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PERFORMING THE "BALINESENESS": Balinese Dance Classes within Ubud Creative Tourism

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Abstract

This article examines how cultural experiences are created and negotiated within the landscape of creative tourism in Ubud, using Balinese dance classes as a case study. Creative tourism is not only a space for the exchange of cultural knowledge and skills between tourists and local communities, but also a field where cultural capital, economic interests, and power relations continuously shape the production and perception of Balinese culture. In this study, Balinese dance classes are understood as a performative field in which "Balineseness" is simplified and negotiated. This research employs an ethnographic method, involving semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The findings show that creative tourism remains an opportunity for local communities to gain economic benefits from their cultural expertise. However, the scale and sustainability of these benefits are strongly influenced by economic capital, language skills, social networks, and symbolic legitimacy. The challenges of cultural commodification are interpreted differently by local actors as part of the realities of tourism practices in Bali.

Keywords: creative tourism; Balinese dance; cultural capital; power relations; Ubud.

Introduction

Tourism in Bali is inseparable from the role of culture and is therefore frequently described as cultural tourism. Since the early stages of tourism development, Balinese culture—particularly performing arts, rituals, and everyday aesthetic practices—has functioned as both a social foundation and a key attraction for visitors. Geriya (1996) defines cultural tourism as a form of tourism that relies on culture, including artistic expressions, as its primary resource and appeal. This definition remains relevant in understanding Bali's tourism landscape, where culture is not merely displayed but actively lived, reproduced, and negotiated in daily social life.

Cultural tourism facilitates the presentation of diverse cultural forms—ranging from artistic performances to broader patterns of social life—as primary

attractions. The close interrelationship between culture and tourism positions cultural events and expressions as significant motivations for travel, while tourism practices themselves simultaneously influence and reshape cultural production. In recent decades, however, this relationship has increasingly been conceptualized explicitly as a form of consumption (Richards, 2018:2). In the context of Bali—particularly Ubud—cultural tourism has become progressively oriented toward maximizing visitor numbers and economic returns. This shift has contributed to the standardization of performances and to a gradual transformation of cultural meaning, whereby lived practices are reconfigured as touristic commodities. As Gao (2023:126) argues, cultural tourism inevitably entails processes of curation aimed at responding to market (tourist) demands, often articulated through the language of "trends" and distinctive "unique selling propositions."

This cultural orientation is clearly reflected in Ubud, which has emerged as one of the most prominent models of cultural tourism development in Bali. Ubud's tourism identity is built upon its strong association with the arts, spiritual practices, and philosophies of harmonious coexistence between humans, nature, and the divine. Local cultural expression is not only presented through performances and festivals, but also embedded in everyday practices, spatial arrangements, and community activities. However, alongside these ideals, cultural tourism in Ubud also faces structural challenges, most notably the risk of cultural commodification, where cultural expressions are simplified, packaged, and transformed into consumable products for tourist markets.

Tourism-related challenges in Bali tend to intensify when development policies prioritize visitor numbers and economic growth over social and cultural sustainability. An overemphasis on quantitative indicators often marginalizes local voices and reduces culture to a marketable asset. Sustainable tourism development, therefore, requires a more balanced approach that integrates ecological, social, and cultural considerations, particularly at the community level. One alternative that has gained increasing attention is creative tourism, which emphasizes participatory experiences, learning, and co-creation between tourists and host communities.

Within creative tourism, local knowledge and cultural practices are not positioned merely as spectacles to be consumed, but as interactive processes that invite visitors to engage more deeply with local ways of life (Richard & Wilson, 2006). Co-creation allows tourists to participate actively in cultural production, while local communities are positioned as knowledge holders, instructors, and cultural mediators. In this framework, local wisdom is expected to function not simply as an aesthetic supplement, but as a guiding principle for tourism innovation rooted in Balinese cultural values. Creative tourism thus offers opportunities to mobilize local skills, expertise, and traditions through a wide

range of activities, including art, crafts, gastronomy, health and healing, literature, spirituality, nature-based practices, and sports (Richards & Raymond, 2000).

