

# Sacred and Profane Dialectics:

## *A Study of Kecak Ramayana Performing Arts at Uluwatu Temple, Bali Indonesia*

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### Abstract

This research focuses on the Ramayana Kecak tourist art in Pecatu Village, South Kuta District, Badung Regency, Bali. The goal is to study the sacred and profane practices in the Ramayana Kecak. In this case the practice of entertainment is accompanied by religious spiritual practices. The method used is a descriptive critical analysis using data from interviews with key informants, observations and a document review. A functional structural theory is used to study the ideas, statements, activities and strategic efforts of the Ramayana Kecak performers. The results are based on the prospective AGIL theory, which explains sacred and profane practices through: (1) Adaptation: Ramayana Kecak is adapted as a main source of livelihood; (2) Goal Attainment: the village community develops the Ramayana Kecak to improve its economy; (3) Integration: the community integrates artistic and spiritual activities; (4) Latency Pattern Maintenance: bonds of kinship, solidarity, and social tolerance are built between artists, the community, and the audience.

**Keywords:** *Kecak, Ramayana, Tourist Art, Tourist Performance, Local Spiritual, Indonesia*

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## Introduction

Tourist art is a transformation and reinterpretation which aims to condition traditional art so that it can continue to be appreciated by society on a broader scale (Charassri, 2023). Tourist art is an attraction that involves artists, travel agents, and the government. Together, these three elements unite to present an attraction which entertains tourists and allows them to enjoy a new experience in the place they are visiting and to feel entertained at a planned time (Setiawan, 2016).

Every tourist art destination must take into consideration the type of attraction it wishes to present, as well as its characteristics, and its uniqueness (Septiyanti, Arismayanti & Ariana, 2018). It may be in the form of a culinary attraction, a ritual attraction, or a traditional art performance. The tourist art destination of Uluwatu presents the Ramayana Kecak dance (Hidajat, Pujiyanto, Prastiawan, et al., 2021), which is a dance production with a religious traditional character presenting a unique communal performance of the Ramayana story.

The *kecak* tourist art was originally created by Wayan Limbak, Walter Spies, and Beryl de Zote in 1927 (Seriasih, 2019). This colossal *kecak* performance is based on a *tolak balak* ritual known as Sang Hyang (Suharti, 2013). Visually, the *kecak* is a unique exotic and artistic performance in which the dancers also function as the musicians. They dance while producing the *cak-cak-cak* sound with their voices (I Made Agus Bayu Antara, I Komang Sudirga et al., 2018).

The performance involves between 60 and 80 male *kecak* dancers who wear black knee-length trousers and a *saput poleng* cloth (Langi & Park, 2017). The dancers are all bare-chested (Sumiati & Girsang, 2018). The *kecak* dancers are divided into four groups who together create an ensemble of canonic sounds with their mouths (Sidia, interview, 2022). In addition to the large group of male dancers, other characters in the story include Rama, Lesmana, Sinta, the golden deer (*kijang kencana*), Trijata, Hanoman, and Rahwana, who perform movements in the style of Balinese dance (Ruastiti, 2019) (Rochim & Jupriono, 2021).

*Kecak* performances in Bali have continued to spread and develop into a form of entertainment for tourists, amongst others by the *saka Karang Boma* organization which established the Ramayana *Kecak* performance at Uluwatu Temple (Putra Kencana, Mudana, & Ardini, 2020). The location for this study was determined based on previous research, including the article entitled Aesthetical Transformation on Ramayana Stories of Indonesia – Thailand Versions (Hidajat, Pujiyanto, Hartono, et al., 2021). This article includes a section on the Ramayana *Kecak* in Uluwatu, viewed from a symbolic aesthetic perspective which examines the unity of the story, the venue, and the function. This means that in terms of its content, the Ramayana *Kecak* performance has relevance not only in its capacity to entertain but also to provide educational motivation.

A previous article, entitled Tourism Performances Management Patterns and the Role of Maecenas in Ramayana Play Presentation as a Tourist Attraction in Indonesia and Thailand, discusses more specifically the aspect of performing arts management, focusing on the artistic management of performing arts for tourists (Hidajat, Pujiyanto, Prastiawan, et al., 2021). Another article, entitled The Dialectics of the Performance of the *Kecak Ramayana* in Uluwatu, Bali, Indonesia, emphasizes that the tourist art of Ramayana *Kecak* is a performing art which cannot be separated from the performers' internalization of spirituality,

and that the role of the spiritual leader (*pemangku*) is an important part of the implementation of this tourist art (Hidajat et al., 2023).

