be replaced by Roman scripts. Its design evokes purity, sacredness, and mystic qualities. The use of *modré* in rituals is integral; an *akṣara* in the form of *modré* cannot generate power without undergoing a purification process, which involves its use in *bantên* and the chanting of *mantra*.

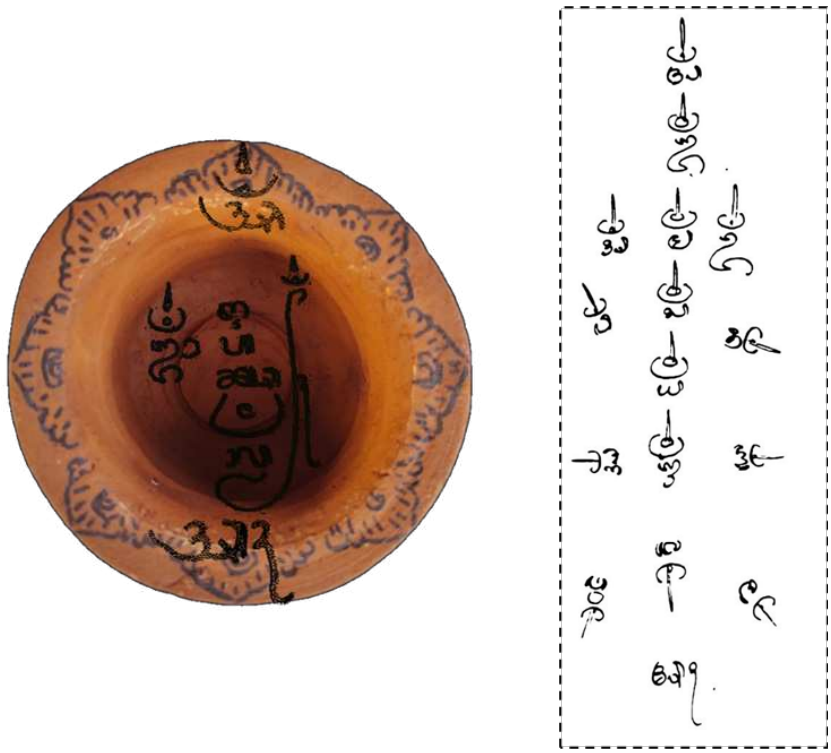

Photo 4. *Akṣara ang* (top) and *akṣara aḥ* (below) representing *akṣara rva bhinéda* scribed in *payuk pengêntas* and in *racadana tīrtha pangêntas* in cremation (*ngabén*) (Source: *Lontar* collection of Grya Akah Klungkung).

4.6 The Importance of Body

Self-transformation in the journey of the soul can only occur in the human body, which must be kept healthy and fit for this purpose. This process is not simple, as it involves a battle between righteousness (*dharma*) and unrighteousness (*adharma*). Stephenson (2023, p. 2) notes that in Kashmir Shaivism, the body and senses play crucial roles. Unlike some Yogic traditions that disparage and discipline the body, Kashmir Shaivism emphasizes cultivating and utilizing the

body and senses in advanced meditation and ritual. One should strive for the victory of *dharma*, as it leads to safety and eternal happiness. Tantra *sādhana* encourages seekers to look inward to discover the essence of life. Thus, the human body and its organs must be understood and meditated upon to embody divinity. In this practice, *akṣara* is vital for the ascension of life.

A specific inner organ, along with the *bījākṣara* of a deity, becomes the abode of the divine. The process of expanding *akṣara* from *ékākṣara* (*praṇava omkāra*) to higher levels, including *ṣaḍ daśākṣara*, and then contracting it back to *ékākṣara*, happens within the human body. According to the *Tutur Kunti Sraya Putus* manuscript, various deities with their associated *akṣara* reside in specific organs, such as Īśvara (*Sang*) in the heart, Brahma (*Bang*) in the liver, Mahādéva (*Tang*) in the spleen, and so on. These *akṣaras* also have external representations at various temples, such as Īśvara at Lêmpuyang temple in the east, and Brahma at Andakasa temple in the south, among others.

