




The Dialectics of the Performance of the *Kecak Ramayana* in Uluwatu, Bali, Indonesia
INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER




About the Journal

Journal DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha
Journal Home	www.rupkatha.com 
Indexed in	Web of Science Core Collection™ Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI)
Journal Impact Factor (JIF)™	2022: 0.2 5 year: 0.2
	Source:  Journal Citation Reports™ 2023

About the Issue

Issue	Volume 15, Number 2, 2023
Issue DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v15n2
TOC	https://rupkatha.com/v15n2.php 

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Title	The Dialectics of the Performance of the <i>Kecak Ramayana</i> in Uluwatu, Bali, Indonesia	
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Article DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v15n2.13	Pages: 1-17
Full-text	https://rupkatha.com/v15n213 	
Full-text PDF	https://rupkatha.com/V15/n2/v15n213.pdf 	
Article History	Submitted 05 May 2023, modified 20 June 2023, accepted 22 June 2023, first published 24 June 2023	
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The Dialectics of the Performance of the *Kecak Ramayana* in Uluwatu, Bali, Indonesia

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Abstract

The *Ramayana kecak* is a popular tourist art in Bali that is rich in symbolism. The audience watches only from the front of the stage, which is formalistic in nature, witnessing different scenes, characteristics of figures, structures, and dramatic factors. The performers are not aware that the backstage is the realm of rituals and a part of the deep experience of spiritual beliefs. The front stage and backstage should be viewed as complementary duality. Activities behind the stage are more natural while those on the front stage are a manipulation. The backstage can be understood as a dramaturgical richness of a paradoxical and symbolic Eastern performing art. Therefore, the appeal of the backstage is not an attractive consideration. This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with *Ramayana kecak* artists in Uluwatu Temple, Bali, and a document analysis was done. The theories used are symbolic interpretation, text and context, and symbolic structure. The results of the research present a description of the dramaturgy of Balinese performing art with a specific focus on: 1. Dramaturgy of the front stage, 2. Dramaturgy of the backstage, and 3. Local spiritual aesthetics including the spirit of duality known as *taksu* which is rooted in *Rwa Bhineda*.

Keywords: *Kecak Ramayana*, dramaturgy, performing art, Uluwatu Temple.

INTRODUCTION

The production of the *Ramayana* as a performing art is sourced from a work by Valmiki, India (Cruz, Rasyid, and Mada 2018). It is a work of Hindu literature which is linked to Hindu practices in Southeast Asia (Cruz, Rasyid, and Mada 2018). The written manuscript was carried by Indian traders, priests, or students of the Hindu religion along the inter-island trade route (Jha 2022) until it reached Indonesia, in particular the Island of Bali, where 90% of the people still practice the Hindu religion (Sampebulu 2019). The *Ramayana* spread in oral form across the Southeast Asia community, teaching about Hindu practices of establishing morals and ethics, and in more recent developments serving as a reference for shaping the personal character of the young generation (Pallathadka, Pallathadka, and Devi 2022). The spread of the *Ramayana* from India to Southeast Asia (Salleh 2009), including Indonesia, was in the form of poetry, lyrical verse, paintings, and

reliefs carved on temple walls, from which it acculturated to become a performing art with local spirituality (Robby Hidajat, Pujiyanto, Hartono 2021).

The transformation of the Ramayana as a performing art is known by various names in different regions, such as in Thailand where it is called Ramakien (Kiriwat 2001). This mythology inspired King Rama I to create a classical Thai dance form (Ichman 2008). In 1797, during the reign of King Rama I, the complete text for the performing art was completed. It is a beautiful, extravagant, comprehensive work of literature which contains over 53,3000 verses written in the Thai language (Kiriwat 2001).

In Thailand, the Ramayana became a performing art of the palace and a source of pride for an entire dynasty of kings. The complexity of Thai works of art display similarities with certain art forms in Indonesia, in particular those in the form of reliefs and *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) stories which have continued to spread throughout society in the form of oral literature. This is not the case, however, in Lanka, India, where over the last decade the Ramayana has been re-transformed to become a combination of religious conceptions and business considerations, or what is commonly known as a commodification of entertainment (Rao 2015).

In Bali, Indonesia, the Ramayana not only appears in the form of a *wayang kulit* repertoire for ritual performance but also as a tourist art. For over 70 years, it has been produced in the form of a kecak dance (Dellios 2003). Audiences at these tourist performances are generally people from outside of Bali, who are only able to appreciate the general storyline and the *cak-cak-cak* sound that is sung melodically by 70 or more dancers. The dancers, who perform on an open stage, create circular formations which change and adapt to follow the storyline (Sumiati and Girsang 2018).

