

# Transformative Thanatology and *Mesatya* Politics: Reconstructing Kumbakarna's Heroism in Contemporary Balinese Shadow Puppet Theatre

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**Abstract:** This study re-examines the paradigm of heroic death in traditional performing arts through the *Kumbakarna Lina* (The Death of Kumbakarna) episode of Balinese shadow theatre as a dialectical locus between local values and global discourses. Employing an interpretive-hermeneutic approach, it integrates Balinese Hindu cosmology with Heidegger's concept of *Being-towards-death*, Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, and Schechner's notion of *restored behavior*. Data were collected through participatory observation, visual documentation, textual analysis of the *Kakawin Rāmāyana*, and interviews with puppet masters and cultural practitioners. The findings highlight three contributions: (1) the conceptualization of transformative thanatology, positioning death as moral-cosmic integration; (2) the articulation of *mesatya* as a political-spiritual resistance principle transcending genealogical loyalty; and (3) the transformation of sacred narratives from textual media to contemporary performance and digital platforms, raising ethical concerns of authenticity. These insights enrich cross-cultural studies of death, heroism, and performance while offering practical implications for preserving and adapting tradition in the global era.

**Keywords:** transformative thanatology; *mesatya*; Balinese shadow theatre; *Kumbakarna Lina*; Balinese Hindu cosmology

## 1. Introduction

*"...Personal and yet utterly universal, inevitable and yet unknowable, death has been a dominant theme in all cultures, since earliest times" (Selin & Rakoff, 2019).*

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This foundational observation underscores the profound epistemological divergence between Eastern and Western cultural paradigms in death representation within performing arts, necessitating a critical examination of how mortality is conceptualized, dramatized, and spiritually interpreted across civilizational boundaries. Western theatrical traditions, particularly those rooted in Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian frameworks, predominantly construct death through tragic individualism, wherein mortality functions as an existential terminus marked by finitude, absurdity, and the dissolution of personal agency (Gu, 2023; Harris, 2010; Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984). This paradigmatic approach positions death as a catastrophic rupture within linear temporal progression, often articulated through heroic resistance against inevitable defeat, as exemplified in classical tragic forms from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to Shakespearean tragedies. Conversely, Eastern performative traditions, particularly those embedded within Hindu-Buddhist cosmological frameworks, reconceptualize death as cyclical transformation rather than terminal conclusion, wherein mortality constitutes a transitional phase within eternal cosmic rhythm (Lee, 2009; Middleton & Plá, 2018; Wang, 2013). This cosmological orientation positions death not as existential negation but as spiritual metamorphosis, facilitating the soul's progression through karmic cycles toward ultimate liberation (*moksha*). The Balinese *wayang kulit* tradition, specifically the *Kumbakarna Lina* narrative, exemplifies this Eastern paradigmatic approach by presenting death as dharmic fulfillment rather than tragic termination, thereby offering a compelling case study for examining how performance art functions as a vehicle for cross-cultural thanatological discourse and spiritual pedagogy in contemporary global contexts.

Non-Western traditions hold reservoirs of wisdom that remain underexplored in global academic discourse (Höllinger & Muckenhuber, 2019; Zhu et al., 2025). In Southeast Asia, the *wayang* shadow-puppet theater stages *Kumbakarna Lina/Kumbakarna's Death*, rooted in the Old Javanese *Kakawin Rāmāyana* (Anom Candrayana & Kodi, 2021; Budayasa et al., 2023; Creese, 2011; deBoer et al., 1992; Khanna & Saran, 1993; Rajantheran, 2012). This art form carries profound philosophical and spiritual dimensions (Cohen, 2016; Nurgiyantoro & Efendi, 2017; Prasetya et al., 2023), with its performance traditions extending across Southeast Asia, including Bali (Chen, 2003; Wang, 2013). *Kumbakarna* emerges as a heroic figure who transcends simplistic binaries of right and wrong (Maulana, 2025; Nalan, 2016; Robson, 1999), embodying reflective moral agency resonant with existential authenticity.

This article situates death within a West–East dialogue: while Western perspectives often frame death as final tragedy (Gu, 2023; Harris, 2010; Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984; Yang & Miller, 2015), Eastern traditions regard it as

an endless cosmic cycle (Lee, 2009; Middleton & Plá, 2018; Wang, 2013). This tension generates a critical dialectic where death appears simultaneously as threat and enlightenment.