The Ramayana Kecak at Uluwatu Temple is both specific and unique as it is performed in the area surrounding a sacred temple that is situated at the side of a steep cliff (Adhika, 2017). Before the performance begins, the tourists who come to watch the show can enjoy the panorama of the expansive ocean from the top of the cliff (Werdistira, 2020) (Tjampan & Nugroho, 2020). The unique attraction of this performance, which is not found at other tourist destinations, is the venue itself (Liestiadre, 2019), with an open stage looking out across the ocean towards the vast expanse of the horizon.

It is the attractive nature of the location of the stage that gives the tourist performance at Uluwatu its authenticity, and allows it to be classed as a high-quality tourist product with (1) uniqueness, (2) authenticity, (3) originality, and (4) diversity (Kanzunudin, 2011). These four aspects of a cultural tourism product are at least on a par with the Hula dance performance in Hawaii (Beckwith, 2010). This exotic ritual dance has gained popularity as a tourist art performance (Rowe, 2008). Soedarsono, in his book *Indonesian Performing Arts and Tourism (Seni Pertunjukan Indonesia dan Pariwisata)*, also discusses the history, function, and uniqueness of the Hula dance, a traditional dance belonging to a local community (Soedarsono, 1999). Tourist arts such as the Hula dance and the Ramayana Kecak are known as shadow rituals (Howe, 2000), which means rituals that are an imitation, pseudo rituals.

The nature of the Ramayana Kecak as a tourist art is no longer disputed, as it is a ritual display that has been transformed into a tourist performance (Seramasara, 2021). In spite of its secular, even commercial nature (Kasman, 2013), it is interesting to note that the Ramayana Kecak performance at Uluwatu is not only a form of entertainment but also an attractive display, with distinctive characteristics that are an expression of local culture.

The problems addressed in the research are the ways the performers build their social relationships, strengthen their institution as an organization, and manage to sustain and preserve their local values that are based on the Balinese Hindu religion (Miharja, 2017).

With this in mind, it is possible that a parallelism exists between the conceptual symbolization, the social practices in the Ramayana Kecak performing art, the goals that are to be achieved, and the practice of a performing art that has the ability to maintain a condition of social balance for all those involved. If this is the case, it provides an interesting addition to existing knowledge about the practice of tourist performing arts that have a background in local culture.

### Research Methodology

This research focuses on the subject of the tourist performing art of Ramayana Kecak from Pecatu Village, South Kuta District, Badung Regency, Bali. The Ramayana Kecak performance venue is in the area of Uluwatu Temple. The boundaries of Pecatu Village are Tukad Cengiling/Jimbaran village to the north, the Indian Ocean to the south and west, and Tukad Gau/Ungasan Village to the east. Pecatu Village covers an area of 2541 hectares.

The Ramayana Kecak tourist art in the Uluwatu Temple area was studied in depth through interviews with key informants, including the head of the Kecak Karang Boma organization, I Made Astra (63 years), the secretary of the organization, I Wayan Chery Antara (30 years), the Hanoman actor, Agus Suantara (38 years), former Hanoman actor and founder of the Uluwatu Ramayana Kecak organization, I Nyoman Suganda (67 years), and I Made Sidia (55 years), head of Paripurna Studio, Jalan Yudistira, Bona Village, Blahbatuh District, Gianyar Regency.

Observations were made during the performance, from the time the performers' preparations began until after the performance had finished, and a document review was also made of the leaflet containing the synopsis and outline of the story of Hanoman Obong. The research is an ethnographic study (Windiani & Nurul, 2016), which describes the thoughts, statements, and attitudes of the tourist art performers at Uluwatu Temple. The theory used is a functional structural theory (Agung, 2015), which includes four aspects of the social system, referred to as AGIL (Prasetya, Nurdin & Gunawan, 2021). These are: (1) Adaptation, (2) Goal Attainment, (3) Integration, and (4) Latent Pattern Maintenance (Adibah, 2017). This theory is the result of an adaptation from the research of Sumandiyo Hadi in his research entitled *Art in Religious Rituals (Seni dalam Ritual Agama)* (Hadi, 2006).

