

Myth as Ritual Foundation: A Semiotic Analysis of the Mayadenawa Narrative in Balinese Religious Practice

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24843/JKB.2026.v16.i01.p08>

Abstract: This article examines the Mayadenawa myth as a semiotic foundation of Balinese Hindu ritual, with particular attention to the Galungan festival. Galungan is a major religious celebration held every 210 days in Bali to commemorate the victory of *dharma* (cosmic order) over *adharma* (disorder) and to mark the return of ancestral spirits to the human realm. Employing Barthes' theory of two-order signification, this study analyzes the Mayadenawa narrative at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings show that the myth functions not merely as a narrative of divine conflict, but as a cultural sign system that legitimizes ritual practice and naturalizes moral and religious values. By applying a semiotic approach, this study moves beyond descriptive interpretations and demonstrates how myth operates ideologically to sustain Balinese Hindu identity through rituals.

Keywords: Mayadenawa, myth, semiotics, ritual, Balinese Hinduism, Galungan

1. Introduction

Myth has long served as a foundational narrative tool that shapes collective beliefs, social practices, and systems of meaning. Scholars of myth and religion argue that myths do more than recount ancient stories; they encode cultural values, legitimize ritual action, and sustain social order across generations (Eliade, 1963; Barthes, 1972). Within the Balinese Hindu context, myths are deeply embedded in religious life and ceremonial practice, functioning as symbolic frameworks that mediate the relationship between the visible and invisible worlds (Geertz, 1973; Eiseman, 1990). Among the most prominent is

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Submitted: 28 August 2025; Accepted: 22 February 2026; Published: 5 April 2026



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the myth of Mayadenawa, a narrative that continues to exert influence across the ritual, theological, and spatial landscapes of Bali.

The Mayadenawa story recounts the defiance of a powerful king against divine authority, culminating in his defeat by God Indra. This conflict—widely interpreted as a struggle between *dharma* (cosmic order) and *adharma* (disorder)—forms the mythological core of Galungan, one of the most sacred festivals in Balinese Hinduism (Eiseman, 1990; Picard, 1996; Ciptahadi et al. 2021). Galungan commemorates the triumph of *dharma* and the restoration of cosmic balance through ritual observance (Ernawati, 2023). The enduring significance of the Mayadenawa myth lies not only in its narrative drama but also in its role as a symbolic foundation for ritual enactments, sacred Hindu water temple such as Tirta Empul in Tampaksiring, and Balinese religious identity more broadly (Geertz, 1973; Lansing, 1983). Despite this centrality, scholarly attention has tended to prioritize ritual performance over close analysis of the myth itself, leaving the semiotic mechanisms through which the narrative sustains meaning relatively underexplored.

To address this gap, the present study employs Barthes' semiotic theory, which is particularly suited to uncovering how myths operate as systems of signs rather than as mere stories. Semiotics enables analysis beyond descriptive oppositions such as *dharma* versus *adharma* by examining how meaning is constructed, circulated, and naturalized within culture (Barthes, 1967; 1972). Barthes' model of two-order signification—denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (cultural meaning)—reveals how myths embed ideological values within ritual, visual, and linguistic codes. His conception of myth as a second-order semiological system provides analytical tools to show how narratives like Mayadenawa transform historical or imagined events into seemingly timeless cultural truths that legitimize religious practices such as Galungan (Barthes, 1972; Strinati, 1995). Semiotics is therefore chosen not simply to interpret what the myth narrates, but to explain how it signifies, persuades, and sustains communal belief over time.

Previous studies have examined the Mayadenawa myth from historical, anthropological, and comparative perspectives. Foundational scholars such as Geertz (1973) and Eiseman (1990) situate the narrative within Balinese kingship, ritual practice, and religious syncretism, while Eliade's (1963) concept of sacred time explains its cyclical re-enactment in festivals. Girard's (1977) theory of the scapegoat mechanism has been applied to interpret Mayadenawa's death as a sacrificial act that restores communal harmony. More recent studies continue this line of inquiry but shift attention toward ethical, social, and discursive dimensions. Sriasih et al. (2014) emphasize the myth's role in character education, while Arta (2024) applies a socio-theological approach to

related sacred narratives at Tirta Empul. Pradnyan et al. (2024) examine the Mayadenawa era through a social-psychological lens, and Wijaya (2024) reveals how the discourse of *dharma* versus *adharma* functions as a mechanism of power and knowledge. While these studies provide valuable insights, they largely remain descriptive or thematic, leaving the semiotic processes through which the myth produces meaning and ideology insufficiently explored.

This article contributes in two key ways. First, it introduces a semiotic approach that examines the Mayadenawa narrative as a system of signs operating across denotative, connotative, and mythic levels. Second, by situating the analysis within the textual authority of the *Usana Bali* (Hinzler, 1986) and by engaging both classical and recent scholarship on Balinese ritual and discourse (Geertz, 1973; Picard, 1996; Wijaya, 2024; Arta, 2024), the study demonstrates that Mayadenawa is not merely a relic of the past but a living cultural text that continues to reproduce religious values and social order. Through this integration, the article moves beyond ritual description and offers theoretical novelty by showing how myth operates ideologically through semiotic mechanisms.