The heroic figure of Kumbakarna has been reinterpreted in more than twenty documented genres - Balinese and Javanese *Wayang Kulit*, *Wayang Golek*, *Wayang Wong*, dance-drama (*Sendratari*), *Kecak*, and *Baleganjur* music - from 1980 to 2025. His popularity is reinforced by celebrated puppeteers such as I Wayan Nardayana, the late Ki Seno Nugroho, Asep Sunandar Sunarya, and Ki Manteb Sudarsono. Commercial recordings and digital platforms, especially YouTube, with millions of views, demonstrate how his death is transformed from a biological event into a transcendent experience rich in existential meaning. This trajectory aligns with Campbell's monomyth (2004), where heroic sacrifice crosses cultural boundaries. If Jean Valjean (*Les Misérables*) (Hugo, 1887), *Oedipus Rex* (Sophocles, 2022), or Wilhelm Tell (Schiller & Palmer, 1915) embody resistance against corrupt power, Kumbakarna represents *heroic self-effacement* grounded in Hindu-Balinese spirituality, where death signifies union through *mesatya* within cosmic rhythm.

Previous Ramayana studies have largely focused on aesthetics, structure, statecraft ethics, or other figures such as Rama, Sita, and Ravana (Acridi, 2010; Chatterji, 2024; Kumar et al., 2024; Kumhaeng, 2024). Few have addressed the existential depth of Kumbakarna's conscious choice to face death—a theme often confined to moralistic or symbolic readings in both modern Indonesian literature and classical *wayang* narratives (Al-Ma'ruf et al., 2024; Andriyanto et al., 2022; Wati et al., 2025). Globally, death is more often cast as either psychological tragedy or spiritual transcendence, but rarely as a dialectical, reflective moral process (Fisker-Nielsen, 2020; Klass & Goss, 1999, 1999; Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984). This study fills that lacuna by integrating Hindu-Balinese cosmology (*dharma*, *moksha*) with Heidegger's existentialism (*Being-towards-death*) (2001), Festinger's cognitive dissonance (1986), and Schechner's *restored behavior* (2020), framed within Campbell's monomyth (2004).

The aim is to reinterpret *Kumbakarna Lina* as a reflective medium offering alternative paradigms of death and sacrifice beyond Eurocentric existential discourse (McClymond, 2002; Yin, 2018). In many non-Western traditions, including Hindu-Balinese spirituality, death is not merely a biological end or an absurdity demanding individual authenticity (Collier, 2003; Nally, 2025; Picone, 2012), but rather a part of the cosmic rhythm (*rta*), wherein the individual reunites with the moral and spiritual order of the universe through *dharma* (righteous duty), *karma* (the law of moral causation), and *moksha* (spiritual liberation or release from the cycle of rebirth) (Muniapan & Satpathy, 2013; Parekh et al., 2025; Premnath, 1994; Shushan, 2011). Kumbakarna's conscious

choice to fall in battle is not motivated by nihilism, but embodies *yadnya*—the ultimate sacrifice that purifies and liberates the soul (Dixit, 2024; Stephen, 2010; Thapar, 1994). Here, *mesatya* (Bumiarta et al., 2024) signifies both loyalty and existential responsibility (Kraan, 1985; Mani, 1987), enacted performatively in *wayang* as death reframed as spiritual triumph. The study's novelty lies in synthesizing Western existentialism with Hindu-Balinese spirituality through Kumbakarna as a cultural symbol.

The urgency of this research arises from the global fragmentation of meaning and collective spirituality (Grof & Grof, 2017; Helminiak, 1997; Neimeyer & Burke, 2011; Nica, 2021; Pieris, 1988). In Bali, the pressures of modernity, digitalization, and identity commodification have accelerated the erosion of traditional values (Sukawati et al., 2020; Verheijen & Darma Putra, 2020; Wirawan & Devi Rosalina, 2024). Within this context, the Kumbakarna Lina performance tradition functions not merely as cultural preservation but as a dynamic site of value reconstruction through contextual aesthetics. It offers a reflective space where communities engage with existential disorientation and reinterpret it through spiritual and ethical frameworks. As such, *Kumbakarna Lina* emerges as a transformative medium that reanimates collective meaning via locally embedded narratives, safeguarding intangible heritage while revitalizing spiritual consciousness through dialogic engagement.