In practice, creative tourism in Ubud often takes the form of short courses, workshops, and immersive learning experiences, one of the most prominent being Balinese dance classes for tourists. In these classes, members of the local community typically assume the role of instructors and, in some cases, program owners or managers. While this arrangement suggests opportunities for local empowerment, it also raises important questions regarding equity and access. Not all local actors who possess similar cultural knowledge and artistic skills are able to benefit equally from creative tourism. Differences in economic resources, education, language proficiency, and social networks significantly influence who is able to participate and profit sustainably.

Balinese dance classes should therefore be understood not merely as spaces of artistic instruction, but as performative arenas where cultural identity is curated, embodied, and transformed into symbolic products for global audiences. Through these practices, tourists are offered an experience of being "almost Balinese," an identity that is temporarily assumed through bodily discipline, movement, costume, and performance. This simulated identity reflects the performative nature of creative tourism, where cultural authenticity is not fixed but continuously negotiated between market expectations and local cultural frameworks.

Ubud's position as both a major tourist destination and an established cultural center makes it a strategic site for examining the dynamics of creative tourism. Historically, Ubud has been projected as a center of excellence for Balinese art and tourism. Since the early twentieth century, the region has been particularly renowned for its performing arts, even more so than for painting and sculpture. Dancers and gamelan musicians from Ubud and Peliatan represented Bali at the Paris Colonial Exhibition in 1931 under the leadership of Tjokorda Gde Raka Soekawati (Picard, 1996). This event played a crucial role in shaping international perceptions of Balinese culture.

The early international exposure of Balinese performing arts cannot be separated from the influence of foreign artists and cultural intermediaries such as Walter Spies. Acting as a cultural curator, Spies contributed to the simplification and aesthetic framing of Balinese art forms to make them more accessible to European audiences. His extensive photographic documentation of Balinese performing arts further reinforced particular representations of Balinese culture within global artistic and academic circles (Putra & Hitchcock, 2021).

These historical processes demonstrate that Balinese performing arts—particularly in Ubud—have long been shaped by external gazes, raising critical questions about local agency in defining what is considered authentic or

representative of Balinese identity. Ubud also has a long-standing record of creative tourism practices characterized by collaboration and co-creation. Early partnerships between foreign artists such as Walter Spies and Beryl de Zoete and local artists, including Wayan Limbak, contributed to the development of new performance forms such as the Kecak dance and to the publication of Dance and Drama in Bali (Erawati, 2019). The later formation of the Pita Maha artists' association marked an important moment in the institutionalization of artistic collaboration in Ubud. MacRae (2016) describes this association as a cosmopolitan movement with an international orientation that sought to sustain artistic livelihoods while engaging with global audiences.

While such collaborations supported artistic continuity and innovation, they also illustrate how aesthetic exploration in Ubud has often been shaped by external demand and market preferences, particularly those of Western audiences. Contemporary creative tourism practices continue to operate within this tension. On the one hand, they create spaces for cultural exchange, learning, and economic opportunity. On the other hand, they risk reinforcing asymmetrical power relations in which cultural narratives are controlled by actors with greater symbolic, economic, and institutional capital. Based on this context, the present study aims to examine the development of creative tourism in Ubud through a case study of Balinese dance classes. It seeks to analyze how various forms of capital shape the positions of local actors and how power relations influence their access to sustainable economic and symbolic benefits.

Literature Review

Creative tourism therefore cannot be separated from broader power–knowledge relations. Narratives of empowerment, authenticity, and opportunity are often produced and circulated by actors who occupy privileged positions within the tourism industry, including local elites, cultural institutions, and tourism managers. Within this context, access to opportunities in creative tourism is shaped by the distribution and conversion of different forms of capital. Actors who possess higher levels of cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital are more likely to influence decisions regarding legitimacy, authenticity, and value.

