

BALINESE HINDU COLOR: A Multidimensional Symbolic System from Cosmology to Experience

Ida Bagus Gde Yudha Triguna^{1*}, I Putu Suweka Oka Sugiharta²

¹Universitas Hindu Indonesia; ² Universitas Hindu Negeri I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa
Denpasar

E-mail: ¹ajiktriguna353@gmail.com; ²suwekaoka@gmail.com

*Corresponding author's email: ajiktriguna353@gmail.com

Submitted: 13 May 2026; Accepted: 26 May 2026; Published: 29 May 2026

Abstract

This article explores color as a polysemy symbolic system within Balinese Hinduism, with attention to the relationships between cosmological structure, ritual practice, and religious experience. Whereas previous research on religion and anthropology has largely treated symbols as sets of meaning or as vehicles of ritual transformation, color as a potent symbolic medium has received less attention (to say nothing of close attention to non-Western contexts like Bali). This study employs a qualitative critical literature review, integrated with symbolic hermeneutic and phenomenological analyses. The findings show that color functions in three interrelated levels. *First*, as a cosmological structure demarcating spatial orientation and sacred ordering. *Second*, as a ritual medium mediating the relationship between human and divine. *Third*, as an embodied experience shaping religious emotions and awareness. This study introduces a multidimensional framework that reframes color as part of a system of meaning, positioning colors as an interrelated symbolic system that can consider cosmology, practice, and experience. This study advances symbolic anthropology and religious studies through a contextual, experiential, and integrative lens by marrying classical theoretical perspectives with local Balinese knowledge.

Keywords: color symbolism; Balinese Hinduism; cosmology; ritual practice; religious experience.

Introduction

National symbols are constantly studied in the context of religion and culture. "What is culture but a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz, 1973); within symbolic anthropology, Clifford Geertz conceptualized symbols as systems of meaning structuring human understanding via "webs of significance." Within this perspective, symbols can be viewed as interpretive frameworks that structure

experience. Similarly, Turner, (1969) sees symbols as transformative media within ritual processes, especially in liminal stages where participants undergo transitions of status and consciousness. (Eliade, 1959), on the other hand, treats symbols as manifestations of the sacred (hierophany) that make divine presence possible within an otherwise profane world.

However, much of the ongoing scholarship remains general about symbols, failing to attend to specific symbolic media such as color. Emerging work in religious studies has turned to material, experiential, and affective registers, noting that symbols are not merely interpreted but also embodied and experienced (Morgan, 2021; Taves, 2020). As a complex symbolic system in itself, however, Western scholarship has underexplored color, particularly in non-Western settings rich with cosmological significance for colored phenomena, as is the case in Balinese Hinduism more broadly, across its ritual life and religious experience.

For Balinese Hinduism, color is not simply a practical decoration but a means of deepening the connection between humans and the cosmos through a system of symbolic language. It functions as a medium by which cosmological structures are rendered in space and action. As scholars of Bali have stressed, symbols do not only represent the “real” but are embedded in lived social and religious realities. So color should be seen not just as a visual sign, but as a medium of experience that connects cosmological, ritual, and existential dimensions.

Discussions on symbolism in Balinese Hinduism have previously centered largely on ritual and cosmology. Nevertheless, most of these studies emphasize certain facets and do not combine them into a holistic analytical approach. This article fills this gap by proposing an integrative understanding of color as a multidimensional symbolic system. Accordingly, this study aims to address three questions: (1) how is color structured in Balinese Hindu cosmology? (2) How is color actualized in ritual practices? Moreover, (3) what role does color play in shaping religious experience?

Literature Review

Color occupies a fundamental position in Balinese Hinduism, functioning far beyond aesthetic decoration. It constitutes a symbolic language through which cosmological principles, theological concepts, ritual practices, and social identities are expressed and reproduced. In Balinese religious life, colors organize sacred space, distinguish ritual objects, embody divine manifestations, and communicate philosophical understandings of harmony between humans, nature, and the divine. This literature review synthesizes major scholarly perspectives concerning color in Balinese Hinduism through four principal

themes: cosmological symbolism, ritual practice, material culture, and theoretical interpretations.