This study explores three interrelated inquiries: (1) how *Kumbakarna Lina* embodies the moral tension between loyalty to power and responsibility to the people; (2) how *mesatya* is performatively interpreted and enacted; and (3) how Kumbakarna's death is reframed as a spiritual culmination that offers culturally grounded alternatives to nihilistic understandings of mortality. Accordingly, *Kumbakarna Lina* is positioned as an interdisciplinary locus that bridges East-West dialectics, theory-practice, and spirituality-performativity, thereby contributing to global discourse on suffering, responsibility, and death within the reflective and transformative horizon of traditional performance.

## 2. Literature Review

Contemporary interdisciplinary studies reveal a profound existential disorientation, necessitating a theoretical re-examination of how death and sacrifice are conceptualized across diverse cultural epistemologies. Epidemiological data presented by Weaver et al. (2025) and the World Health Organization (2025), indicating one suicide occurring every 43 seconds worldwide, represent only the quantitative surface of a deeper structural failure to provide transcendent frameworks for human existence. While scholars such as Lovero et al. (2023), and Rose-Clarke et al. (2020) have explored the sociological dimensions of contemporary alienation, and philosophical inquiries by Frankl

(1966), and Uddin (2024) diagnose a nihilistic reduction of death as merely a biological end, these analyses remain firmly rooted in Western epistemological frameworks.

Critical studies by Beriain (2020), Bhusal (2024), Escamilla González Aragón (2024), and Koci (2022) expose the failure of Western modernity to articulate sacrifice beyond the tragic register, yet they do not substantially engage with non-Western alternatives that could reconstruct death as a form of spiritual transformation rather than existential termination. This academic landscape underscores the urgency of cross-cultural dialogue, yet existing literature remains underdeveloped in theorizing how local performance traditions might serve as existential and philosophical frameworks for rearticulating meaning within an increasingly fragmented global epistemology.

The dichotomy between Eastern and Western thanatological paradigms in current scholarship, though productive for comparative purposes, risks obscuring the potential for a synthesis that transcends binary constructions. Western perspectives, examined by Gu (2023), Harris (2010), and Palgi & Abramovitch (1984), consistently frame death within a tragic individualist paradigm, while Eastern perspectives, analyzed by Lee (2009), Middleton & Plá (2018), and Wang (2013), emphasize cyclical cosmologies. Yet this binary itself requires critical deconstruction. Although Collier (2003) and Nally (2025) highlight postmodern destabilizations of traditional frameworks of death, and Fisker-Nielsen (2020) as well as Klass & Goss (1999) reveal dialectical negotiations between life and death, these studies tend to remain descriptive rather than prescriptive.

Comparative analyses by Yang & Miller (2015) and Picone (2012) demonstrate cultural specificity, but fall short in developing an integrative theoretical model capable of bridging epistemological divides. What remains critically absent from current discourse is a substantive engagement with how specific non-Western performance traditions - particularly those embedded within living spiritual praxis - may offer not merely alternative perspectives, but transformative frameworks for reconfiguring death, sacrifice, and existential meaning in ways that are both contextually grounded and resonant with contemporary global concerns.

Despite the richness of Ramayana's textual and performative traditions, particularly in the context of Southeast Asian *wayang*, existing scholarship has systematically neglected the existential and philosophical dimensions of heroic death, especially in relation to morally complex figures such as Kumbakarna. Foundational studies on the *Kakawin Rāmāyana* by Aciri (2010), Creese (2011), and Khanna & Saran (1993), alongside performance analyses by deBoer et al. (1992), indeed provide valuable historical and aesthetic documentation,

but remain confined to a descriptive register. Character-focused research has largely prioritized Rama, Sita, and Ravana (Chatterji, 2024; Kumar et al., 2024; Kumhaeng, 2024), while limited studies on Kumbakarna by Anom Candrayana & Kodi (2021), Budayasa et al. (2023), and Maulana (2025) have yet to engage with the deeper philosophical implications of his conscious decision to face death despite recognizing the moral corruption of the regime he defends. This absence becomes particularly striking when considering that Kumbakarna's narrative - choosing death while maintaining *dharmic* loyalty to a corrupt power - offers a unique case study for examining autonomous and reflective moral decision-making, moving beyond both Western heroic tragedy and simplistic Eastern fatalism.