The Ramayana kecak in Bali, Indonesia, has become a popular tourist performing art in the form of a dance-drama. It was developed out of an idea by Walter Spies, a German musician and painter (Sumiati and Girsang 2018). In 1927, Walter Spies moved to Bali from Yogyakarta, where he had been employed as a musician in the royal court. In Bali, he befriended a traditional Balinese artist by the name of I Wayan Limbak (Seriasih 2019), and together they created a performing art with the specific purpose of entertaining tourists, based on Sang Hyang Dadari, a ritual to exorcise evil spirits that were believed to be the cause of outbreaks of disease. The Ramayana kecak created by Walter Spies and I Wayan Limbak has continued to exist since 1930, and is still performed by Balinese artists up to the present day (Bakan 2009) (Picard 1990).

The Ramayana story presented in the form of a kecak dance is entertaining but does not reach a deeper level of understanding. This is mentioned by Ben Walmsley, who writes that the motivation of audiences who come to watch tourist performances is simply to increase their knowledge and seek entertainment (Walmsley 2011). This is in line with the articles of Ponimin and Guntur. These two researchers capture the visual aspects of Ramayana performing arts in Indonesia, as presented in the form of *wayang kulit*, *wayang golek* (three-dimensional wooden puppet theater), and *wayang wong* (human puppet theater), as a source of ideas for art creation. They focus primarily on investigating the pragmatic function of the formalistic factors of appearance. On the other hand, however, they do manage to capture the creative experience to create other art forms (Ponimin and Guntur 2020).

According to Sarah Weiss, the practice of ritual performing arts can give meaning to the reflection of life experiences (Weiss 2019). However, the Ramayana kecak in Bali is still viewed as entertainment, in spite of the ritual practices it contains. This allows both the performers and the audience the space to benefit from the performance, at least in the way described by Sarah Weiss.

The researchers were inspired to explore the benefits of the artistic practices of Ramayana kecak dancers in Bali. The researchers believe that there is a fundamental understanding which is a form of expansion of western dramaturgy. The artists are not merely actors who provide entertainment, as implied in the article entitled "*Persepsi Pengunjung Domestik Terhadap Wisata Entertainment Di Daya Tarik Wisata Kawasan Luar Pura Uluwatu*" (The Perception of Domestic Visitors to Entertainment Tourism in the Tourist Attraction Outside Uluwatu Temple). This article shows that the tourist art in Uluwatu Temple is no more than an object of entertainment (Tjampam and Nugroho 2020).

Over a period of approximately 2 years, between 2020 and 2022, the researchers observed the practice of several Ramayana kecak tourist performances in Uluwatu Temple. These tourist performances can be seen to contain a ritual side that the dancers are not aware of, as they are acting simply on the basis of tradition and belief. If this is implemented in other performing art practices, it can become a highly useful theory.

In order to understand the ritual factor in the practice of Ramayana kecak tourist performances, the researchers applied a theory of text and context. This meant that throughout the duration of the research, they acted as the 'readers' of the dancers' performance in their expression of the Ramayana epic by the Indian artist Valmiki (Hidajat, Pujiyanto, Hartono, et al. 2021).

In a previous study from 2022, entitled 'Aesthetical Transformation on Ramayana Stories of Indonesia-Thailand Versions', the researcher only examines the historical aspect of the Ramayana in Indonesia and Thailand as vocabulary for tourist art (Hidajat, Jamnongsarn, and Hasyimy 2022), without going into any depth on the aspect of benefit for the audience. The researcher is aware that the performance of tourist art, which by nature is pseudo traditional art (Soedarsono 1999), still possesses the genetics of a ritual symbolic art, as explained by D.K. Hema Hari & D.K. Hari in the work 'Ramayana In Lanka'. This book discusses in depth the subject of the Ramayana, which is proven to have historical origins in Lanka, India, but its transmission through tourism has linked Langka India with Sri Lanka, and led to a joint search for an understanding of the events that are believed to have taken place in these two regions. This research proves that there is a genetic factor which can still be retraced in order to convince modern day society in these two countries to offer mutual support to each other (Ichman 2008).

'Ramayana In Lanka' provides an important consideration, that the Ramayana is not only a performing art phenomenon which serves to entertain. The researchers believe that it is possible to uncover a meaning which serves to enrich the dramaturgy, because the Ramayana in the Balinese performing art of kecak can offer a deeper understanding and awareness to the performers and the audience, that performing arts contain multidimensional aspects pertaining to the microcosm and macrocosm.

The performance by the kecak dancers on the front stage is not merely a series of acts and scenes, accompanied by the rhythmic, dramatic movements of the dancers' bodies, and various other attractions that entertain the audience. The presence of the kecak dancers behind the stage can provide a deeper explanation because the front stage and backstage complement one another.