Conversely, local communities with limited access to these forms of capital are often compelled to adapt to market expectations in order to remain economically viable. As a result, their bargaining position in determining the direction and meaning of creative tourism practices is constrained. Despite the growing body of research on creative tourism in Bali and on the role of performing arts within the tourism industry, few studies have specifically examined Balinese dance classes as performative spaces where identity, power relations, and cultural capital are concretely negotiated.

Creative tourism has been widely discussed in international tourism studies literature and continues to evolve as a field of inquiry (Tan et al, 2013; Bestari et al, 2022; Bestari & Widhiastini, 2023) Much of this scholarship adopts a tourism studies perspective, focusing on destination development and visitor experience, while fewer studies employ a cultural studies lens that foregrounds the position of local communities and the socio-cultural implications of creative tourism.

The work of Greg Richards constitutes a foundational reference in this field. In The Challenge of Creative Tourism (2016), Richards describes how culture has become a new form of economic capital driving tourism production and consumption. Creative tourism is conceptualized as a shift from traditional cultural and heritage tourism, emphasizing intangible heritage, creativity, and symbolic capital over material artifacts (Richards & Raymond, 2000; Richards, 2016). Richards (2019) further highlights the potential of creative tourism for smaller communities while warning of "creativity traps" that encourage imitation rather than locally grounded innovation.

Souca (2020) emphasizes the role of creative tourism in engaging local artists and communities directly in cultural learning programs, while Blapp and Mitas (2017) argue that community-based management can mitigate power imbalances and cultural identity loss. Studies on Balinese dance and tourism similarly highlight adaptation to globalization and market demand, including the emergence of dance classes as experiential tourism products (Abdillah et al., 2022; Putri, 2023; Fisabilillah et al., 2025). However, analyses that explicitly address power relations and capital distribution within Balinese dance classes remain limited.

Research Methods

This qualitative research was carried out based on the ethnographic method by focusing on one example of a creative tourism program, namely the Balinese Dance class. Yusuf (2014) calls it a strategy that emphasizes the search for meaning, understanding, concepts, characteristics, symptoms, symbols, and descriptions of a phenomenon presented narratively. The ethnographic approach was chosen because it allows researchers to observe firsthand how Balinese dance class practices take place as performative acts, where cultural identity is not only taught but also staged and negotiated. The position of the researcher as a Balinese or a local researcher allows closer access to the internal dynamics of the studio, while at the same time demanding critical reflection on the power relations involved.

To obtain data, research was carried out by applying participation observation. Then followed by semi-structured interviews and document studies involving previous research results, online and offline news, and archives related to the research topic. The method used by Cultural Studies researchers is also

known as the naturalistic method because the research is carried out under real conditions, so that qualitative research does not just describe socio-cultural phenomena but finds the ideology hidden behind them (Ratna, 2010: 94-95).

The research period occurred from September to December 2025. The research took place in Ubud Village with the consideration that this place is a Culture Area which stores various forms of creative tourism practices, including Balinese dance classes. Observation was carried out by studios and museums owned by the Balinese people domiciled in Ubud who provide Balinese dance class programs for tourists. The criteria for the informants sought include teachers, owners, or studio managers who are local Balinese people who are domiciled or come from Ubud. The majority of informants obtained were women in the age range of 30-40 years.

The researcher approaches first and asks permission from the owner and manager. This is not difficult to do because Ubud has long been a research location for students. The real challenge arises when permission has been obtained and observation is continued to the interview stage. Most informants tend to be reluctant at the beginning when they hear the researcher ask for permission to conduct an interview. After a fairly long explanation in a more casual manner and involving the use of the local language, the informant then agreed to be interviewed. But another problem came: time constraints. Because the informants have a fairly busy teaching schedule and other activities, the average interview takes place interspersed with teaching and serving other guests. One of the informants even needed two interview visits which were delayed quite a long time because of his busyness. The average length of an interview is ninety minutes.