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to identify the denotative elements of the Mayadenawa myth; (2) to uncover the connotative meanings embedded in its narrative structure and ritual enactments; and (3) to interpret its ideological functions within contemporary Balinese Hindu religious life. By situating the myth within both its textual sources and present-day ritual contexts, this study contributes to current debates on myth, semiotics, and religion, particularly in Southeast Asian cultural studies.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews cultural sources and previous studies relevant to the Mayadenawa narrative. The myth of Mayadenawa holds an essential position within Balinese religious and cultural identity, particularly as it is preserved in *Lontar Usana Bali*, a palm-leaf manuscript that records sacred stories, ritual prescriptions, and mythological accounts. The *Lontar* tradition itself is central to Balinese cultural continuity, functioning not only as a written archive but also as a sacred authority that legitimizes ritual practices. Within *Usana Bali*, the story of Mayadenawa is presented not simply as a tale of a tyrannical king but as a narrative with theological, moral, and ritual significance. The text ensures that this myth is transmitted across generations and remains embedded in the cycles of Balinese religious practice.

Importantly, Hinzler (1986) has shown that *Usana Bali* is not only a theological text but also a valuable historical source, providing insight into the political, cultural, and ritual life of Bali. This demonstrates that the Mayadenawa

narrative is both mythic and historiographic, allowing it to function as a cultural memory that bridges history and ritual. More recently, Wiradnyana (2022) explores the existence of the Mayadenawa story in Bali through oral narrative, ritual sites, and speech acts, showing that the myth continues to be reenacted and localized in sacred spaces like *Tirta Empul* and other cultural landmarks.

The cultural background of Balinese Hinduism provides the broader context in which this myth functions. Unlike Indian Hinduism, Balinese practice reflects a syncretic blend of Hindu cosmology, indigenous animistic traditions, and ancestor worship. The Hindu philosophy of *Tri Hita Karana*, the harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and the divine, forms the guiding principle of Balinese life. Within this framework, myths are not seen as distant or allegorical, but as living cultural codes that justify ritual actions and sustain the moral order. The Mayadenawa narrative, in particular, represents the ever-present struggle between *dharma* (goodness) and *adharma* (evil), a struggle that is ritually remembered and renewed through festivals. Studies such as Pradnyan et al. (2024) on the myth and societal anomie show how the myth functions as a metaphor for social malaise and cultural anxiety in modern Bali, not just ancient times.

The most important ritual context for the Mayadenawa story is the *Galungan* festival, celebrated every 210 days according to the Balinese calendar. *Galungan* is the moment when ancestral spirits are believed to return to the earthly realm to bless their descendants. The festival is marked by elaborate household offerings, temple ceremonies, and the erection of *penjor*, towering bamboo poles adorned with coconut leaves, fruits, and flowers, which symbolize prosperity and gratitude to the gods. The underlying mythological justification for *Galungan* is directly tied to the Mayadenawa story: just as God Indra defeated Mayadenawa, so too must humanity continually reaffirm the victory of order and righteousness in their daily lives.

Closely linked to *Galungan* is the *Kuningan* festival, which occurs ten days later and marks the return of the ancestral spirits to the heavens. Offerings on this day are distinctive, often including yellow rice, symbolizing prosperity and spiritual illumination. Together, *Galungan* and *Kuningan* embody the cyclical worldview of Balinese religion, in which myth, ritual, and cosmology are continually reenacted.

Several studies have examined the role of myth and ritual in Balinese culture. Lansing (1983) emphasizes that Balinese myths act as cultural scripts that regulate religious life and social order, highlighting how narratives like Mayadenawa are inseparable from ritual practices. Rubinstein (2000) shows how *Lontar* manuscripts function not only as repositories of myths but also as performative guides for ritual specialists, reinforcing the view that the *Usana*

Bali prescribes how the Mayadenawa myth should be ritually enacted. Hobart (1999) and Eiseman (1990) both demonstrate that festivals such as *Galungan* and *Kuningan* are performative re-enactments of cosmological principles, where myth becomes tangible through offerings, ceremonies, and community involvement. Geertz's (1973) classic concept of the "theatre state" further illustrates how myth and ritual combine to sustain collective identity and political authority in Bali.

More recent studies provide additional perspectives. For example, Sriasih et al. (2014) classify the Mayadenawa story as a legend containing character education values. Arta (2024) approaches the Tirta Empul mythology from a socio-theological perspective, while Wijaya (2024) focuses on the hidden relations of power and knowledge, showing how the Galungan discourse operates ideologically. The study on commodification of *Usana Bali* by Suatama et al. reveals how *Usana Bali* practices and symbolic authority are being re-negotiated in socio-economic domains, clarifying that these texts/practices are not static but dynamic.

Taken together, these previous studies highlight three important insights: first, that the Mayadenawa myth has been consistently preserved and authorized through *Lontar Usana Bali* and oral tradition; second, that the myth provides theological, cultural, and moral justification for Balinese festivals such as *Galungan* and *Kuningan*; and third, that ritual practice ensures the myth's continuing relevance as a cultural foundation of Balinese Hindu life. However, while past scholarship has addressed Mayadenawa from historical, theological, educational, and sociological perspectives, there has been little attempt to analyze it through the lens of semiotics. The present study demonstrates how Mayadenawa operates not merely as a religious tale but as a semiotic system that constructs meaning, legitimizes ritual practice, and shapes Balinese cultural identity. This approach provides a genuine novelty to the study of Balinese mythology, moving beyond description into critical interpretation of signification.