One of the earliest scholarly observations concerning Balinese color symbolism appears in the work of Geertz (1973), who argued that Balinese culture organizes social and religious life according to symbolic systems rather than merely practical considerations. Although Geertz did not specifically focus on color, his interpretive approach demonstrates that colors function as cultural texts whose meanings derive from shared symbolic structures.

Central to Balinese cosmology is the doctrine of *Nawa Sanga*, the sacred spatial system dividing the universe into nine cardinal directions. Each direction corresponds to a particular deity, color, ritual function, and natural force. The system reflects an adaptation of Hindu cosmology within Balinese religious traditions. The principal color associations include: white (Iswara – East); Red (Brahma – South); Yellow (Mahadeva – West); Black (Vishnu – North); and Multicolored or mixed colors (Shiva – Center)

These colors organize temple layouts, ceremonial offerings, sacred banners, ritual clothing, and even village spatial planning. According to Lansing (2006), Balinese cosmology should be understood as a dynamic ecological and religious system in which symbolic classifications regulate relationships between humans and their environment. The *Nawa Sanga* framework also intersects with the philosophical concept of *Rwa Bhineda*, the principle of complementary duality. Rather than representing oppositional binaries in conflict, Balinese thought understands contrasting colors—particularly black and white—as mutually necessary forces producing cosmic balance. This differs significantly from Western symbolic traditions where black frequently connotes evil while white signifies moral purity.

Anthropological studies consistently demonstrate that color acquires meaning primarily through ritual performance. Rituals transform abstract symbolic associations into lived religious experiences. Hobart, et al. (1996) emphasize that Balinese ceremonies integrate visual symbolism with sound, movement, scent, and material offerings, producing multisensory religious experiences. Within this ritual context, colors function as communicative media linking devotees with divine powers.

One of the clearest examples appears in the preparation of *banten*, the elaborate ritual offerings that constitute an essential element of Balinese Hindu worship. Each component—including flowers, rice, leaves, fruits, and cloth—is carefully selected according to prescribed color symbolism. For example: white flowers represent purity and Iswara; red flowers symbolize creative energy associated with Brahma; yellow flowers invoke prosperity and Mahadeva; blue or black elements correspond to Vishnu; and mixed-color flowers represent Shiva and cosmic unity.

Rather than arbitrary aesthetic choices, these combinations reproduce cosmological order during ritual performance. Similarly, sacred cloths such as poleng, characterized by alternating black-and-white checkered patterns, embody Rwa Bhineda philosophy. Researchers such as Hauser-Schäublin (2003) argue that poleng should not be interpreted merely as decorative textile but as a visual representation of balance between opposing yet complementary cosmic forces. Temple festivals further reinforce color symbolism through ceremonial umbrellas, banners, masks, costumes, and processional decorations. During these events, colors distinguish ritual roles while simultaneously marking sacred transitions between ordinary and divine space.

Balinese artistic production cannot be separated from religious practice. Architecture, sculpture, painting, dance costumes, and ritual objects all employ color according to symbolic conventions. According to Forge (1978), traditional Southeast Asian art often functions as an extension of ritual rather than independent aesthetic expression. In Bali, this principle is particularly evident because artistic production remains embedded within temple ceremonies and communal religious life. Temple architecture demonstrates carefully regulated color usage. White limestone, black volcanic stone, gold ornamentation, and brightly painted carvings collectively express sacred hierarchy rather than merely visual beauty.

Likewise, Balinese masks used in ritual dramas employ distinctive color schemes to characterize divine beings, ancestors, demons, and mythological heroes. These visual codes allow audiences to recognize moral and cosmological identities immediately. Scholars of Balinese dance similarly note that costume colors communicate theological meanings. White garments often signify priestly purity, while red costumes emphasize dynamic spiritual power. Gold decoration frequently represents divine radiance or sacred authority.