After the data collection is completed, the researcher conducts an analysis of interview transcripts and field notes . The data analysis method used in this study is a qualitative model analysis technique. Miles & Huberman (1994) state this technique as an interactive analysis model and a comparative analysis model, where there are three stages in analyzing data. This stage includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. That's mean that activities in qualitative data analysis are carried out interactively and continuously until they are completed and no new data or information is obtained. The results of the data analysis are then presented in the form of a descriptive article narrative.

Results and Discussion

The Emergence of Creative Tourism in Ubud

As a development of cultural tourism, creative tourism in Ubud is largely unrecognized as a distinct concept by the local community. Although the practices associated with creative tourism have existed for a long time and have

provided livelihoods for local residents, they are generally perceived as part of cultural tourism. This perception aligns with the long-standing positioning of cultural tourism as the core paradigm of Bali's tourism development (Picard, 1996:121).

The early emergence of creative tourism practices in Ubud can be traced to the 1970s, when the area gained prominence as a tourist destination following the expansion of Ngurah Rai International Airport. During this period, Puri Ubud began to open Puri Saren Agung to visitors, albeit in a limited capacity, primarily through ritual offerings such as semanggen and ancak saji (Putri, 2023: 4–5). Prior to this, Puri Saren Agung had also functioned as a homestay for guests associated with the palace family.

As tourist arrivals increased, local residents gradually transformed parts of their homes into homestays. The term "guest" became commonly used to refer to tourists who frequently stayed in local accommodations or visited neighborhood restaurants. Tourists who remained for extended periods were often socially integrated into the community and, in some cases, symbolically recognized as family members through the adoption of local names placed before their original names (MacRae, 2016: 19).

Local artists also began to respond to these developments by offering opportunities for tourists to learn Balinese music, dance, sculpture, and painting. Some artists established partnerships with travel agencies and promoted art courses aimed at tourists seeking immersive cultural experiences distinct from the coastal tourism model of Kuta (Picard, 1996: 86). These initiatives can be regarded as the initial entry point for creative tourism in Ubud, characterized by art-based workshops that facilitated direct interaction between tourists and the local community. At this stage, such practices were informal, home-based, and largely unstandardized, with minimal commodification. This observation supports Bestari's (2022: 139) argument that the foundations of Ubud's creative tourism emerged as early as the late 1920s, long before the term "creative tourism" was formally introduced in the 2000s.

Creative tourism in Ubud continued to develop under the broader framework of cultural tourism. Between the 1980s and 1990s, art institutions such as museums and studios began to offer creative tourism activities in a more structured manner, incorporating simple schedules and curricula. Following the introduction of the creative tourism concept by Richards and Raymond (2000), programs diversified further in the 2000s, encompassing workshops in silver jewelry making, batik painting, ceramics, and other art forms. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when Ubud experienced a shift toward wellness tourism,

creative tourism activities increasingly incorporated healing-oriented elements, including yoga, herbal and healthy food workshops, sound healing, and meditation (Sutarya, 2022; Hubner et al., 2025).

In the post-pandemic period, creative tourism in Ubud has become more prominent and is increasingly aligned with the principles of regenerative tourism, which emphasize community-based initiatives and local participation. Examples include the integration of cultural narratives into walking tours (Febriani & Muttaqin, 2025; Utami et al., 2024) and the combination of festival tourism with cultural workshop activities (Budarsana, 2025). In this phase, local communities are increasingly positioned as the primary implementers and providers of creative tourism activities, often accompanied by reflective discussions on cultural sustainability, commercialization, and the dynamics of creative tourism in Bali.

Balinese Dance Classes as Performative Spaces of Cultural Experience

Spaces dedicated to the teaching of Balinese dance are widely distributed across Ubud in the form of studios, museums, and community-based art groups. According to the *Gianyar Regency Cultural Office* (2024), there are 466 traditional dance groups across Gianyar Regency, with 72 art studios recorded in Ubud Village alone. These figures include various types of art groups, such as those focused on crafts, sculpture, painting, decoration, and visual design.