3. Method & Theory

This section outlines the the research method and theoretical framework employed in this study. The research adopts a descriptive qualitative method to explore the Mayadenawa folktale in Tampaksiring, Gianyar, Bali, while the analysis is guided by Barthes' semiotic theory. By combining methodological rigor with theoretical depth, this study seeks to reveal both the structure of the myth and its significance in sustaining Balinese religious traditions. The following subsections first describe the method in detail, before turning to the theoretical foundation that underpins the analysis.

3.1 Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach combining participant observation and in-depth interviews to examine the Mayadenawa myth as a cultural and semiotic phenomenon embedded in Balinese ritual practices. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for this study because it enables an in-depth exploration of meanings, symbols, and interpretations within mythological narratives and lived religious experiences (Creswell, 2018, 2022). The research was conducted in Tampaksiring District, Gianyar Regency, Bali, an area closely associated with the Mayadenawa narrative, particularly through sacred sites such as Pura Tirta Empul, which plays a central role in the myth and its ritual manifestations.

Participant observation was carried out in villages and ritual spaces related to the Mayadenawa narrative, especially during religious and cultural activities connected to temple life and communal worship. These observations were conducted over several visits in June and July 2025, with each visit lasting two to five hours to allow the researcher to engage directly with the social and ritual context. The purpose of the observations was to document how the Mayadenawa myth is referenced, enacted, and symbolically represented in ritual practices, spatial arrangements, and oral narratives within the community. During observation sessions, informal conversations were also conducted with community members to clarify meanings and contextual interpretations, a technique commonly associated with participant observation (Satori & Komariah, 2009).

In-depth interviews were conducted with five informants selected through a snowball sampling technique. This technique was chosen because knowledge of the Mayadenawa myth is culturally embedded and typically held by specific traditional authorities rather than distributed evenly across the community. Initial informants were key community figures, who then recommended other individuals recognized for their cultural knowledge. The informants consisted of village leaders, including a *Bendesa Adat* (traditional village head), as well as cultural experts and cultural observers. These informants were selected because of their roles in preserving, interpreting, and transmitting mythological knowledge and ritual traditions within the community.

The interviews were conducted in an open-ended and flexible manner, allowing informants to narrate the Mayadenawa myth, explain its symbolic meanings, and reflect on its religious, moral, and cultural significance. The primary purpose of the interviews was to obtain emic perspectives on how the myth functions as a semiotic system that shapes ritual practices and collective beliefs. All interview data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically, with particular attention to mythological symbols, narrative structures, and their

relationship to ritual practices. By integrating observational data and interview narratives, this study provides a contextual and interpretative understanding of the Mayadenawa myth as a living cultural text within Balinese Hindu society.

For data analysis, the study followed Creswell's (2018, 2022) qualitative framework, which includes data reduction, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. These stages were applied in an iterative manner, meaning that data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously and repeatedly refined until analytical saturation was achieved. During data reduction, interview transcripts and observation notes were carefully reviewed, and only data directly related to the Mayadenawa myth, such as narratives of ritual practices, symbolic interpretations, moral teachings, and references to sacred sites, were retained, while irrelevant information was excluded. The reduced data were then organized thematically and displayed in narrative and categorical forms to facilitate comparison across informants and data sources. Interpretation was carried out by integrating emic and etic perspectives: the emic perspective was used to capture informants' insider understandings of the myth and its ritual significance, while the etic perspective enabled the researcher to analytically interpret implicit meanings using semiotic concepts. Conclusions were drawn through continuous verification by comparing interview data with observational findings and by cross-checking key interpretations with selected informants to ensure cultural accuracy and analytical consistency.

3.2 Theory

The roots of semiotic theory can be traced back to Ferdinand de Saussure, who conceptualized language as a system of signs. For Saussure (1966), a sign consists of two inseparable components: the signifier (the form or expression) and the signified (the concept or meaning). This dyadic model emphasizes the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, meaning that no natural connection binds a word to its meaning except through social convention.

Barthes (1967, 1972) extended de Saussure's framework by applying semiotics beyond language into myths, media, and cultural practices, showing that any cultural object—rituals, images, performances, or stories—can be read as a system of signs. In his refinement, Barthes (1982) introduced the ERC system (Expression, Relation, Content), highlighting how signs function at two levels: denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign, while connotation involves the cultural and ideological associations that signs acquire in specific contexts (Chandler, 2017).

Barthes further developed the concept of myth as a third level of signification. Myth, in this sense, is not merely a traditional story but a cultural mechanism that transforms historical meanings into naturalized truths (Barthes,

1972; Sturrock, 1998). By stripping signs of their historical context and reloading them with ideological content, myths appear as self-evident realities. Eco (1976) and Copley (2010) also emphasize that myths function as codes through which societies reproduce cultural norms, while Danesi (2004) highlights their role in shaping collective identity. Myth operates as a system of meaning that explains and legitimizes social reality, a view consistent with Segal's (1999) argument that myth serves fundamental ideological and interpretive functions within culture.