The human body is viewed as a complex laboratory for experimenting or researching to uncover the truth of reality. This perspective holds that the entire world, both the macrocosm and microcosm, is nothing but sacred letters (*akṣara*), a manifestation of divine sound (*nāda/nāda brahman*). These concepts are reflected in Balinese rituals, each with its own modes of manifestation.

5. Conclusion

The Balinese Hindu religion is based on three interconnected principles: *tri kérangka āgama* or *tri yoga*, which include metaphysics (*tattva*), ethics (*śīla*), and ritual (*upacāra*). These principles aim to unite (*yoga*) the self with the Supreme Self. The rituals of Balinese Hinduism combine Vedic and non-Vedic elements, particularly Tantric traditions. They include aspects like *maṇḍala, yantra* (in *bantên*), *pañca makāras, akṣara, mantra,* and the human body, all of which form a spiritual discipline (*sādhanā*) aimed at acquiring *siddhi*. Rituals in Balinese Hinduism can vary in scale—small (*kanistha*), medium (*madhya*), or large (*uttama*)—depending on the ability and sincerity of the practitioners. They incorporate elements of *pañca mahā bhūta,* which are reflected in local culture, giving these rituals a distinctive and strong Tantric influence.

Knowledge and ritual in Balinese tradition are inseparable, akin to a bird needing both wings to fly. Rituals are extensions of knowledge (*jñāna*) found in *tutur/tattva* texts. While Tantrayāna, particularly its *maithuna* aspect, is not openly embraced, symbolic adaptations are used. Tantrism subtly influences rituals, despite some terminologies being unfamiliar to the general public.

Acknowledgements

This is revised version of the conference paper "Elements of Tantrism in the Balinese Rituals" presented in the Tantric Text Practices as Intersection: Between Magical Knowledge and Self-Liberation, 28th-29th October 2022 held in CATS Heidelberg University, Germany. I would like to extend my gratitude to Prof Annette Hornbacher for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to present my paper on the Conference of Tantrism held on 28th-29th October 2022 in the CATS of Heidelberg University, Germany. The same is also to priests, *viku tapini*, *sarati bantên*, *pêmangku*, and scholars who have helped me providing information during collecting the data. Without their helps this paper would not be in its present form.

Bibliography

Bhattacharyya, N.N. (1990). *A Glossary of Indian Religious Terms and Concepts*. Manohar Publications.

Bhuwana Kosa (transliteration). (1988). IHD Denpasar, Library Denpasar (unpublished).

Davis, R.H. (2000). *Worshiping Siva in Medieval India: Ritual in an Oscillating Universe*.Motilal Banarsidass.

Gupta, S, D. J. Hoens and Goudriaan, T. (1979). *Hindu Tantrism*. E.J. Brill.

Hatley, S. (2020). "Tantra (Overview)": *Encyclopedia of Indian Religions*. *Hinduism and Tribal Religions*. Springer, pp.1-21.

Hooykaas, C. (1966). *Surya Sevana: The Way to God of a Balinese Saiva Priest*. N.V. Noord-Hollandshe uitgevers Maatschappij.

Hornbacher, A. (2016). "The Body of Letters: Balinese *Aksara* as an Intersection between Script, Power, and Knowledge" in *The Materiality and Efficacy of Balinese Letters*, Fox, R. and Annete Hornbacher (eds.), Brill, pp.70-99.

Jones, C.A and J.D. Ryan. (2007), *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Infobase Publishing.

Karja, I W. and R. Fieldman (2024). "The Ancient Tantric in Balinese Contemporary Art" in *Jurnal Kajian Bali*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Oktober 2024, pp. 324-348. doi: https://doi.org/10.24843/JKB.2024.v14.i02.p02.

Keniten, I.P.G.W. (2021). *Siwa Siddhanta Bali: Sebuah Identitas Kehinduan Warisan Nusantara.* Paramita.