Efforts to market Balinese dance classes to tourists have been evident since Ubud's early development as a tourism destination. One of the pioneering institutions is Balerung Mandera Srinertya Waditra, commonly known as Balerung Stage, managed by the Gunung Sari Music and Dance Group in Puri Peliatan. The group was initiated by Gung Kak Mandera, a renowned Legong dance maestro and a member of the Dutch East Indies cultural delegation to the Paris Expo in 1930. Through international cultural missions, Gung Kak Mandera involved dancers and gamelan musicians from Peliatan, reinforcing the global presence of Balinese performing arts. This commitment to sustainability has continued through daily programs at Balerung Stage, even after his passing in 1986, under the leadership of his son, Gung Aji Oka Dalem.

Similarly, the Agung Rai Museum of Art (ARMA) has consistently provided cultural learning opportunities since its establishment in 1996. ARMA offers free Balinese dance classes for local children and paid classes for tourists, emphasizing the preservation of the Peliatan dance tradition. As stated by Agung Rai, "If we stop dancing and teaching the next generation, then it is only a matter of time that the style will be forgotten" (interview, September 28, 2025).

Other institutions, such as Pondok Pekak Library, Sanggar Cudamani, Sanggar Sri Padma, and Kerta Art Studio, also contribute to the dissemination of Balinese dance education. Additionally, several hotels in Ubud provide short

dance classes as part of their guest experience, further embedding Balinese dance within the creative tourism landscape.

Thus far, no definitive data are available regarding the exact number of Balinese dance classes operating in Ubud. This is largely because not all classes are formally promoted as creative tourism programs; many function as in-house cultural activities within hotels or private villas. Similarly, not all Balinese dance studios in Ubud offer courses specifically designed for tourists. This study identified six Balinese dance classes provided either by traditional community-based studios, multi-disciplinary dance centers, or as part of hotel and villa programming. Of these, three venues were selected as case studies for in-depth analysis.

Participants in these classes are diverse; however, the majority consist of dancers and dance enthusiasts. All informants indicated that most of their students are practicing dancers in their home countries, including performers of salsa, tango, and belly dance. They originate from various countries, such as Japan, Australia, the United States, and Russia. Their interest is frequently motivated by curiosity about the distinctive movement vocabulary of Balinese dance, which they perceive as enriching their broader understanding of global dance traditions. It is not uncommon for participants to return multiple times enrolling in intensive month-long programs focused on mastering a specific dance, as follows:

> "There are always tourists who come specifically to study dance here for two weeks up to a full month. Most of them already have a foundation in Balinese dance and therefore request instruction in particular pieces such as Oleg Tamulilingan or Margapati. They are typically professional dancers or arts students specializing in the study of Balinese dance." (TN, Balinese dance teacher, 40s)

In addition to experienced dancers, some tourists participate primarily to gain a cultural learning experience despite having no prior dance training. One participant interviewed during the observation described her fascination with the performances she had watched prior to attending the class, which motivated her to enroll after discovering information about the program:

> "I watched Balinese dance performances several times in Ubud and amazed by it. So I think I should give it a try at least once. Turns out it's quite hard and energetic, I barely can follow the teacher but I think that's okay for a first timer. Now that I learned the basic, I will never see Balinese dancer the same way again. I respect them so much" (VL, woman from Italy)

Another informant reported receiving several invitations to teach outside Bali, including in Jakarta and Malaysia. These invitations reportedly originated from tourists who were highly satisfied with her teaching approach, which they described as accessible and patient. Some of these individuals manage dance

studios in their home countries and expressed interest in establishing Balinese dance classes there due to strong student demand.

> "I have been invited to reside in Jakarta and even in Malaysia because they greatly appreciate my teaching approach. They said many students became interested after they shared videos of the class with their friends."(KR, Balinese dance teacher, 50s)

This evidence suggests that Balinese dance classes primarily attract a relatively specific audience composed of dancers and dedicated enthusiasts. In many cases, interest is initially generated through exposure to Balinese dance performances in the Ubud area, which subsequently encourages participants to pursue more structured and immersive learning experiences.