The relationship between semiotics and ideology has been extensively discussed within critical social theory. Ideology functions as a system of meaning that shapes how individuals perceive and interpret social reality, a view consistent with Takwin's (2003) discussion of the foundational roots of ideology. Gramsci (1971) introduces the concept of hegemony to explain how ideology is sustained not only through coercive power but also through cultural consent, whereby dominant values are internalized and accepted as natural. In this sense, myths and folktales function as hegemonic tools that normalize particular worldviews and social orders. Building on this foundation, Eagleton (1991) conceptualizes ideology as a system of meanings that both legitimizes power relations and shapes collective identity. From a socio-cognitive perspective, Van Dijk (2009) further defines ideology as a system of socially shared beliefs that serve group interests and are primarily reproduced through discourse, especially narrative forms. More recently, Fairclough (2015) situates ideology within discourse practice, emphasizing that ideological meanings are continuously produced, negotiated, and transformed through language use in specific social contexts. Taken together, these perspectives highlight how ideology operates through language, narrative, and myth, providing a strong theoretical basis for analyzing myth as a semiotic and ideological system. Ideology is not static but a dynamic system of meaning-making, embedded in everyday rituals, narratives, and symbols. Barthes' semiotic model reveals how myths naturalize ideology, while Gramsci and others expose the power relations underlying this process. Althusser (2008) argues that ideology constructs an imaginary relationship through which individuals perceive and live their real social conditions

Semiotics is particularly relevant to this study because the Mayadenawa myth is not only a narrative but also a ritualized system of signs that operates through language, symbols, performances, and ceremonial practices. As Barthes (1972) argues, myths function as second-order semiological systems in which signs convey meaning beyond their literal reference. In ritual contexts, myths are encoded not only verbally but also through embodied actions, sacred spaces, and symbolic objects, all of which communicate meaning at multiple

levels (Turner, 1967; Geertz, 1973). Semiotics therefore provides the analytical tools to examine how the Mayadenawa narrative simultaneously conveys historical references, cultural values, and ideological meanings that legitimize religious authority and sustain ritual continuity within Balinese Hinduism (Eiseman, 1990).

Other approaches, such as historical or anthropological analysis, tend to focus on the origins, chronology, or social functions of myths. While these perspectives are valuable, they often leave unexplored the deeper mechanisms through which meaning is produced and naturalized (Leach, 1976). A theological approach, meanwhile, emphasizes religious truth and doctrinal interpretation but does not critically interrogate how meaning is encoded, transmitted, and reproduced through symbolic forms. Semiotics, by contrast, bridges these gaps by revealing not only what the Mayadenawa story narrates, but also how it constructs layered meanings that become taken for granted within ritual practice and collective consciousness (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2017).

Within this framework, the Mayadenawa myth is examined through Barthes' concepts of signifier and signified, denotation and connotation, and myth as ideology. At the denotative level, the narrative depicts religious conflict and divine intervention; at the connotative level, it articulates cultural values and moral oppositions; and at the mythological-ideological level, it naturalizes concepts of dharma, divine legitimacy, and social order (Barthes, 1972; Van Dijk, 2009). In this way, the Mayadenawa myth functions as a semiotic foundation that sustains Balinese Hindu ritual practice, particularly in the celebration of Galungan, where myth and ritual converge to reproduce religious meaning and identity (Picard, 1996; Eiseman, 1990; Suardana, et al. 2025; Arshiniwati & Peradantha, 2025).

4. Result & Discussion

The following section presents the analysis and interpretation of the data collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews with customary leaders and cultural experts in Tampaksiring District, Gianyar, Bali. The discussion is organized to follow a thematic and sequential structure: beginning with the descriptive presentation of key narrative elements, followed by an exploration of their symbolic meanings, and culminating in an interpretation of how these meanings function as the semiotic foundation of the *Galungan* festival.

The Mayadenawa myth recounts the story of a powerful king who rejected the authority of the gods and prohibited the worship of deities in his kingdom. His defiance disrupted cosmic order and provoked a battle with God Indra, who led the divine forces against him. After a prolonged conflict, Mayadenawa was defeated and killed. His downfall restores dharma and cosmic balance, an event ritually commemorated in Bali through the Galungan festival.

4.1 The Mayadenawa Epic: The Cosmic Battle of 'Dharma' Against 'Adharma'

Mayadenawa is depicted as a powerful but arrogant ruler who forbids his people from worshipping the gods. This defiance prompts the gods, led by Indra, to descend to Bali and engage in battle with his forces. The most crucial episode in this battle took place in the area now known as Tampaksiring. Using his supernatural powers, Mayadenawa infiltrated the camp of God Indra's army. In order to leave no recognizable trace, he walked by tilting the soles of his feet. This act is believed to be the origin of the name *Tampaksiring*, derived etymologically from *tampak* (sole of the foot) and *siring* (tilted). Near the camp, Mayadenawa created a spring of clear but deadly water. This spring, known as *Air Mala*, contained a powerful poison. The following day, many of Indra's soldiers, parched after battle, drank the water and died instantly.