The interesting aspects of the front stage and backstage encouraged the researchers to study the Ramayana kecak in Uluwatu Temple in greater depth. The researchers believe that this study can uncover the meaning and dramaturgical practice of performing artists in Bali. The understanding and appreciation of the Ramayana epic in Bali is a subject that continues to be studied up to the present day. One such study is by Ajay K. Rao, Associate Professor in the Department of Historical Studies (UTM) and the Department of Religious Studies in the University of Toronto, Canada, presented in his book entitled 'Re-Figuring the Ramayana: A history of reception in premodern India' (Rao 2015). This work complements earlier research results, in particular about the function and history of the Ramayana kecak in Bali.

Through his study of the Ramayana in India, Ajay K. Rao inspired a number of contemporary writers in Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Malayalam to use their local languages in a more communicative style. Paula Richman managed to collect writings by authors in these four regions. These works by contemporary Indian writers have inspired various works of music, theater, and film art (Rao 2015).

The goal of the research is to explain about: (1) the meaning of the front stage of the Ramayana kecak in Uluwatu, (2) the meaning of the backstage of the Ramayana kecak in Uluwatu, and (3) the aesthetic and spiritual practices of the Ramayana kecak performers in Uluwatu. This study contributes practical dramaturgical knowledge which combines the practices of formalistic dramaturgy with the spiritual practices of the Ramayana kecak dancers.

METHOD

This research uses an observational qualitative descriptive approach (Fadli 2021), which means that the researchers immersed themselves directly and interacted with the Ramayana kecak performers in Uluwatu Temple. The reason for choosing this research subject was that up to the present day, the Ramayana kecak is performed in Uluwatu as an attraction for domestic and foreign tourists who are visiting Bali (Hidajat, Pujiyanto, Prastiawan, et al. 2021). Although tourists can watch the Ramayana kecak in various places, the most unique and spectacular of all these performances is the Ramayana kecak in Uluwatu Temple (Wigantara and Suryasih 2014).

There are three main reasons that give the Ramayana kecak in Uluwatu such a strong appeal: (1) the performance venue is an open stage on the edge of a steep cliff, (2) the audience can enjoy watching the sunset at the end of the performance, and (3) the venue is in the grounds of the sacred Kahyangan Uluwatu Temple (Werdistira 2020) (Liestiandre 2019).

The researchers carried out 2 observations in 2021 and 4 observations in 2022, as well as conducting a number of interviews with key informants, including I Made Sudira (58), head of Sekaa Karang Boma, I Made Astra (56), deputy head, I Wayan Chary Antara (48), secretary, and I Made Tarka (57), functionary.

The observations were carried out during the Ramayana kecak performances and the events were all documented. The main focus of the data was the meaningful words, attitudes, and actions that were observed from the participants. This meant that the results of the observations were closer to the informants. The validation of data was carried out using a triangulation technique of sources, techniques, and methods. The data were then tabulated in accordance with the topic, and analyzed using a textual-contextual theory (Yudiaryani 2007), and a theory of symbolic interaction (Howard 2012), which positions the research subject as something that is meaningful and analyzed in the understanding of a text. The textual-contextual theory was more operational, thereby allowing the researchers to position themselves as the main instrument throughout the duration of the research. Therefore, the main focus was to 'read' the research subject and to act as a tool for the analysis (Boy S. Sabarguna 2020). The results of the research can be useful for constructing a theory about performing arts, by showing in a meaningful and symbolic manner that the behavior of the dancers backstage has a positive impact on their presentation on the front stage.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Data Presentation

I Wayan Chary Antara explained the origins of the Ramayana kecak performance in Uluwatu Temple. In 1996, traders in the area around Uluwatu Temple began to develop a venue for entertainment based on Balinese dance. At that time, the venue became known as a place for the performance of Uluwatu Temple Ramayana kecak. The community of Ramayana kecak artists consisted of traders and members of the community in Sekaa Karang Boma in the village of Pecatu Kute Selatan, Badung, Bali (Antara, interview 2022). A previous research study explores 'Tourism Performances Management Patterns and the Role of Maecenas in Ramayana Play Presentation as A Tourist Attraction in Indonesia and Thailand'. This article discusses the function of the Ramayana kecak in Uluwatu Temple as a tourist art that is performed on a daily basis (Hidajat, Pujiyanto, Prastiawan, et al. 2021).

In Figure 1, I Made Tarka, a traditional spiritual leader in Sekaa Karang Boma, is performing the duty of sprinkling holy water on the kecak performers. I Made Tarka gave the following explanation: "The kecak performers are not only dancers in the Ramayana kecak but also abide by the traditional, spiritual Hindu principle known as *Tri Hita Karana*, which is the three reasons for the creation of harmonious relationships to achieve true happiness." I Made Tarka also explained about the aspect of discipline that the dancers need to understand about the concept of *Desa* (place), *Kala* (time), and *Patra* (mood).