Thus, color functions as a semiotic system permeating material culture. Semiotic theories provide useful frameworks for understanding Balinese color symbolism. Following Saussure's conception of sign systems, colors may be understood as cultural signs whose meanings emerge through socially established conventions rather than intrinsic properties. However, Peirce's triadic model offers greater explanatory power because ritual colors simultaneously operate as: *Icons* through visual resemblance, *Indices* through ritual association, and *Symbols* through culturally transmitted meanings.

Turner (1967, 1969) further argues that ritual symbols possess multivocal meanings. A single color may simultaneously communicate theological, social, political, emotional, and cosmological significance. White, for instance, may signify: purity, priesthood, eastern direction, Iswara, sacred beginning, ritual cleansing. These multiple meanings coexist rather than contradict one another. Similarly, Mary Douglas (1966) emphasizes that symbolic classifications establish

social order by distinguishing sacred from profane categories. Within Balinese Hinduism, color contributes to maintaining ritual boundaries while simultaneously organizing cosmological knowledge.

Recent developments in anthropology increasingly emphasize embodied religious experience rather than symbolic interpretation alone. Drawing upon Thomas Csordas (1990), scholars argue that religious symbols are experienced through the body before becoming conceptual knowledge. Colors influence perception, emotion, memory, and sensory awareness during rituals. The visual intensity of Balinese ceremonies—combining colorful offerings, temple decorations, dance costumes, incense smoke, and sacred music—creates immersive environments that cultivate religious emotions.

Similarly, David Morgan (2005) argues that visual culture constitutes an essential dimension of lived religion. Religious images, colors, and objects shape devotional practices by engaging sensory perception. Within Balinese Hinduism, colors therefore function not only as representations but as agents facilitating encounters between humans and the sacred.

Globalization and tourism have significantly transformed Balinese visual culture. Researchers such as Michel Picard (1996) note that Balinese traditions increasingly operate within international tourism, leading to new interpretations and commodifications of ritual aesthetics. Despite these transformations, color remains a resilient marker of Balinese Hindu identity. Temple festivals, traditional clothing, ceremonial decorations, and sacred textiles continue reproducing symbolic color systems even within modern contexts. Contemporary Balinese communities therefore negotiate between preserving traditional meanings and adapting visual expressions for global audiences. Recent heritage studies also suggest that color contributes to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage by transmitting religious knowledge across generations.

Research Methods

The study is qualitative and comprises a critical literature review informed by symbolic hermeneutics. This is a good way to work because, as a symbolic phenomenon, color should not be treated as quantitative data but interpreted within cultural and religious contexts (Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1969). The study was conducted in three phases. First, the proper sources were accumulated: classical Hindu texts, literature of symbolic anthropology, contemporary studies on faith and experience (Morgan, 2021; Taves, 2020), as well as Balinese materials (Nala, 1992; Wiana, 2004). Second, the data were coded along three analytical axes of cosmological structure, ritual practice, and religious experience. Third, the data were interpreted using analogy hermeneutics and phenomenological analysis (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), supplemented by thematic analysis.

This research also demonstrates conceptual triangulation by drawing on classic theories (Eliade, 1959) and contemporary perspectives on the built environment/local theory, providing theoretical robustness within the local context.

Results and Discussion

Color as a Cosmic Structure

In Balinese Hinduism, color is embedded in the cosmological framework of *Dewata Nawa Sangga*, in which eight of the nine directional axes are aligned with deities, colors, and cosmic energies. This system operates not only as a mere symbolic categorization but also as a cosmological model that places human existence within an ordered universe. Color, in this scheme, serves as a mediating element linking spatial orientation to divine presence and cosmic order, enabling individuals to locate themselves within the larger metaphysical architecture.

This cosmological significance of color is further elaborated through the principles of the so-called *pangider-ider*, which assign cardinal directions and their spiritual forces to specific colors. In this system, color does not serve as a passive visual characteristic, but rather is an active symbolic code for organizing spatial consciousness and ritual direction. This structural entanglement of cosmology with the quotidian spatial practices indicates an orientation not just geographical but also metaphysical (Titib, 2003; Wiana, 2004).