The critical gap addressed by this study lies at the intersection of three prevailing academic omissions: first, the absence of a substantive theoretical synthesis between Western existential philosophy and Hindu-Buddhist cosmological frameworks in conceptualizing conscious death; second, the lack of performance-based analysis that repositions *wayang* not merely as a cultural artifact, but as a living philosophical medium capable of engaging with contemporary existential concerns; and third, the neglect of Kumbakarna as a paradigmatic figure whose moral complexity offers a model of reflective autonomy that surpasses both Western tragic heroism and Eastern fatalism. While Heidegger's (2001) concept of *Being-towards-death* and Campbell's (2004) structure of the monomyth provide Western theoretical frameworks, and Hindu-Buddhist discourses on *dharma* (Muniapan & Satpathy, 2013), *yajña* (Dixit, 2024), and *moksha* (Shushan, 2011; Stephen, 2010) offer local frames of reference, no study has yet attempted a serious interdisciplinary synthesis to conceptualize Kumbakarna's death in *wayang* performance as a form of "transformative thanatology" - a framework in which conscious sacrifice is understood not merely as tragedy or transcendence, but as a dialectical achievement of moral autonomy within the cosmic order.

By synthesizing Schechner's (2020) concept of restored behavior, Festinger's (1986) cognitive dissonance theory, and indigenous principles such as *mesatya* (Bumiarta et al., 2024) and *dharma*, this study formulates a theoretical framework that positions the *Kumbakarna Lina* performance tradition as both a site of epistemic articulation and a hermeneutic apparatus for navigating contemporary existential complexities. In doing so, it contributes to the discourse on cultural resilience as articulated by Sukawati et al. (2020) and Verheijen & Darma Putra (2020), offering philosophically embedded alternatives to reductive interpretations of mortality within global performative paradigms.



### 3. Method and Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Method

This study adopts a qualitative design employing an interpretive-hermeneutic approach grounded in textual and narrative semiotic analysis to examine phenomena within their natural context (Creswell, 2015, p. 58). The focus is the *Kumbakarna Lina* narrative, selected for its capacity to represent the cultural complexities of Balinese expressions of inner conflict, sacrifice, and the value of *mesatya* in confronting death.

Primary data consist of five performances across three genres: Balinese *wayang kulit* by I Wayan Nardayana and the late I Ketut Madra; Javanese *wayang kulit* by the late Ki Manteb Sudarsono and Ki Seno Nugroho; and Sundanese *wayang golek* by the late Asep Sunandar Sunarya. The Balinese performance by I Wayan Nardayana serves as the principal case, complemented by other variants based on the credibility of the puppeteers (Winaja, 2017, p. 89) and the contextual-textual relevance of the heroic-tragic theme (Suaka & Budiasa, 2024, p. 61; Winanti, 2015, pp. 162–165).

Analysis is further enriched through interviews with senior Balinese puppeteers, including I Wayan Wija, I Made Lamu, I Wayan Nardayana, I Made Raka Sukada, and Sang Ketut Pesan Sandiyasa. The interviews were deliberately limited to Balinese puppeteers due to their direct involvement in the living performance tradition of *Kumbakarna Lina*, where Balinese philosophical concepts such as *mesatya*, *dharma*, and *moksha* are performed as embodied practice. This focus ensures epistemological coherence, as Balinese *dalang* (shadow-puppeteer/puppeteer/puppet master) operate within ritual, linguistic, and cosmological frameworks unavailable to practitioners outside Bali. Data such as dialogues, key scenes, emotional shifts, and visual symbols were transcribed and compared with the *Kakawin Rāmāyana* (1987), particularly *Sarggah* (chapter) XIV, XXII, and XXIII, to trace links between classical narratives and contemporary interpretations. Additional validation was sought through documentation of related art forms such as *ogoh-ogoh* theater and sculpture, as well as philological and thanatological literature.

Data analysis employed thematic and narrative interpretation framed by the *monomyth*, cognitive dissonance, and Schechner's notion of *restored behavior*. Three central themes emerged: (1) Kumbakarna's ethical dilemma between genealogical loyalty and state *dharma*; (2) the articulation of *mesatya* as transcendent fidelity; and (3) the affirmation of death as existential courage. Interpretation followed a hermeneutic spiral, iteratively moving between parts (scenes, dialogues) and the narrative as a whole.

Interpretive validity was ensured through triangulation of classical texts, performance narratives, interviews, and theoretical literature. Credibility was

reinforced by the researchers' role as active spectators and practitioners of Balinese performance. Reflexivity was employed to minimize bias, particularly in bridging Western existentialism with Hindu-Balinese philosophical and ritual concepts such as *dharma*, *karma*, *moksha*, *yajna*, and *mesatya*.