Figure 1: First scene: A traditional leader sprinkles holy water (Photo: research documentation)



Figure 2: I Made Tarka, spiritual leader in Uluwatu Temple, prays for the figure of Hanoman (Photo: research documentation)

Figure 2 shows the spiritual leader carrying out his duty of praying for each of the dancers before they perform. The Balinese believe that their work is an offering to God, so whatever they do, they must give their best. Their obedience to the spiritual ethic is apparent when preparing themselves in the outer stage or backstage area. The spiritual leader performs the ritual of sprinkling holy water and the performers pray for safety and for the performance to go smoothly (Tarka, interview 2022).

The spiritual ethic and customary practice of the artists is an expression of their spiritual belief as Hindus (Ketut Subagiasta 2018). It is common practice for the all the dancers, explains I Made Sudira (Sudira, interview 2022). The backstage area is the place where the performers prepare to change into their costumes, although not all costumes are put on backstage. The backstage is an important entity for reading the front stage because it is believed to have a significant relationship with the interpretation of the performance which contains both sacred and profane values (Parmajaya 2020).

The Ramayana kecak is performed in Uluwatu Temple every day from 17.00-18.30 on an open stage. The front stage is in the form of an arena with a single gateway in the form of a split gateway or *Candi Bentar*, through which the performers enter and leave the stage. Members of the audience enter the venue through doors on the right and in the center, and sit in a semicircular shaped balcony. When the performers arrive, they walk along a corridor behind the stage, through the administration office. The kecak dancers are already dressed in their costumes of black trousers and a *saput poleng* loincloth when they arrive (Ari Dewanti and Kameswari 2019).

The character dancers, however, do not arrive wearing their costumes so they must get changed and made up according to the characters they are to play. The female dancers who are playing male or female characters are provided with a closed dressing room while the male dancers get changed in a gazebo. While the performers are getting ready, the spiritual leader goes around reciting prayers and splashing holy water on the stage equipment.

The mood behind the stage is calm and all the performers concentrate on preparing themselves as they wait for their time to perform. Once they arrive at the venue, they do not leave the area for any reason, and only the spiritual leader walks around the area of the stage, first to place incense in the shrine on the stage, then moving to other parts of the main stage and to different spots on the balcony. I Made Tarka describes this process as the expelling of evil spirits from the entire performance arena so that all the activities run smoothly, safely, and are blessed by Sang Hyang Widi Wasa (Tarka, interview 2022).

The main duty of the spiritual leader is to prepare the offerings, to recite prayers, and to bless the performers who are going to dance. The spiritual leader takes up his position behind the row of crowns of the various characters which are placed on top of a table. All the crowns are kept in a room behind the stage and are not permitted to be taken home, and the performers are not allowed to wear their own crowns because the crowns worn for the performance have been blessed and purified through the *Tumpek Landep* ritual, a ritual for professional tools or equipment that is held every six months, or every 210 days (Puger 2022). According to I Made Tarka, the *Tumpek Landep* ritual is a way to obtain *taksu*. *Taksu* can be described as the spiritual energy that a performing artist needs to possess in order to radiate charisma. It is acquired by

performing a special ritual, or by wearing properties that possess special powers (Tarka, interview 2022).

The performance structure of the Ramayana kecak was arranged by the director who first taught the dancers, and subsequently shaped by the deputy head of Sekaa Karang Boma, I Made Astra. This is common practice in the performance of Balinese arts where a group is led by the head or deputy head of the Sekaa because traditionally, the head of the Sekaa is responsible for the continuity of the community. There are no written rules about this so everything runs according to social conventions (Astra, wawancara 2022).

The order of performance of the Ramayana kecak is as follows: (1) the kecak dancers enter the stage with a circular formation. The spiritual leader reads an incantation and sprinkles holy water; (2) Rama, Sinta, and Lesmana are evicted from the palace and wander through the Dandaka forest; (3) Sinta is seduced by the beauty of the golden deer, Kijang Kencana, so Rama and Lesmana chase the deer into the depths of the forest; (4) Sinta is kidnapped by Rahwana who disguises himself as a priest; (5) Jatayu tries to prevent Sinta's kidnapping but is defeated; (6) Rama and Lesmana meet with Hanoman and send him on a mission to search for news about Sinta's whereabouts; (7) Hanoman manages to meet with Sinta but is spotted by a group of giants who capture him and try to burn him alive before Hanoman manages to escape; (8) Rama and Lesmana, together with Hanoman, kill Rahwana and set Sinta free; and finally (9) after Rahwana is killed, the kecak formation lines up facing the audience and is blessed again by the spiritual leader who once again sprinkles holy water.