The AGIL theory, which was used by Sumandiyo Hadi in his doctoral dissertation analyzing the art activities of the Catholic congregation in the celebration of the Eucharist at Ganjuran Church in Yogyakarta, was adapted to include the following 4 elements: (1) cognitive symbols, (2) symbols of expression, (3) constitutive symbols, and (4) symbols of morality.

Sumandiyo Hadi's adaptation of the AGIL theory is suitable to be used in this research on the performance practices of the Ramayana Kecak at Uluwatu Temple. In the implementation of the Ramayana Kecak performance there is a sacred dialectic, namely the social capital of the group of Ramayana Kecak performers, specifically their spiritual and artistic capital, and the profane practice as a goal of improving the economy of the people of Pecatu Village.

## Results

### *Implementation of the Ramayana Kecak in Uluwatu*

The subject of this research is the tourist art of Ramayana Kecak which is performed by the Karang Boma organization led by I Made Astra. From the results of the interviews, it is known that this organization was established in 1996. There were previously no well-known *kecak* dancers in Pecatu Village but I Made Astra and I Nyoman Suganda continued to gather members from Pecatu Village, in particular villagers who had kiosks in the area surrounding Uluwatu Temple. Today the organization has 125 members who participate in the daily performances.

The results of the research can be grouped into three main areas of focus: (1) the origin of the Ramayana Kecak in Uluwatu, (2) the Ramayana Kecak performance, and (3) the goal of establishing a Ramayana Kecak organization in Uluwatu. The results are explained below.

### *The Origin of the Ramayana Kecak Dance in Uluwatu*

The idea to stage a *kecak* performance in the Uluwatu Temple area began as an effort to support the traders in the temple area, with the goal of increasing the number of visitors. This idea was welcomed by all the traders and a decision was made to gather together all the young men in the village of Pecatu.

In 1996, a number of Balinese dances were already being performed at Uluwatu Temple for tourists. The venue was very simple, with performances taking place on the open ground and spectators sitting on bamboo benches. The proposed development of a *kecak* performance was set in motion by inviting a teacher from Gianyar Village by the name of I Made Didir (Chery Antara, interview, 2022).

For the first five years, the conditions did not progress much. I Nyoman Suganda felt concerned but continued to encourage his members to remain with the group. The conditions during this period made I Nyoman Suganda reluctant to leave his job as a hotel employee. However, after the first five years had passed, the situation began to change. Audiences grew as more people began to hear about the performances, and the original venue was renovated and transformed into an amphitheater with an audience capacity of over 1200 (Suganda, interview, 2022).



Figure 1. Ramayana Kecak performers and audience at Uluwatu Temple (Photo: Robby).

With the increasing number of tourists coming to watch the Ramayana Kecak performance in Uluwatu, *sakaa* Karang Boma introduced a number of special regulations, one of which was that the *kecak* performers must be officially registered as members of Pecatu Village. This was highly beneficial for the community as it improved the economic standard of families living in the village. The daily *kecak* performances provided an additional source of income that helped people to pay for their children's education and to purchase various family necessities.

### *Ramayana Kecak Performance*

I Made Astra, the head of the Ramayana Kecak in the Karang Boma organization, explained that as an art activity, the Ramayana Kecak is made up of four aspects: religion, art, language, and tradition (Astra, interview, 2022), and that religion is the main element which provides strength, motivation, and spirit for the Ramayana Kecak performers in Uluwatu

and enables them to express their local values through the performance of the Ramayana Kecak with the story of Hanoman Obong (Hidajat, Jamnongsarn & Hasyimy, 2022).



Figure 2. The priest sprinkles holy water, circling from right to left (Photo: Robby).

Forty-two *kecak* performers, dressed in *saput poleng* cloth, create a circular formation. They make vocal sounds, sometimes in unison and sometimes alternating in turn with each other, while raising their hands, standing up, or lying on the floor. At certain points, the *kecak* dancers change their formation to portray a particular scene.