Kiss, Csaba (2014). "On *yantra*s in Early Śaiva Tantras" in *Cracow Indological Studies,* Vol. XVI (2014).

Nala, N. (2006). *Aksara Bali dalam Usada*. Paramita.

Picard, M. (2012). "What's in a Name? An Enquiry about the Interpretation of Agama Hindu as "Hinduism" in *Jurnal Kajian Bali*, Vol. 2. Number 2, 2012. pp-113-140. https://ojs.unud.ac.id/index.php/kajianbali/search/search

Pranjanananda, P. (2006) *Jnana Sankalini Tantra*. Motilal Banarsidass.

Rao, S.K. Ramachandra. (1988). *The Yantras*. Sri Satguru Publications.

Reicle, N. (2010). *Bali: Art, Ritual, and Performance*. Asian Art Museum.

Sandika, K. (2019). *Tantra* (*Ilmu Kuno Nusantara*). Javanica.

Sartini, N. W. (2017). "Makna Simbolik Bahasa Ritual Pertanian Masyarakat Bali" in *Jurnal Kajian Bali,* Vol.07 No. 07, 2017. doi: https://doi.org/10.24843/JKB.2017.v07.i02.p06

Stephen, M. (2014). "Dasaksara and Yoga in Bali" in *The Journal of Hindu Studies*, 7 July 2014. https://academic.cup.com//jhs/article-abstract/7/2/179/2188755.

Stephen, M. (2015). "Sūrya-Sevana: A Balinese Tantric Practice", *Archipel* Études interdisciplinaries sur le monde insulindien, 89 | 2015, pp. 95-124. https://doi.org/10.4000/archipel.492

Stephenson, J.B. (2023). "Ornament of Reality: Language Ideology in a Tantric ′Sakta Text" in *Religions* 14: 456. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040456

Suamba, I. B. P. (2009). *Siwa-Buddha di Indonesia*: *Ajaran dan Perkembangannya*, Program Magister Ilmu Agama dan Kebudayaan bekerja sama dengan Penerbit Widya Dharma.

Suamba, I. B. P. (2016). *Javanese Saivism A Philosophical Study of Tattva Texts*. B.R.Publishing House.

Suamba I. B. P. (2019) "Tantrayana di Bali: Aksara Mysticism dan Etika di dalam Teks Tutur" dalam *Tuhan dan Alam* (*Membaca Ulang Pantheisme-Tantrayana dalam Kakawin dan Manuskrip Kuno Nusantara*), Andrea Acri (eds.), BWCF Society.

Sura, I Gde (ed.). (2005). *Roga Sanghara Bhumi, Wasista Tattwa, Dewa Tattwa*. Dinas Kebudayaan Provinsi Bali.

Thakur, M. K. (2001). *The Tantras: An Introduction Outline*. Worldview Publications.

Utama, I. W. B. (2019). *Lokalisasi Tantra di Bali*. PT. Japa Widya Duta.

Wenta, A. (2023). "The Siddha with a Thousand Faces: Non-Tantric and Tantric Elements in the Construction of the Buddhist Siddha in*Jñanakara's Commentary to the Introduction to the [Path of] Mantra" in *Religions 2023, 14(6), 792; https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/6/792* https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060792.

Woodroffe, J. (2008). *Introduction to Tantra Sastra*. Reprint, Ganesh and Company.

Yudiantara, P. (2017). *Ilmu Tantra Bali*. Bali Wisdom.

Author Profile

Ida Bagus Putu Suamba is a professor in the field of philosophy/ethics in the Business Administration Department, Politeknik Negeri Bali. He earned his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Pune, India in 2012. In 1991, he joined the Politeknik Negeri Bali as a lecturer. From 2012 to 2023, he was a member of the "Text Material Culture" research team at The Collaborative Research Centre 933, University of Heidelberg, Germany. Email: bagusputusuamba@pnb.ac.id