Faced with a crisis threatening the survival of his entire army, God Indra demonstrated his superior divine power. By thrusting his magical staff into the ground, a miraculous spring of pure, sacred water burst forth. This spring became known as *Tirta Empul*, from *tirta* (holy water) and *empul* (to gush forth from the ground) (Figure 1). This sacred water served as *Tirtha Amertha Pengentas Urip* (the holy water that revives life), capable of curing and reviving all of Indra's poisoned troops.



Figure 1. Tirta Empul Temple, Tampaksiring, with the sacred waterspouts visible in the lower right corner. The photograph was taken in September 2013 from the adjacent State Palace or Istana Tampaksiring (Photo by I Nyoman Darma Putra).

From a semiotic perspective, the tilted footsteps, poisoned spring, and gushing holy water can be read as signs that shift meaning through Barthes' (1972) two levels of signification. On the denotative level, they are physical acts and natural elements. On the connotative level, they become embodiments of deceit, corruption, death, purification, and rebirth. At the level of myth, they crystallize into a cultural narrative: Mayadenawa as the figure of disorder and desecration, and Indra as the restorer of balance and sacred law. In this sense, the myth transforms ordinary material signs (water, footsteps) into ideological symbols that naturalize the primacy of dharma in Balinese cosmology.

This mythological episode forms the foundation for the sacredness and continued significance of Pura Tirta Empul. Archaeological evidence from the Manukaya inscription indicates that the temple was established in 882 Saka (962 CE) during the reign of King Indrajayasingha Warmadewa, confirming the historical significance of Tirta Empul as a sacred royal foundation (Goris, 1954; Ardika, 2015). Within Balinese religious tradition, the site is understood as the physical manifestation of God Indra's divine act of salvation following his victory over Mayadenawa. The purification ritual known as *melukat*, which is still widely practiced by Balinese Hindus and increasingly by visitors from around the world, represents a direct spiritual continuation of this myth (Eiseman, 1990). On ordinary days, an average of 300 devotees perform prayers or purification rituals (*melukat*) at Pura Tirta Empul. On sacred days such as Tilem (new moon), Purnama (full moon), and other Hindu holy days, the number of devotees can exceed 1,000 people per day (Irwanti & Adnyani, 2022). By immersing themselves beneath the thirty sacred fountains within the temple complex, participants symbolically reenact Indra's act of healing, seeking purification from *mala* (impurities) at the physical, emotional, and spiritual levels (Geertz, 1973; Picard, 1996).

This ritualization demonstrates what Eliade (1957) describes as the "eternal return": myth is not only remembered but re-lived, allowing participants to step outside of profane time into sacred time. At the same time, the myth performs an ideological function in the sense described by Thompson (1990) and van Dijk (1998), as it legitimizes social and cosmic order by associating purity, survival, and well-being with obedience to *dharma*, while delegitimizing rebellion against divine authority. Seen through Barthes' (1972) semiotic framework, the Mayadenawa narrative moves from denotation, the literal story of gods and humans, into connotation, where themes of obedience and transgression are symbolically linked to moral and religious values, and finally into myth, where these values are naturalized as timeless truths of Balinese culture. In

this way, the Mayadenawa epic serves not only as theology but also as cultural semiotics and ideology. The narrative does not remain in the realm of symbolic imagination but is enacted through ritual practices that discipline bodies, affirm collective identity, and continually encode the values of Balinese Hinduism. Its endurance through festivals, rituals, and temple practices demonstrates how myth operates as a living discourse—simultaneously preserving cosmological order and negotiating contemporary identity in Balinese society.

4.2 Sacred Topography – The Map of Mayadenawa’s Journey and Escape

The epic battle between God Indra and Mayadenawa is deeply inscribed upon the physical landscape of Gianyar Regency. Every village, river, temple, and forest stands as a silent witness to this cosmic drama. Toponymy, or the study of place-name origins, functions here as a narrative map, transforming geography into a sacred text, one that can be read and contemplated. The path of Mayadenawa’s escape and God Indra’s pursuit can be traced through a series of locations whose names directly reflect the mythological events said to have occurred there. Table 1 summarizes the relationship between key locations, their associated mythological events, and the etymological analysis of their names.

Pejeng was the central domain of Mayadenawa’s rule and the heart of the ancient Bedahulu Kingdom. This region holds great archaeological significance, with numerous ancient relics that connect it to Bali’s rich pre-colonial past. In Tampaksiring, Mayadenawa famously walked with tilted footprints to avoid detection from his enemies. The name derives from *tampak* (sole of the foot) and *siring* (tilted), immortalizing the unique tactic he used during his escape. *Air Mala* is the poisoned spring created by Mayadenawa in an attempt to kill the divine troops. The name comes from *air* (water) and *mala* (impurity, poison, or disaster), symbolizing its deadly role in the myth. *Hutan Cemara*, now home to Pura Cemara, is where God Indra meditated in *yoga samadhi* to seek divine guidance before facing Mayadenawa. The area was once filled with *cemara* (pine-like) trees, giving the site its name. *Tirta Empul* is the sacred spring miraculously created by God Indra to neutralize the poison of *Air Mala*. Its name combines *tirta* (holy water) and *empul* (to gush forth from the ground), reflecting its divine origin and continuing role as a purification site.