The Ramayana kecak performance in Uluwatu Temple is based on the story of *Hanoman Obong* (I Made Sudira, interview 2022), with a number of modifications in certain scenes to entertain the audience, such as inviting the audience to dance or making jokes through the body language of the dancers or mixing Indonesian with English. As the main figure in the Ramayana kecak in Uluwatu Temple, Hanoman performs a variety of attractive, imitative, and responsive movements. His movements charm the audience because of their interactive patterns which imitate the movements of an agile, mischievous monkey.

The kecak performance, with the order described above, is accompanied by the singing and chanting of the kecak dancers who number around 80 people in total. They make circular formations and lines during each of the changes between scenes, and have the ability to create an atmosphere of sorrow, tension, or joy. The structure of the choreography is controlled by the Kecak coordinators, addressed as kecak 1, 2, and 3, who give codes for the dynamics that the other dancers must follow, known as *tukang tarik*. With their loud voices, they give cues to stop, slow down, or increase the volume of the *cak-cak-cak* chorus. The rhythmic stability is provided by another of the kecak dancers who makes the sound *pung-pung-pung*, in imitation of the *ketuk* instrument.

At the moment when Rahwana is defeated by Rama and Hanoman, if the weather is fine and the sky is clear, the sun helps create a dramatic atmosphere. Just as Rahwana is defeated, the horizon turns a copper red color and the sun can be seen slowly disappearing as the sky becomes dark and the somber music accompanies the dancers as they carry Rahwana's body off the stage.

All the different Sekaa that give kecak performances in Bali choose the late afternoon as their time of performance. There are no written rules about this but it is difficult to find a kecak performance earlier in the day. This phenomenon presented an interesting topic of discussion for the research team, and can be interpreted as indicating a connection between the Ramayana story, the setting sun, and the open natural environment.

DISCUSSION

The performance of the Ramayana kecak in Uluwatu Temple as a tourist performing art was studied through observation and the results of interviews with the performers. The findings consists of two main conceptions, namely the symbolic meaning of the front stage and backstage, and the spiritual aesthetics. In connection with this, the explanation is presented based on aspects of the dramaturgy of the front stage and the dramaturgy of the backstage. This explanation offers an important contribution to the dramaturgy that is practiced by kecak artists in Bali. The subject can be explored through a teaching known as *Desa* (place), *Kala* (time), and *Patra* (mood). This concept is a part of Balinese culture which is fundamental to the exploration of the dramaturgy of the outer stage (front stage) and inner stage (backstage).

Dramaturgy of the front stage

The performance of Ramayana kecak in Uluwatu Temple is a phenomenon of tourist art that is oriented towards entertaining tourists. Performances are managed based on the spiritual background and traditional background of Balinese culture (Seriasih 2019). The Ramayana kecak performers exist in two areas: in the front stage they express the story based on the scenario, while in the backstage they not only make physical preparations, including costumes and makeup but also prepare spiritually. From a spiritual point of view, the kecak dancers are bound closely to their customs and spiritual background as part of the Hindu community. The backstage is a sacred space that no-one may enter without the permission of the head of the group or the traditional spiritual leader.

The researchers based their understanding of the Ramayana kecak in Uluwatu Temple on the thought pattern of F. W. Dillstone, in which meaning is explored from symbolic thinking (Heisig 1988). This is because human beings have for a long time acted and communicated by reading symbols (Yunus 2020). Therefore, the actions and behavior of the subjects observed are considered in terms of their beliefs, customs, and actions. Hence, the focus on the front stage and backstage is a way of understanding the subjects studied. The subject of the front stage and backstage is a subject of *Desa* (place). However, the aspect of *Desa* is also related to *Kala* (time), which determines the attitudes of the dancers, and to *Patra* (mood), which is related to the actions that the Ramayana kecak performers should carry out. This is affirmed by Gharavi, who states that a new meaning can be discovered from a ritual practice by understanding the social aspect (Gharavi 2012).

The backstage and front stage are first of all understood symbolically as places that are sacred and profane. Based on Hindu customs and traditions in Bali, anything that is considered sacred is prioritized over something that is considered profane. This is also characterized by upper

and lower levels, where the actors in the story are positioned in different environments. Hence, it can be understood that the special characters exist in the upper position as something sacred and the kecak performers are in the lower position, symbolizing the profane.

Between the sacred and the profane is the process of transmission which connects the two. This is done by the traditional spiritual leader whose duties begin before the performers arrive and continue until after they have all gone home. The spiritual leader regards the entire area in and around the performance venue, including the backstage and front stage areas, as a mandala (Astra, interview 2022). The spiritual leader connects the supernatural with the real world. His duty is to calm the spirits and to protect the living. Therefore, all the performers must receive a blessing accompanied by the recitation of a prayer and sprinkling of water before they perform. The data analysis was based on the complementary aspects of the front stage and the backstage.