### 3.2 Theoretical Framework

This study employs an interpretive–hermeneutic approach to the character of Kumbakarna in the play *Kumbakarna Lina*. The play is read as a creative adaptation of the *Kakawin Rāmāyana*, which articulates philosophical values of sacrifice (*mesatya*) and Balinese Hindu religiosity. The analysis integrates the cosmology of *śraddhā* (*dharma*, *karma*, and *moksha*) as a universal form of Eastern-oriented philosophical thanatology within Balinese Hindu belief (Donder, 2007; Parbasana, 2009; Suamba, 2003; Titib, 2003; Yudabakti & Watra, 2007) with Martin Heidegger's existential concept of *Being-towards-death* (2001), Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (1986), and Richard Schechner's theory of restored behavior (2020), all framed within Joseph Campbell's monomyth (2004) to map the dramatic narrative of Kumbakarna in *Kumbakarna Lina/Kumbakarna Gugur*.

This research thus operates through an interdisciplinary analytic that weaves Western existential epistemology with Balinese Hindu cosmology into a productive and transformative hermeneutic dialectic. Heidegger's philosophy of *Sein-zum-Tode* (*Being-towards-death*) (2001, p. 295) is not merely treated as an ontological category affirming human thrownness toward the horizon of the inevitable final possibility; it is reread through Balinese Hindu values - *dharma*, *moksha*, and *ṛta* - which regard death not as a terminal rupture, but as a moment of attunement with the cosmic order. This perspective enables the articulation of Kumbakarna's death as the teleological fulfillment of a *dharma* calling that transcends the life–death dichotomy. Within this framework, Festinger's notion of “cognitive dissonance” (1986, pp. 6–7) is mobilized dialectically to trace the ethical tension between genealogical loyalty to Rāvaṇa and transpersonal responsibility to the people of Alengka, a tension mediated into an autonomous moral decision marking the transition from particular consciousness to cosmic consciousness.

Schechner's theory of restored behavior, commonly understood as the repetition and transformation of cultural forms (2020, p. 10), is creatively articulated with the local concept of *kawi dalang* (2002, p. 69) and Sedana's *trisandi* model (2019, pp. 11–12), positioning the *dalang* both as hermeneutic agent and spiritual medium. The performance of *Kumbakarna Lina* is interpreted as a performative event that restores, transforms, and recontextualizes the *Rāmāyana* narrative within a contemporary value landscape, with the actor's body, visual artifacts, and ritual symbols functioning simultaneously as text,



context, and praxis. This synthesis is enriched by Campbell's monomythal structure (departure–initiation–return) (2004, p. 28), which undergoes resemanticization wherein the *return* phase signifies sublimation into cosmic rhythm through sacrifice (*yajña*). In line with Kernodle's typology of dramatic plot, as interpreted by Dewojati (2012, p. 167 dan 174), the analysis maps crisis, climax, and resolution into fourteen dramatic points (P) to illuminate Kumbakarna's existential transformation.

Together, these theoretical instruments constitute an analytic mechanism that positions performance art as a dialectical locus between local values and global discourse, ultimately yielding a new category - *transformative thanatology* - that conceptualizes death as the culmination of self-integration within both the cosmic and moral horizons.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Results

The results of this study present a comprehensive interpretation of how the *Kumbakarna Lina* performance reconstructs the meaning of death, loyalty, and transformation within Balinese shadow theatre. Drawing from field documentation, performance analysis, and textual comparison with the *Kakawin Rāmāyana*, three interrelated findings emerge. First, death is reframed from a tragic event into a transformative act of cosmic integration. Second, *mesatya*—the principle of loyal devotion—is revealed as both spiritual fidelity and political resistance. Third, the adaptation of sacred narratives across textual, performative, and digital media demonstrates the continuity of Balinese cosmological values in contemporary contexts. These findings are elaborated in the following subsections.