In the center of the stage, the flames from a torch stand with five prongs burn throughout the duration of the performance. The torch stand indicates the direction of the journey of the different characters, from left to right or vice versa. The protagonist characters move clockwise and the antagonist characters move anti-clockwise. There is also a separation between the upper and lower levels, in particular in the Hanoman Obong scene, which is shown by moving the torch stand to the Candi Bentar gate, thereby creating a separate space for the stage and a separate space for the audience.

The Ramayana is a popular story in Southeast Asia and contains a wealth of eastern philosophical values which are widely recognized. In each new era it has experienced a reinterpretation in order to remain actual (Charassri, 2023). This is also evident in the tourist art of Ramayana Kecak which portrays Rama and Sinta in exile. As they wander through the forest, Sinta is tempted by a golden deer (*kijang kencana*). Rama tries to capture the deer while Lesmana protects Sinta, but Sinta fears that Rama is in danger and sends Lesmana after him. Alone in the middle of the forest, Sinta is being watched by Rahwana, who approaches her, disguised as a priest. Sinta is kidnapped in spite of the efforts of the divine Jatayu bird to thwart her capture. Sinta is filled with sorrow, being held against her will by Rahwana. Accompanied by Trijata, Sinta is held in the female quarters (*kaputren*) of the palace, as she continues to refuse the advances of Rahwana. Her hopes still rest on Rama who is wandering through the Dandaka Forest.

A commander by the name of Hanoman is sent to Alengka to deliver a souvenir, as a sign of Rama's love. After meeting Sinta, Hanoman is captured and burned alive but he manag-

es to escape and subsequently burns down the Alengka Palace. A fierce battle then ensues, coming to an end only when Rama and Lesmana, with Hanoman’s help, manage to defeat Rahwana.

**The Goal of Establishing a Ramayana Kecak Organization in Uluwatu**

The performance of the Ramayana Kecak tourist art has become popular as a commercial art performance, which is why ongoing efforts are needed to bring together the artists in a bond and confirmation of kinship. Membership in the organization is regulated by a number of binding rules, one of which is that all the people involved in the *kecak* performance must be members of the Pecatu Village community. As a consequence, any members who move to another village are required to leave the group.

Income is shared proportionally according to the duties and responsibilities of each member of the group, with a portion also being given to support the area of Uluwatu Temple and the *sakaa* in Pecatu Village. Even the cleaning assistants at the performance venue are residents of Pecatu Village. Some of the ideas related to the income generated have been transmitted to establish kinship bonds, in order to ensure that the Ramayana Kecak tourist art can enjoy a stable and continued existence so that the goal of improving economic welfare can be realized.

**Discussion**

This research is based on the AGIL theory used in the research of Sumandiyo Hadi, entitled *Art in Religious Rituals (Seni Dalam Ritual Agama)* (2006), which adapts the functional structural social theory into the art discipline to become four elements: (1) Adaptation, which is equivalent to cognitive symbols, (2) Goal Attainment, which is equivalent to expressive symbols, (3) Integration, which is equivalent to artistic commitment, and (4) Latent Pattern Maintenance, which is equivalent to symbols of morality. The Ramayana Kecak at Uluwatu Temple is explained through a diagram of the results of Sumandiyo Hadi’s research which is adapted from the AGIL theory, as shown below.

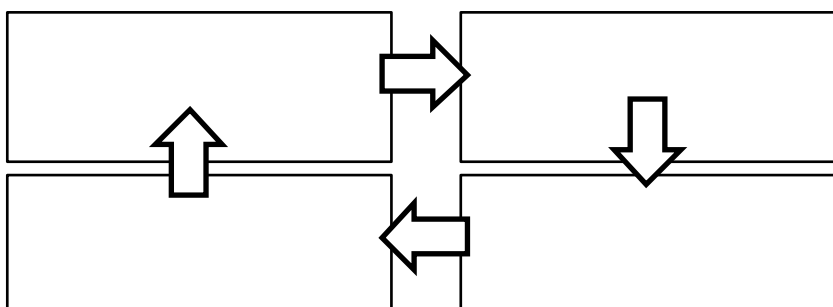


Figure 3. Adaptation of AGIL theory in the research of Hadi (Hadi, 2006).