Front stage

The front stage is the stage for presentation, the place where the performers express themselves in accordance with the scenario of the story performed. In this case the story is the Ramayana, based on a structure in the form of a kecak dance, a performance which is unique in its use of a vocal gamelan ensemble. The formation of the dancers who vocalize the *cak-cak-cak* sounds is led by three men who lead the ensemble and provide rhythmic codes to cue different formations or to give space for the main figures to perform. One of the leaders is responsible for creating the rhythms by making the sound *pung-pung-pung*, while another is known as the *juru tarik*, and cues the other performers to speed up or to stop singing (Darmawan, Ardini, and Mudana 2020).

The front stage is the space where the performance begins and ends. A traditional spiritual leader recites prayers and sprinkles holy water at the beginning of the performance as the dancers create a circular formation which symbolizes unity, and at the end of the performance when they create a linear formation as a symbol of respect to the profane. In the performance, the figure of Sinta appears as a symbol of earth, facing up against the figure of Rahwana who symbolizes fire. The commander in chief of the army, Hanoman, is the symbol of air, Rama is the symbol of water, and the spiritual leader is the symbol of the existence of human beings and the bond between beginning and end, top and bottom. Hence, it can be concluded that the performance of the Ramayana kecak presents a display of cosmic balance.

Based on the symbolic structural understanding, structure can be defined as a cosmic arrangement that can connect both paradigmatically and syntagmatically to establish a symbolic constructive understanding. In the front stage area, which is understood to be a *mandala*, a complementary structure is formed between the upper realm (macrocosm or *bhuana ageng*) and the lower realm (microcosm or *bhuana alif*) which is the functional world of human existence. The horizontal construction is understood as the beginning and end that shapes cosmic balance. On the front stage, the mandala is formed from four spiritual elements, water, fire, air, and earth, which are balanced by the spiritual leader at the beginning and end of the performance, a concept known as *Rwa Bhineda* (Subekti 2021).

The spiritual leader is not a performer, and his involvement in the performance is to protect the balance of the performance, in particular from the symbolic spiritual aspect so that the four

elements remain in balance. Water is sprinkled in the backstage and front stage areas, a pillar of fire is lit in the middle of the performance arena, air is needed by everyone involved throughout the performance, and earth is the ground that all the performers stand on as they perform with bare feet.

The vocalization of the *cak-cak-cak* sounds in a rhythmic manner by the kecak dancers is an ancient expression that can be related to the understanding of a concept known as a 'young bee' (*anamin tavvan*), a buzzing sound made with the face turned downwards, as in a Shaivanist ritual, made by individuals in a *Sala* (large house) (Andrea Acri 2021). In other words, the sound of the kecak chant is like the sound of bees in a large house (the front stage).

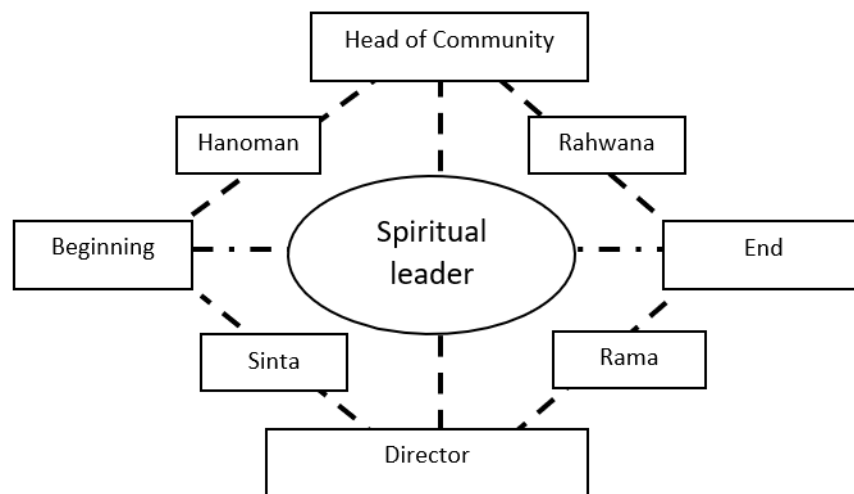


Diagram 1. Diagram of the dramaturgy of the *Ramayana Kecak* (Hidajat, Results of analysis)

Diagram 1 illustrates the dramaturgical formation which shows the importance of all the relationships with the spiritual leader. The presence of the spiritual leader is not as an actor. He possesses a transformative responsibility that is based on the performance of the *Sanghyang Dadari* ritual. Symbolically, the position of the spiritual leader is replaced by the kecak lamps while the performance is taking place. This symbolic position of the spiritual leader is the implementation of *Desa* (place).

In this illustration of the dramaturgical scheme, the spiritual leader is in the center. The spiritual leader carries out his duties from the beginning until the end of the performance. His purpose is to purify the performance and to recite prayers to ask for safety. This is the implementation of *Patra* (mood).