#### 4.1.1 Epistemological Reconstruction of Death: From Tragedy to Transformation

Field findings reveal that the representation of Kumbakarna's death in the *Kumbakarna Lina* performance is not merely a biological tragedy, but rather a heroic transformation that articulates a transcendental horizon. This epistemological reconstruction of death is manifested in the four-act dramaturgy of *dalang* Nardayana's performance, which integrates dramatic form (plot, character, theme) with performative texture (dialogue, mood, spectacle). These acts progress from sacred exposition (P1-P2; P=Part), genealogical tension (P2-P7), ideological conflict and ethical compromise (P7-P10), to the climactic battle and the release into *moksha* (P10-P14). The visualization of Kumbakarna's spirit joyfully gazing upon his own body signifies that death is positioned as a cosmic resolution rather than a mere linear end of life (Figure 1). Thus, this performativity of death transcends the nihilistic reductionism often attached to

interpretations of heroic tragedy in Western perspectives, reaffirming death as a cosmic renewal imbued with transformational value.

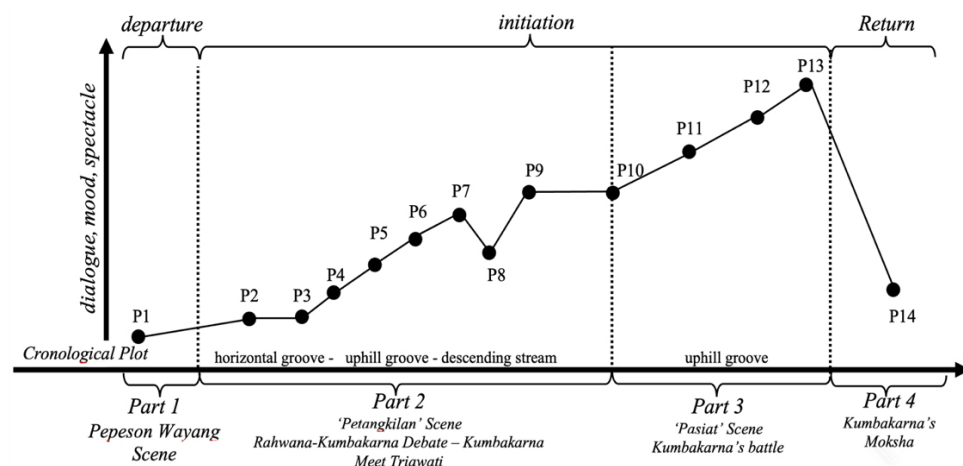


Figure 1. Dynamic/plot graph in the play “Kumbakarna Lina” (Source: Researcher’s Interpretation, 2025)

Micronarrative analysis reveals that before reaching a transcendental resolution, Kumbakarna is shaken by an existential dilemma that displays moral performativity amid structural dissonance. In segments (P3–P7), he is caught between resisting the *adharma* regime of Rahwana or fulfilling the *dharma* of the state as Alengka’s commander. This ambivalence is articulated when he states,

*“Forgive me, brother. As for the words you have just spoken before me, commanding me now to go to the battlefield against Lord Rama, it is difficult for me to speak before you in this noble assembly. Why so? Because, if I reflect upon it, since the very beginning many have given you teachings, advice, and counsel. Yet it seems difficult for you to heed them. Forgive me, I cannot say more before you at this moment”* [Quotation 1]

a statement immediately met with Rahwana’s curses and Delem’s mockery. Kumbakarna’s deliberative choice to proceed to battle (P8), however, is framed with the assertion,

*“I go to the battlefield not to defend you my brother... whom do I defend? My homeland, my motherland... even if it costs me my very breath, I am ready,”* [Quotation 2]

Underscoring a middle path that reflects a model of heroic self-effacement. This struggle resembles the tragic dilemmas of Antigone or Hamlet (Hamm, 1926), yet within the Southeast Asian context it reveals a distinct ethical character: the devotion of *mesatya*, which transcends personal genealogy toward a cosmic loyalty to the motherland. As the scene from the micronarrative data of Rahwana and Kumbakarna’s dialogue can be seen in (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Front View from Left to Right (Sangut, Kumbakarna, Rahwana, Delem). Scene of Kumbakarna's Dilemma When Confronting Ravana's Order to Enter the Battlefield in Defense of the State under Ravana's Adharma (Source: Wicaksana, 2007).