In this system, the color white is assigned to the east (Iswara), red to the south (Brahma), yellow to the west (Mahadeva), and black to the north (Wisnu). This organized connection shows that color is a symbolic language that encodes cosmic energies into spatial arrangements. Hence, color emerges as a medium through which esoteric cosmological precepts become enacted practices. In the phenomenological sense, according to Eliade, (1959), religious symbols are symbolic hierophanies that reveal the invisible in human experience. Thus, color in Balinese cosmology is not simply a signifier of the sacred but rather creates and makes manifest the sacred, bringing abstract metaphysical concepts into palpable experience.

This cosmological knowledge is tied to the local Balinese context. Moreover, though in Balinese practice symbols are not presented separately from the living social reality but drawn straight out of it, as shown by (Bagus, 1980), color as cosmological structure isn't just conceptual but always actively performed daily, informing how people experience their environment. From another perspective, according to Balinese Hindu theology (Nala, 1992), there is no gap between *tattwa*, *susila*, and *upacara*.

In this system, color serves as a cosmological index and a normative strategy that shapes ethical conduct and ritual performance. In this way, color

reconciles metaphysical epistemology with lived action. The cosmological role of color is likewise manifested in the organization of space, such as temple configuration, village layouts, and domestic architecture. As illustrated by (Lansing, 2018), spatial layouts in Bali are strongly informed by cosmological principles, with color being central to supporting symbolic orientation. This shows that color is not merely a discourse of the symbolic but also lodged in material and spatial practices.

Moreover, the cosmological color expression extends to artistic media, namely, performing arts and visual culture. As mentioned by (Bandem, 2001) and (Dibia, 2012), colors in costumes, stage design, and artifacts have symbolic meanings related to cosmic order and spiritual energy. This implies color, as a cosmological structure, is not fixed but rather performative in cultural expressions.

Color in Ritual Practice

The cosmological structure of color is concretely realized in ritual practices, specifically in the preparation and arranging of *banten* (offerings). In this light, color as a symbolic language mediates between the human and the divine. Ritual participants, in this way, construct a symbolic bridge between the visible (*sekala*) and the invisible (*niskala*) realms through the arrangement of colors. Color in real terms is materialized in ritual media, namely *busung*, *ron*, *ental*, and *selepahan*, which are created in several chromatic forms. The colors of these materials are not arbitrary, but they follow a specific symbolic pattern based on cosmological principles. It shows that materiality and symbolism cannot be disentangled, because ritual objects are carriers of meaning rather than just practical tools.



Figure1 : Colors in *rerontek* and *tedung* in Balinese Hindu rituals

Symbolism of color is also found in visual elements of ritual, such as *rerontek* and *tedung*. Beyond decorative accouterment, these objects serve as markers of sacred space. The colors with which they are overlaid mimic those used in

cosmological configurations, underscoring the role of divine forces in ritual activity. According to Bandem, (2001) and Dibia, (2012), these visual elements are central to creating the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of ritual.

The use of *panca warna* (five colors) flowers in daily worship practice also represents the operationalization of color symbolism. The use of colors represents the divine attributes and cosmic energies, thus enabling practitioners to interact with cosmology through embodied ritual acts. This example illustrates how abstract cosmological concepts are converted into concrete ritual forms.

Likewise, *segehan* offerings (*putih-kuning*, *panca warna*, *solas*, and *satus kutus*) illustrate nuances of color symbolism in their ritual context. These differences reveal various ritual intentions and hierarchical levels, suggesting that color is an encoded system governing human-divine relationships.