A range of Ramayana stories are presented symbolically, in the form of a drama, in a way that can be associated with the concept of the Hindu cosmos. The head of the Sekaa is synonymous with the transcendental powers that exist in the upper area (*Swar-Loka*), while the spiritual leader is synonymous with the existence of the universe that is positioned in the middle area (*Bwar-Loka*), and the director is synonymous with immanence and is positioned at the bottom (*Bhur-Loka*). This symbolism is the dramaturgical principle that is used in the Ramayana kecak performance. This principle is in accordance with the lives of the Balinese community who follow

the concepts of *kaje* and *kelod* (north/mountain-south/sea) as a form of duality in their lives. The front stage represents *kelod* or the south/sea.

This principle is also found in the Ramayana story, which contains an expression of duality between good and evil. Both good and evil exist forever in a balanced state, like the beginning and end of a cycle. A storyline is always constructed with a beginning and an end. The spiritual leader, or symbolically the kecak lamp, is the balancing factor. This continues to be implemented with the concept of *Rwa Bhineda* (the law of balance in life) (Wirawan 2018).

An illustration of this spiritual symbolism is the spiritual leader's duty to protect the condition of all the performers and to calm all the elements through his incantations and prayers with holy water. The position of the spiritual leader remains in a vertical range in order to enable the transmission to the backstage, which is sacred (*niskala*) and the front stage, which is profane (*sekala*), where the two complement each other with the symbols of the beginning and the end, understood as *Rwa Bhineda*. *Rwa* means two, and *Bhineda* means different. This concept is practiced as the spiritual aesthetic of Balinese artists (Ardana 2016).

The spiritual leader, who serves as the spiritual transmission, is present on the stage at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the performance. While the performance is taking place, his presence is replaced by a kecak lamp with five lights. The spiritual leader's presence is sacred in the front stage.

Dramaturgy of the backstage

The backstage area is also watched over by the spiritual leader, who applies chalk to the right and left temples of the performers, and on their foreheads, as they prepare to perform. Then the performers gather in groups with their own group leaders. The male kecak performers do not go inside but wait outside in the yard from the time they arrive until they are ready to perform.

The female performers go inside a room as soon as they arrive, and the male performers gather in a gazebo. Sometimes other more senior performers wait with them in this area while they carry out all the preparations by themselves.

By observing the behavior and actions of the performers in the backstage area, it is clear that they are as obedient as if they are performing an act of worship. The spiritual leader waits to serve the performers when they are ready to perform, and they stand before him as he recites an incantation and sprinkles holy water on them as they too recite a prayer.

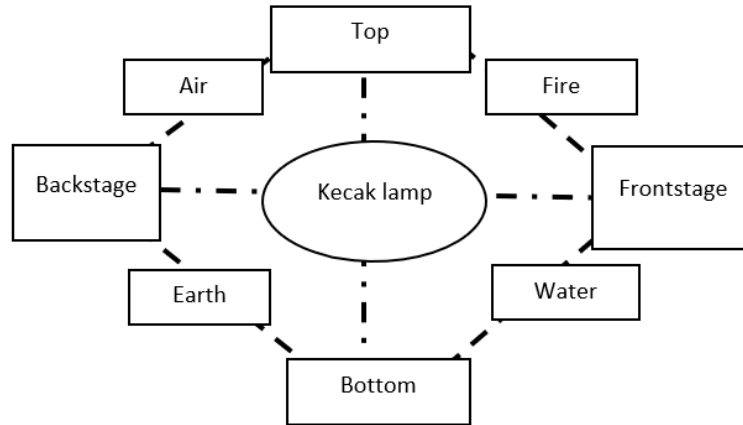


Diagram 2. Symbolism of the backstage and front stage (Hidajat, Results of analysis)

Diagram 2 is an illustration of the dramaturgical symbolic structure. The Ramayana kecak performance contains a construction of symbolic characterization in the Ramayana kecak story: Beginning+top = Hanoman (air), the symbol of life; beginning+bottom = Sinta (earth), or fertility; top+end = Rahwana (fire) or anger/wrath; end+bottom = Rama (water) or disaster/disturbance. Human life in the level between the top and bottom is a medium of transmission to achieve cosmic balance, which is understood in the concept *Tri Hita Karana* (Wijaya 2018).

It is the duty of the spiritual leader to achieve symbolic stability between the backstage and front stage, and between all the symbolic elements. The element of air is synonymous with Hanoman, who is the son of the god of wind, Dewa Bayu. The element of fire is represented by Rahwana, who is the pupil of the god Shiva, and Shiva's power is inside Rahwana. Sinta represents the element of earth, or the god of fertility, and Rama is the avatar of the god Vishnu who represents the element of water as the symbol of life, peace, and prosperity for all the universe.