Staging Balineseness

Across the observed sites, Balinese dance classes generally follow a similar instructional structure. Sessions begin with an introduction to participants' backgrounds, particularly their prior dance experience. Instruction then proceeds with basic dance postures, including sirang foot positioning, *agem* postures, and characteristic eye movements (*nyeledet*). Following mastery of basic movements, participants are introduced to simplified dance sequences accompanied initially by vocal cues from instructors, and later by recorded gamelan music. Female participants are typically taught *Puspanjali* or *Pendet* dances, while male participants learn *Wirayuda* or *Baris* dances. These dances are selected due to their relatively simple movement patterns and short duration.

This instructional standardization reflects an implicit framework through which tourists are guided toward a symbolic experience of "becoming Balinese." However, this simplified learning process contrasts with the complexity of Balinese dance, which integrates *wiraga* (physical discipline), *wirama* (rhythmic coordination), and *wirasa* (emotional and symbolic expression). While tourists may acquire basic movement sequences, deeper philosophical and ritual meanings are often omitted due to time constraints and language limitations. The final stage of the class typically involves a collective performance, often documented through photographs or videos. These materials serve as symbolic proof of cultural participation and reinforce the narrative that tourists have successfully experienced Balinese identity through dance.

Balinese dance classes in Ubud constitute a social field in which various actors—teachers, studio owners, cultural institutions, and tourists—interact through the accumulation and conversion of different forms of capital. Dance instructors seek to transform cultural capital, acquired through long-term training and ritual performance (*ngayah*), into economic and symbolic capital. Recognition as a competent teacher is often reinforced through performance experience, educational background, and language proficiency. Formal training

and higher education in dance or *karawitan* provide legitimacy, while foreign language skills facilitate communication with tourists. Trust is further shaped by online reviews and promotional narratives emphasizing authenticity.

However, access to economic benefits remains uneven. Studio ownership requires significant financial resources, and teachers are typically compensated per class, with no income stability. As a result, local instructors remain economically vulnerable, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite possessing substantial cultural capital, many teachers lack access to economic, social, and symbolic capital, limiting their ability to control the value and meaning of the cultural products they deliver.

On average, a single Balinese dance class is priced between IDR 200,000 and IDR 350,000 per participant, with fees varying according to duration, which typically ranges from one to two hours per session. Studios offering private course packages of ten sessions may charge up to IDR 3,500,000. However, this total amount is not fully allocated to the instructor. Dance teachers generally receive between IDR 100,000 and IDR 200,000 per participant each session. Although such earnings may be considerable when demand is steady, requests for classes tend to be irregular, resulting in income instability for instructors. The situation differs for individuals who also own the studio, as they usually possess greater and more stable economic capital.

Balinese dance classes function as performative spaces where cultural commodification and preservation intersect. While commodification is often viewed critically, local communities in Ubud tend to perceive it as an inevitable aspect of tourism. As long as sacred and ritual boundaries are maintained, the commodification of non-sacred cultural forms is considered acceptable and even beneficial. This perspective aligns with Bai & Weng (2023), who argue that commodification at superficial cultural levels can support the preservation of core cultural practices. Economic benefits derived from creative tourism contribute to sustaining artistic traditions and reinforcing community participation in cultural governance.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Balinese dance classes within Ubud's creative tourism landscape function not only as intercultural learning spaces but also as performative arenas in which Balinese identity is produced, negotiated, and commodified. While creative tourism offers economic opportunities for local communities, access to these benefits is uneven and shaped by disparities in cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital. The findings indicate that cultural commodification is not uniformly perceived as a threat by local actors. Instead, it is often understood as an inherent aspect of tourism practice, provided that boundaries between sacred and profane cultural domains are maintained.

Commodification at the superficial level may, in some cases, support the preservation of core cultural practices by generating economic resources for sustainability. Nevertheless, creative tourism remains embedded in power relations that require critical attention. Future research should therefore explore policy and management models that address structural inequalities, enabling local communities not only to perform culture but also to exercise control over its meaning and economic value.

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