The operational system of the diagram in figure 3 is implemented in the performance of Ramayana Kecak in Uluwatu as follows: (a) creative ideas: the ideas of members of the Pecatu Village community who formerly worked as traders in the area of Uluwatu Temple and whose economic status was below the poverty line, (b) symbols of expression: the realization of the goal of the creative ideas in the form of the Ramayana Kecak performance,

(c) artistic commitment: the formation of the Karang Boma organization, and (d) symbols of morality: the establishment of a strong sense of solidarity and kinship among the members of Karang Boma.

### *Creative Ideas*

Creative ideas are used to foster the social relationships between members of the Pecatu Village community who work as traders in the area of the Uluwatu Temple. This is an adaptation for the future existence of the Pecatu Village community, to allay any previous thoughts that they have not developed sufficiently in the field of performing arts for tourists. If they are able to involve a larger number of people as performing artists, there is a better opportunity to boost the social and economic potential of the community. The lack of involvement of community members from certain strata can be addressed and people can be encouraged to become involved. Hence, the creative ideas will provide a form of support to contribute to the community's future. Creative ideas are part of a transformative pattern of adaptation. In order to improve culture, there is a need for efforts to form intensive relationships in creative ways by involving the environment and nature (Eagleton, 2000). The creative ideas of the community of traders in Uluwatu already contain spiritual capital, cultural capital, and the asset of traditional performing arts.

Creative ideas that are founded on the environment and nature, and supported by spiritual capital, cultural capital, and traditional Balinese arts, are a powerful tool for achieving future goals, by improving social and economic relationships in the Pecatu Village community. In concrete terms, creative ideas have been manifested through the highly popular traditional Balinese performance of Sanghyang in Gianyar Village. Performances in Bali generally contain a deep spirit of sacred and profane dialectics which is found in the concept of duality known as *rwa bhineda*.

The concept of *rwa bhineda* is used as the basis of creative ideas, to recognize and align any differences in order to create a harmonious world (Ardana, 2016). From the results of interviews with I Made Astra and I Nyoman Suganda, it can be said that the social lives of the people of Pecatu Village who work as traders in the Uluwatu Temple area are generally founded on spirituality, as members of the Hindu community, although from a social perspective, their lives cannot be described as prosperous (Astra and Suganda, interview, 2022). Creative ideas are therefore used to achieve a balance between the material world and the spiritual world, by transforming the ritual performance of Sanghyang into an entertaining tourist art performance of Ramayana Kecak. The concept of duality used as a foundation is the function of the Sanghyang performance as a ritual art for social immunity (*tolak balak*) and the Ramayana Kecak as a profane art which serves as a medium of entertainment to fulfil economic needs. This is what Walter Spies, Beryl de Zotte, and Limbak did by transforming the Sanghyang performance in 1927. Walter Spies' efforts aimed to serve the needs of European tourists so that they could witness the performance of traditional Balinese art (Solehudin et al., 2023).

### *Symbols of Expression*

The Ramayana Kecak was chosen due to its economic value, because in the 1990s, many hotels in Bali presented the Ramayana Kecak as a form of entertainment for tourists. I Nyoman Suganda formerly worked in a hotel, where he played Hanoman in numerous Ra-



mayana Kecak performances. I Made Astra saw that there was an opportunity for the tourist art of Ramayana Kecak to provide economic benefit which would improve the welfare of the community in Pecatu Village, especially people whose everyday job was selling food and souvenirs in the Uluwatu Temple area.

Welfare in the social life of a community is related to expressive symbols which can be recognized in the torch stand used in the *kecak* dance, with its five lamps. In Hindu cosmology, these can be identified symbolically as *Pertiwi* (earth), *Apah* (water), *Teja* (fire), *Bayu* (wind), and *Akasa* (cosmic space). I Made Astra believes that the relations between these symbols of expression should be balanced, as the people of Pecatu Village need the earth as a place to live, food (including water) for sustenance, fire or power or energy to work, wind to live and sustain their health, and cosmic space to channel their hopes and expectations. I Made Astra explained that human beings need a balanced life which can be expressed through spirituality and art (Astra, interview, 2022). The stage arena is divided into two sections, right and left. The area on the left is a space for the antagonist character, Rahwana, and his soldiers, and the area on the right is a space for the protagonist characters, Rama and Lesmana. Hanoman moves backwards and forwards from right to left, representing the transmission or connection between the two areas, to create balance. In this way, the Ramayana Kecak in Uluwatu presents Hanoman as the main character in the performance.