Table 1. Mythological Toponyms of Mayadenawa’s Journey in Gianyar

No	Location	Associated Mythological Event	Name Origin (Etymology) & Notes
1	<i>Pejeng</i>	The central domain of Mayadenawa’s rule (Bedahulu Kingdom).	An ancient region, archaeologically significant.
2	<i>Tampaksiring</i>	Where Mayadenawa walked with tilted footprints to avoid detection.	<i>Tampak</i> (sole) + <i>siring</i> (tilted).
3	<i>Air Mala</i>	Poisoned spring created by Mayadenawa to kill the divine troops.	<i>Air</i> (water) + <i>mala</i> (impurity, poison, disaster).
4	<i>Hutan Cemara (Pura Cemara)</i>	Place where God Indra meditated (<i>yoga samadhi</i>) to seek divine guidance.	Forest filled with <i>cemara</i> (pine-like trees).
5	<i>Tirta Empul</i>	A sacred spring created by God Indra to neutralize the poison.	<i>Tirta</i> (holy water) + <i>empul</i> (to gush forth from the ground).
6	<i>Anguling (Pura Pagulingan)</i>	Resting or sleeping place of God Indra’s troops.	<i>Anguling</i> (to lie down/rest).
7	<i>Manukaya</i>	Place where Mayadenawa disguised himself as a giant bird (<i>manuk raya</i>).	<i>Manuk</i> (bird) + <i>raya/aya</i> (great/large).
8	<i>Sanding</i>	A location along Mayadenawa’s escape route; more likely linked to another historical conflict.	Etymology unclear; possibly from 'bersanding' (side by side) or fortress.
9	<i>Banjar Sareseda</i>	The place where God Indra’s general was paralyzed (his arrows became useless).	<i>Sara</i> (arrow) + <i>seda</i> (broken/paralyzed/dead).
10	<i>Tanah Pegat</i>	The place where Mayadenawa was finally killed — where his life was 'cut off'.	<i>Tanah</i> (land) + <i>pegat</i> (severed).
11	<i>Tukad Petanu</i>	Formed from the blood of Mayadenawa, cursed by God Indra.	<i>Petanu</i> from 'peta' (sound) + 'nu' (still), referring to Mayadenawa’s groaning sound.
12	<i>Dusun Taulun</i>	Believed to be the site of Mayadenawa’s burial.	Possibly related to 'taulan' (to be buried).

Source: Authors (2025)

Anguling, associated with Pura Pagulingan, was the resting place of God Indra’s troops. Its name comes from *anguling* (to lie down or rest), marking its importance as a strategic pause in the battle. *Manukaya* is where Mayadenawa disguised himself as a giant bird (*manuk raya*). The name derives from *manuk*

(bird) and *rayalaya* (great or large), preserving the memory of his transformation. *Sanding* lies along Mayadenawa's escape route. While its exact link to the myth is uncertain, it may be tied to another historical conflict. The name possibly comes from *bersanding* (side by side) or refers to a fortress.

In *Banjar Sareseda*, one of God Indra's generals was rendered powerless—his arrows (*sara*) became useless (*seda*), meaning broken or dead. The place name directly reflects this dramatic moment in the battle. *Tanah Pegat* marks the site where Mayadenawa's life was cut short. The name *Tanah Pegat* meaning "land of severance" (*tanah* for land and *pegat* for severed or ended), signifies the final blow that ended his reign. *Tukad Petanu*, a river formed from the blood of Mayadenawa, was cursed by God Indra. The name comes from *peta* (sound) and *nu* (still), recalling the eerie groaning sound Mayadenawa made in his final moments. *Dusun Taulun* is believed to be the burial site of Mayadenawa. Its name may come from *taulan* (to be buried), cementing its place as the myth's closing chapter.

The toponymy of Mayadenawa's journey in Gianyar illustrates how landscape functions as a semiotic text that encodes both historical memory and religious ideology. Based on Barthes' theory, at the denotative level, the names of places such as *Tampaksiring*, *Tirta Empul*, *Air Mala*, *Tanah Pegat*, and *Tukad Petanu* refer to specific geographical sites in Gianyar. These names, in their literal sense, denote physical forms, "tilted sole" (*Tampaksiring*), "sacred water" (*Tirta Empul*), or "severed land" (*Tanah Pegat*).

At the connotative level, however, these toponyms are not mere descriptions of topography but are deeply embedded in the mythic journey of Mayadenawa. Each name carries the symbolic trace of his escape and defeat by Indra: *Air Mala* signifies the destructive force of poisoned water, *Tirta Empul* connotes purification and divine intervention, while *Tanah Pegat* reflects rupture, separation, and cosmic punishment. These meanings, although rooted in narrative, continue to resonate in ritual practice, pilgrimage, and the sacred associations of each site.

At the level of myth, the spatial narrative of Mayadenawa becomes a cultural discourse that naturalizes Balinese Hindu cosmology. The landscape is transformed into a living myth, where geographical sites become visible proof of the eternal struggle between *dharma* and *adharma*. By inscribing the narrative into the physical environment, the toponymy legitimizes ritual practices (such as *melukat* at Tirta Empul) and reaffirms collective identity. In this way, the topography does not merely record myth—it enacts and perpetuates it.