In my description, the color that may be seen symbolically represents, in *Jaja Calcalan*, another example of aesthetic and symbolic dimensions. Moreover, while the colored offerings are beautiful things to behold, they are imbued with meaning regarding balance and harmony: in Balinese ritual, beauty cannot be divorced from symbolic significance. It has cosmological meaning for every element in ritual (Wiana, 2004). Here, color is a communicative tool that sends messages to the divine through symbols. This resonates with (Geertz, 1973) claim that symbols serve as models of and also for reality, shaping not just representation but action.



Figure 2 : Colors in *segeran* offerings

As such, color in ritual practice functions as a multivalent system that structures meaning, action, and experience. Through ritual, not only is cosmology conceptualized, but color itself becomes an integral component of religious practice.

Color as Religious Experience

Color functions in addition to its structural and ritual efficacies as a medium of religious experience. In this manner, color elicits emotional and sensory responses that inform the religious subconscious in ritual contexts. The coloristic

opulence of ritual spaces (predominantly white, red, and yellow) creates a vaporous environment that shapes participants' emotional state. In everyday worship practices, this experiential aspect is evident: red flowers evoke certain feelings, while white flowers evoke others. White symbolizes purity and calmness, red energy and vitality, and yellow peace of mind and spiritual elevation. Notably, these associations show that color has affective power and can directly activate religious emotions.

From a phenomenological perspective, Merleau-Ponty, (1962) presents perception as embodied, in that sensory modalities cannot be separated from corporeal engagement. In this sense, color is not only seen but also lived through the body, and thus becomes a natural element in religious practice. In a ritual with an experiential dimension, the combinations of colorings create atmospheres when combined with the *wku* and *cacah-sweet* paints for large-scale rituals such as *odalan*, *ngaben*, and *malasti*. The experience of these images is so powerful that it evokes feelings of devotion, reverence, and spirituality, turning ritual into an emotional phenomenon shared by everyone.

According to Nala, (1992), symbols work in the unity of *tattwa*, *susila*, and *acara*. In this psychological model, color operates through the interdependence of knowledge, ethics, and pragmatics, influencing cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Thus, color functions as a lived medium of religious experience, inscribing symbolic meaning. It is not just decoration for ritual; it determines how religion is felt and lived.

Synthesis: Color as a Multidimensional Symbolic System

This study has shown how color in Balinese Hinduism constitutes a multidimensional symbolic system entailing cosmological, ritual, and experiential dimensions. These dimensions are interrelated rather than discrete, creating a holistic set of symbols. At the cosmological level, color establishes a spatial hierarchy and metaphysical modes of understanding through systems such as *Dewata Nawa Sangga* and *pangider-ider*. On a ritual level, it is experienced through offerings, visual manifestations, and ceremonial acts. Experientially, it determines emotional and sensory engagement, rendering the religious experience embodied and affective.

That integration is also cemented through tangible cultural manifestations that crystallize cosmological representations into visually and spatially defined entities exhibited in forms such as *rerontek* and *tedung*. All of these elements illustrate that color operates as both a structure, a practice, and an experience. This multidimensional approach aligns with Triguna, (2025), who emphasizes that symbols must be understood as integrative systems encompassing meaning, practice, and experience. In this perspective, color is not a passive symbol but an

active agent in shaping religious life. Therefore, color in Balinese Hinduism is a symbolic reservoir that not only reflects reality but also shapes and even realizes it. This approach builds on symbolic anthropology, but moves beyond meaning to integrated, experiential contexts.

Conclusion

As exemplars of the intensive symbolism explored in Chapter 4, this study shows that color in Balinese Hinduism cannot be reduced to a mere aesthetic element but must be understood as a multidimensional symbolic system that integrates cosmological structure with ritual practice and religious experience. On a cosmological scale, color is a structuring principle and spatial orientation, and color conditions sacred order the same way Dewata Nawa Sangga and pengider-ider. On the ritual side, it concerns how color is operationalized through offerings (*banten*), *segehan*, and visual forms like *rerontek* or *tedung*, which are symbolic and mediate the human-divine relationship. Color elicits embodied and affective responses at the experiential level, shaping religious consciousness and thereby enhancing the lived dimension of spirituality.