The five prongs of the torch stand are spiritual symbols which honor the god, Shiva. The torch stand divides the area of the stage into two parts, the *pengiwa* (left) and the *panengen* (right), to show the balance between evil and good forces (Gami, Untara & Gunawijaya, 2020).

The interpretation of the analysis of these symbols of expression is that they represent an adaptation of spiritual values which display binary opposition between the spiritual and the profane. Spiritually, the time when the performance takes place, in the late afternoon, just before sunset, is a symbol of respect to the gods of the sun and the moon. This is closely related to the *poleng* cloth worn by the *kecak* dancers, which symbolizes the sun with the white color and the mountain with the black color, together representing a harmonious balance (Ari Dewanti & Kameswari, 2019). The profane element is the orientation towards the needs of tourists, specifically the need to enjoy the sunset in Bali, and Uluwatu is a strategic place for watching the sun set. This is acknowledged by audiences who enjoy the Ramayana Kecak tourist performances at Uluwatu. They truly enjoy a sensational experience when Hanoman is captured and burned alive. As the sun sets over the horizon, the fire that burns Hanoman is set alight.

### **Artistic Commitment**

The Ramayana Kecak in Uluwatu is devoted to two constitutive aspects: first, art for the religious life of the Balinese community, because art is tied to the religion of the performers (Parmajaya, 2020), and as I Made Astra, head of Kecak Karang Boma, emphasizes, art is an integral part of religious life; and second, art for organizational life, where the Ramayana Kecak exists as part of an organization with social ties, and one of its goals is to foster strong kinship bonds in a modern world where it is necessary to use a for-profit organization in order to be institutionally binding.

The Ramayana Kecak is an entertainment organization in the form of an institution which aims to strengthen the commitment, loyalty, and dedication of its members. *Sakaa Karang Boma* was established as an organizational institution with a head, a secretary, and a treasurer who manage the organizational side of the institution, enabling the operation of its social activities to run well.

The performance production side is managed by a director and a number of coordinators with different fields of expertise. The purpose of this is to support the process of the sacred and profane dialectics. Administrative matters prioritize rational aspects while artistic matters place emphasis on the sacred side, which means that the performers abide by artistic principles that are founded on local spiritual values. Arts that are devoted to a certain function in the daily life of the Balinese community are classified as *bali-balian* performing arts (Ratih, 2001).

### **Symbols of Morality**

Morality in the social life of the Pecatu Village community requires a transformative effort. The Ramayana Kecak was chosen to build the morality of the members of the group, as well as the Pecatu Village community, and tourists. In the performance of the Ramayana Kecak, a number of elements of morality appear which can help to build and shape character, especially for members of the Ramayana Kecak organization in Uluwatu. Hence, the background of this tourist object, in the form of the Ramayana Kecak, is to prioritize morality and 'the victory of good over evil.'

According to I Made Astra, this morality is intended to provide a response to artistic practices in which there is a synergy between aesthetics (beauty), spirituality (religion), language (speech), and customs (ethics). This demonstrates the presence of a dialectic process in building and shaping the character of the performers and the audience (Salayanti, 2017). Tourists from India, in particular, have a deep appreciation of this. At the end of a performance, they often approach the performers of Rama and Hanoman to show their respect by reaching out their hands to touch the feet of the performers.

### **Conclusion**

The dialectic of the sacred and profane in the tourist art of Ramayana Kecak at Uluwatu Temple is a construction of the institution of tourist art for the purpose of social balance between the Ramayana Kecak artists and the audience or tourists. The Ramayana Kecak in Uluwatu supports the interests of the artists by strengthening their solidarity, kinship, spirituality, and economy.

The tourist art of Ramayana Kecak in Uluwatu is a form of art which has the function of entertaining as well as being commercial in nature. Therefore, there are two main goals: (1) to reinforce the internalization of spirituality of members of the Ramayana Kecak group and to create internal stability in the Pecatu Village community; and (2) to achieve economic prosperity for members of the Uluwatu Ramayana Kecak group as a means to attaining stability in the social welfare of the community.

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