Thus, through Barthes' semiotic framework, the toponyms of Gianyar operate simultaneously on three levels: they name places (denotation), they tell the story of Mayadenawa's escape (connotation), and they institutionalize a

cosmological ideology (myth). The endurance of these place names demonstrates how myth extends beyond oral narrative into the very fabric of Balinese sacred geography, making the landscape itself a semiotic archive of cultural memory and religious meaning.

Table 2. Semiotic Analysis of Toponymy in Mayadenawa’s Journey Based on Barthes’ Theory

No	Toponym (Place Name)	Denotation (Literal Meaning)	Connotation (Mythic Narrative)	Myth (Cultural Ideology/Second-Order Meaning)
1	Tampaksiring	Tilted footprint	The mark of Mayadenawa’s miraculous footstep while escaping from Indra.	The land itself bears witness to divine pursuit; nature inscribes the cosmic struggle between gods and rebellion.
2	Tirta Empul	Sacred water spring	Emerged from Indra’s act to neutralize the poisoned water released by Mayadenawa.	Symbol of purification and divine intervention; legitimizes ritual <i>melukat</i> and belief in sacred water as source of life.
3	Air Mala	Dirty/poisoned water	Water contaminated by Mayadenawa’s curse, bringing illness and death.	Rebellion against divine order produces chaos and pollution; reinforces obedience to <i>dharma</i> for survival and well-being.
4	Tanah Pegat	Severed land	The earth cracked as Mayadenawa attempted to flee, signifying separation and rupture.	Represents cosmic punishment and the impossibility of escaping divine justice; legitimizes divine authority.
5	Tukad Petanu	Petanu River	The river cursed by Mayadenawa, said to flow with blood for centuries.	Nature itself becomes a living myth; river embodies memory of sin, punishment, and restoration through ritual offerings.

Table 2 shows how toponyms function as semiotic signs layered with meaning: at the denotative level, they simply describe the physical environment. At the connotative level, they narrate episodes of Mayadenawa's journey and defeat. At the myth level, they naturalize religious ideology, turning geography into sacred proof of the cosmic order. Thus, the landscape of Gianyar becomes a semiotic archive, where myth is continually remembered, ritualized, and legitimized through place names that bind narrative, space, and belief.

4.3 Galungan Festival in Bali

The Galungan Festival is celebrated with a series of rituals that take place over several days, beginning with *Penampahan Galungan*, continuing with *Galungan Day* itself, and followed by *Manis Galungan*. Each stage has its own significance, blending spiritual devotion with family togetherness.

The day before Galungan is called *Penampahan Galungan*. On this day, Balinese families prepare food and offerings for the festival. Traditionally, pigs or chickens are slaughtered to make ceremonial dishes such as *lawar* (a spiced mixture of meat, vegetables, and coconut) and *satay*. Every household also decorates a tall bamboo pole known as a *penjor*. These are adorned with coconut leaves, fruits, rice, and other natural produce, symbolizing prosperity and gratitude. The atmosphere is lively, as families work together to cook, prepare offerings, and decorate their homes in readiness for the main celebration. It can be seen in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Traditional Balinese satay and *lawar* prepared on *Penampahan Day* in celebration of Galungan (Photo: Desak Putu Eka Pratiwi)

The climax of the festival is *Galungan Day*, when Balinese Hindus believe that *dharma* triumphs over *adharma*. On this day, families dress in their finest traditional attire and visit temples to pray and present offerings. Specially prepared *banten* (arrangements of fruits, flowers, rice cakes, and incense) are

offered at both family shrines and community temples. It is also believed that ancestral spirits return to earth to visit their descendants, so the rituals serve to honor and welcome them. Across the island, villages and streets are beautifully decorated, with rows of *penjor* swaying gracefully in the wind, creating a festive and spiritual atmosphere (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Balinese families joyfully celebrating Galungan Day, praying at their family shrines and temples adorned with decorated bamboo penjor, symbolizing the triumph of *dharma* over *adharma* (Photo: Desak Putu Eka Pratiwi).

The following day is known as *Manis Galungan*, which means “Sweet Galungan.” This day is dedicated to joy, family visits, and relaxation. Balinese people often spend time with relatives and friends, share food, and strengthen bonds with loved ones. Many also use the day for outings to beaches, recreation areas, or cultural sites, making it a time of happiness and togetherness. Spiritually, it is a moment of reflection, as the victory of *dharma* is not only celebrated ritually but also carried into everyday life (Donder et al., 2025).

Galungan is more than a religious ceremony; it is a cultural celebration that unites families and communities. From preparation and prayer to joy and leisure, the festival embodies the harmony between spiritual devotion and daily life, reminding Balinese Hindus to live according to the principles of *dharma*.

4.4 *Myth as Ritual Foundation: The Death of Mayadenawa and the Rites of Galungan*

The myth of Mayadenawa's death transcends mere narrative—it serves as the mythological foundation underpinning key ritual practices, particularly those associated with *Galungan*. This connection can be analyzed through René Girard's scapegoat mechanism, a theoretical framework in which ancient societies are believed to resolve internal crises and mimetic violence by collectively projecting aggression onto a single victim. The ritualistic killing or expulsion of this scapegoat then restores peace and order, and is remembered and reenacted in ceremonial traditions.