The core contribution (novelty) of this research is the construction of an integrative conceptual framework that situates color as a multidimensional symbolic system of meaning and practice with significance. In contrast to earlier works that focus on symbols as systems of meaning in themselves (Geertz, 1973) or as ritual media (Turner, 1969), this study shows that color cannot be separated from embodiment and experience. This addition enables the articulation of a local paradigm that underlines sensory and symbolic effects for place-making while integrating local epistemologies (Nala, 1992; Wiana, 2004) and contemporary discourses (Triguna, 2026), without losing touch with grand anthropological interests, but pushes this multidimensional inquiry towards a more contextual, experiential, or even an integrative anthropological understanding.

However, the study's approach is limited by its literature-based analysis, which may not always capture the dynamic, living aspects of color symbolism in contemporary Balinese society. It is therefore necessary for future studies, especially those using ethnographic and visual methods, to investigate how meanings of color are negotiated and transformed by the fluidity afforded by changing social contexts, from digital spaces to contemporary (visual) culture. These approaches would help better contextualize symbolic systems as living, evolving, and context-dependent systems.

Bibliography

- Bagus, I. G. N. (1980). *Kebudayaan Bali dalam perspektif antropologi*. Jurusan Antropologi Universitas Udayana.
- Bandem, I. M. (2001). *Metodologi penciptaan seni*. Program Pascasarjana Institut Seni Indonesia Denpasar.
- Csordas, T. J. (1990). *Embodiment as a paradigm for anthropology*. *Ethos*, 18(1), 5–47.
- Dibia, I. W. (2012). *Geliat seni pertunjukan Bali*. UPT Penerbitan Institut Seni Indonesia Denpasar.
- Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. Routledge.
- Eliade, M. (1959). *The sacred and the profane*. Harcourt. [https://monoskop.org/images/b/b1/Eliade Mircea The Sacred and The profane 1963.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/b/b1/Eliade_Mircea_The_Sacred_and_The_profane_1963.pdf).
- Forge, A. (1978). *Balinese traditional painting*. Oxford University Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.
- Hauser-Schäublin, B. (2003). *The woven universe: Balinese ritual textiles*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Hobart, A., Ramseyer, U., & Leemann, A. (1996). *The peoples of Bali*. Blackwell.
- Lansing, J. S. (2006). *Perfect order: Recognizing complexity in Bali*. Princeton University Press.
- Lansing, J. S. (2018). *Priests and programmers*. Princeton University Press. <https://www.andreasaltelli.eu/file/repository/Lansing.pdf>.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge. <https://ia800600.us.archive.org/17/items/G.BachelardThePoeticsOfSpace/PhenomenologyofPerception.pdf>.
- Morgan, D. (2005). *The sacred gaze: Religious visual culture in theory and practice*. University of California Press.
- Morgan, D. (2021). *The embodied eye: Religious visual culture and the social life of feeling*. University of California Press. <https://academic.oup.com/california-scholarship-online/book/17869>
- Nala, I. G. N. (1992). *Ajaran agama Hindu*. Upadasastra.
- Picard, M. (1996). *Bali: Cultural tourism and touristic culture*. Archipelago Press.
- Taves, A. (2020). *Religious experience reconsidered*. Princeton University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7rtvt>



-
- Titib, I. M. (2003). *Teologi dan simbol-simbol dalam agama Hindu*. Paramita.
- Triguna, I. B. G. Y. (2025). *Teori tentang simbol : Dari klasik hingga kontemporer*. Pustaka Larasan.
- Triguna, I. B. G. Y. (2026). *Teori dan metode penelitian agama dan budaya*. Pustaka Larasan.
- Turner, V. (1967). *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Cornell University Press.
- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine. https://books.google.co.id/books?id=IBRuiOX8VEEC&printsec=frontcover&hl=id&source=gbs_atb#v=onepage&q&f=false
- Wiana, I. K. (2004). *Makna upacara yadnya dalam agama Hindu*. Paramita.