The one person who is present but does not play any part in the actual performance of the Ramayana story is the spiritual leader. He is not an actor but a holy man who performs ritual acts to ward off evil spirits (*pelukatan* or *tolak bala*) in order to be blessed with peace and calm, and to keep away any negative influences. This is the role played by the spiritual leader in the Ramayana kecak art performance in Uluwatu Temple.

The veneration of the god Shiva is enabled through the elements of water, fire, air, and earth. This can be connected to the Brama Mantra which symbolizes the four points of the compass: *Sadyojata* (east), *Vamadeva* (north), *Tatpuruṣa* (west), and *Aghora* (south) (Andrea Acri 2021). In the Ramayana kecak performance, all the elements are united along with the setting of the sun, and in the past this has been understood as a sensation of spiritual aesthetics. The underlying concept is *Patra* (mood). The setting of the sun on the horizon is one of the spirits of Shaivism in Bali (Andrea Acri 2021). Shiva, as the god of destruction and also the protector, shows his existence as the kecak lamp with its five lanterns of fire, in the center of the stage. The split gateway, or Candi Bentar, serves as the main entrance and exit for all the dancers, and the mandala circle is the sacred center of the stage and the sunset. The setting of the sun is understood as a

spiritual aesthetic that is related to *taksu*. The sunset on the horizon is a form of *pujabakti* ritual to summon the god Shiva, the god of all the dancers.

Spiritual Aesthetic

The aesthetic concept of the dramaturgy implemented in the Ramayana kecak in Uluwatu Temple is not merely formalistic in nature. It is the result of rehearsal, which is regarded as the basis of skill, and the enthusiasm that emerges from the belief and understanding that dancing is an offering to Sang Hyang Widi Wasa (Mariasa 2015). The practices implemented in the tourist performances of the Ramayana kecak display a spiritual behavior. The social actions of the dancers are founded on the ethics, morals, and behavior that they adhere to in their community. The Ramayana kecak dancers are committed to adopting their particular positions as a responsibility to their characterization. Hence, they cannot decide by themselves to change roles. This is not only in accordance with the customs that prevail but also due to seniority. They are given the responsibility and entrusted to play a particular role under the guidance of their seniors. This structural orientation shapes the acting system. People cannot choose their acting roles themselves but must receive the recommendation of a more senior dancer.

When the responsibility and conviction of an actor has emerged and become sufficiently established, a special ritual is performed in order to bring out the actor's *taksu*, which is considered an important element of traditional dramaturgy in Balinese performing arts. A performing art actor is required to have the ability to radiate charisma, known as *taksu*, which generates a magical, ferocious, gentle, or captivating charm in their movements, voice, or humorous body movements, or in various other aspects that have a strong technical basis.

Taksu is the spiritual aesthetic that is acquired through a learning system based on apprenticeship, learning directly from a senior artist. In this way, the *taksu* of the teacher can be passed on to the student, and may even be acquired through the power of magical objects such as costumes. This involves a special *pengruwatan* ritual known as *Tumpek Landep*.

As a spiritual aesthetic, *taksu* possesses a duality: *niskala* (sacred) and *sekala* (profane), which can be acquired by an actor who has already reached the level of *santarasa*, or the peak of spiritual aesthetic experience.

CONCLUSION

The performance of the Ramayana kecak story in Uluwatu Temple is a traditional Balinese dramaturgical model. Its concept is founded on spiritual Hindu ethics, aesthetics, and morals. The front stage and backstage are used as principles for building a construction with a system of aesthetical production based on *Tri Hita Karana* and *Rwa Bhineda*. The front stage is the mandala, the place where the Ramayana story is performed. In structural and symbolic terms, it represents a union between Rama, the symbol of water, Rahwana, the symbol of fire, Hanoman, the symbol of air, and Sinta, the symbol of earth. They unite to form a cosmic balance with the aid of the spiritual leader. The backstage is spiritual in nature, and a *pujabakti* space where spiritual acts are carried out to ward off evil spirits (*tolak bala*) generated by the elements of water, fire, air, and

earth that are formed from the microcosm (*bhuana alit*) and all the events of the performance as the macrocosm (*bhuana agung*) in the hope of ensuring a safe and smooth performance.

The aesthetics in the *Ramayana kecak* art performance in Uluwatu Temple are sourced from local spiritual values, based on the concept of *Rwa Bhineda*, a form of adoration ritual to Shiva. The spirit of the setting sun is the spiritual aesthetic that gives rise to *taksu*. The backstage and front stage are a duality in the dramaturgy of the *Ramayana kecak* performing art. This is intended as a discovery of the wealth of spiritual aesthetics which differ from those in western dramaturgy, and the behavior that creates a duality between technique and feeling, action and appreciation.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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