In this context, Mayadenawa functions as the archetypal scapegoat. He is portrayed as embodying all forces that threaten spiritual and social order—a tyrant, a heretic who rejects the divine pantheon, and even a cannibal in some versions of the tale. He becomes the symbolic vessel of chaos and malevolence. His eventual death at the hands of Indra is thus not merely a military victory, but a cathartic act that purges the collective tension of society. This moment of release is then ritually commemorated through *Galungan*, which can be understood as a cyclical reaffirmation of cosmic and communal harmony, achieved through the sacrificial expulsion of disorder.

This function is made even more explicit in *Penampahan Galungan*, the day preceding the main celebration. On this day, Balinese Hindu households traditionally slaughter a pig. The act carries deep symbolic significance: the pig, often associated with traits such as gluttony, laziness, and greed in local cultural perception, becomes a secondary scapegoat. Through its sacrifice, the community symbolically “kills” the residual aspects of Mayadenawa that may still linger within themselves.

At the same time, the *Galungan* rites can also be examined through Barthes' semiotic framework, in which myth operates as a second-order signification. The killing of Mayadenawa, and later the slaughter of pigs during *Penampahan Galungan*, functions as a sign that transcends literal meaning. On the denotative level, it is an act of killing; on the connotative level, it signifies the victory of *dharma* over *adharma*, and ultimately naturalizes this struggle as a timeless truth of Balinese life. In Barthes' sense, the myth of Mayadenawa becomes a “cultural text” that transforms historical violence into a sacred and unquestionable ritual, reproducing ideology through repetition.

This rite constitutes a dramatization of the internal struggle against *Sad Ripu*, the six enemies within human beings: *Kama* (desire), *Lobha* (greed), *Krodha* (anger), *Mada* (intoxication), *Moha* (delusion), and *Matsarya* (envy). In this way, *Penampahan Galungan* transforms the cosmic narrative of Mayadenawa's defeat into a personal spiritual practice. Every individual and family participates in

the victory of *dharma* by conquering *adharma* within themselves, making the celebration of *Galungan* a reaffirmation of order at both the communal and personal levels. From Barthes' perspective, this transformation represents myth as a second-order semiological system: the literal act of animal sacrifice and ritual observance becomes a sign that conveys a deeper cultural meaning—the eternal struggle between good and evil. By naturalizing this struggle as a moral truth, the *Galungan* rite reproduces and reinforces Balinese Hindu ideology, ensuring that the myth of Mayadenawa continues to function not only as a historical memory but also as a living framework for ethical and communal life.

The continuing relevance of the Mayadenawa myth is reinforced through contemporary ritual discourse and local cultural authority. This is evident in the testimony of the *Bendesa Adat* (customary village head) of Manukaya, Made Mawi Arnata (75 years old), who emphasized the importance of cultural transmission to younger generations. He stated that younger community members are repeatedly reminded “not to become disconnected from their Balinese cultural roots,” particularly through regular communal meetings and moments of social concern. He further explained that the preservation of Pura Tirta Empul is essential, as the temple is regarded as “a divine blessing from Ida Bhatara Indra” (Interview, Made Mawi Arnata, 2024). This statement illustrates how the Mayadenawa narrative is not merely recalled as a mythic story but actively mobilized as a semiotic framework that links sacred space, divine legitimacy, and moral responsibility. Through such discourse, the myth functions at the level of lived ideology, where ritual sites like Pura Tirta Empul become signs that naturalize religious authority and reinforce collective identity within Balinese Hindu practice. As Storey (2003) suggests, ideology operates by transforming culturally constructed meanings into what appear to be natural and self-evident truths, a process that closely parallels the function of myth.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the Mayadenawa myth through Barthes' two-order signification framework demonstrates that this narrative is far more than a historical or folkloric account; it is a living cultural text that continues to shape Balinese Hindu thought and ritual practice. This study analyzes the Mayadenawa myth as it appears in two interconnected forms: first, as a textual narrative preserved in the *Usana Bali* manuscript, and second, as an oral tradition transmitted by cultural authorities and enacted through ritual practices in Tampaksiring.

At the denotative level, the myth recounts a sequence of events involving the confrontation between God Indra and King Mayadenawa, as narrated in the *Usana Bali* and retold by informants. At the connotative level, these events are

imbued with moral, spiritual, and socio-political meanings that emphasize the supremacy of *dharma* over *adharma*. At the mythic–ideological level, the narrative functions as a legitimizing foundation for the Galungan festival, naturalizing divine authority, moral order, and communal unity within Balinese Hinduism.

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our gratitude to the following contributors who have significantly contributed to this work, especially our fieldwork team: Ni Putu Erika Putriasih and Ni Komang Sita Widyasari, for kindly assisting us during the fieldwork. Sincere appreciation is extended to all informants from Tampaksiring District: Made Mawi Arnawa, Eka Wiranata, I Wayan Mahendrawan, and A.A. Gde Maha Baskara Pelayun, whose invaluable insights, narratives, and perspectives have greatly enriched the analysis presented in this study. We extend our appreciation to Udayana University for providing the research grant that made this work possible.

Artificial Intelligence–based tools were used in a limited manner to assist with language editing and clarity of expression. All interpretations, analyses, and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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