The climax of the performance articulates death not merely as a military defeat, but as a cosmological transition. In the Nardayana *Kumbakarna Lina's* versions (2005 and 2007), Rama's sacred arrow dissolves Kumbakarna's body in flames, which then transform into a spiritual aura symbolized by a green light, accompanied by the appearance of two *kayonan* (a sacred "cosmic tree" puppet symbolizing the universe, life-force, transition, and cosmic order; also known as *gunungan* in Javanese wayang) flanking Kumbakarna's corpse (P13–P14). His soul gazes upon his body with joy before soaring away, reinforced by the narrative emphasis in: "*penjah sang Kumbakarna, ageseng lawan sira sang Rama Wijaya*" (Kumbakarna falls, burned by Rama Wijaya) [Quotation 3]. This sequence appropriates the iconography of the *ngaben* cremation ritual in Balinese tradition as a metaphor for the dissolution of the body, accompanied by a prayer that, in his next rebirth, he may become a human being of benefit to himself, others, and the universe.

*Kumbakarna's Monologue of Joy:*

*Embracing Death with Serenity Performed by Dalang Nardayana*

Dalang (I Wayan Nardayana) : Ultimately, the mighty and virtuous Kumbakarna fell - he perished on the battlefield, slain by King Rama. His death was not in defense of his cruel brother, but in service of the people and the nation teetering on the brink of collapse. He died as a martyr, a flower of the nation. Kumbakarna found joy in being defeated by Rama, for Rama had dissolved the demonic traits (*sifat-sifat raksasa*) embedded within him. Now, Kumbakarna's soul drifts through the ether, journeying toward a realm where the Divine has prepared a place for him, in accordance with the karma of his devotion (*karma bhakti*) in the mortal world (*mayapada*). Within his soul, he continuously prays to the Supreme God (*Tuhan Yang Maha Esa*). Should he be reborn, he wishes to return as a useful human being - useful to himself, to others, and to his nation. May it be so... may it be so... may it be so. [Quotation 4]

In Wicaksandita's 2015 performance variant, cosmic omens - such as a crimson sky, rain of blood, and entrails falling from above - underscore Kumbakarna's awareness of his impending death. Nevertheless, he advances into battle undaunted. These elements exemplify Richard Schechner's concept of restored behavior, wherein ritualistic gestures are borrowed, transformed, and recontextualized as instruments of cultural resilience. Rather than portraying death as a tragic conclusion, the performance visualizes it as *moksha* - a state of blissful liberation attained through the fulfillment of *yadnya* (sacrificial duty), *dharma* (righteousness), and *tapa* (ascetic practice), as affirmed in the *Kakawin Rāmāyana* (XIV:31–32; XXII:48–49).

*Kakawin Rāmāyana* (Catur Dasamas Sarggah XIV, stanzas 31 - 32; Dwi Wingasti Sarggah XXII, stanzas 48 - 49): Depicting Kumbakarna's  
Courage in Facing Peril and Death

Catur Dasamas Sarggah (XIV),  
Stanza 31:

"*wruh nghulun lara tēka ri kita huwus  
daitya dānawa asing musuh umarā, ndā ta  
katuna rikang ksana ri kita, nyā nghulun  
pējaha ring rana dadaha*"

[Kumbakarna is aware that calamity shall inevitably befall his elder brother (Rahwana). Yet, not even for a moment will he abandon him. Let the *daitya*, *danawa*, and all hostile forces come forth - he shall face them alone. Let him fall as a sacrificial offering upon the battlefield]

Catur Dasamas Sarggah (XIV)],  
Stanza 32:

"*Tā Kasangśaya huwus manému suka,  
tusti sésti humandang taya kakurang.  
Yajña punya tapa kapwa ya gawayan,  
mātya ring rana naha suka kawēkas*"

[Kumbakarna harbors no doubt, for he has already tasted fulfillment. He has performed *yadnya* (sacrificial rites), upheld *dharma* (righteous duty), and undertaken *tapa* (ascetic discipline).

All that brings joy to the heart has been attained - nothing remains lacking. Only death on the battlefield stands as the final bliss]

Dwi Wingasti Sarggah (XXII) Stanza 48:

*Cihna nyan pejahéng ranānggana katon utpata  
mangde pati, méghābāng i ruhur nirantara  
hudan rāh māngsa lawan (nj) usus, gagak ghora  
humung manamber arubung tang andaru kwéh  
tibā, moghātah kumedut [t] ikang mata lawan  
bāhwi kiwān cañcala.*

[A portent of death upon the battlefield revealed itself - ominous signs foretelling the end. Crimson clouds loomed overhead, and ceaselessly fell the rain of blood, flesh, and entrails. Ravens shrieked in frenzy, circling the sky in chaotic flight. Suddenly, Kumbakarna's eyes flickered, and his left shoulder trembled]

Dwi Wingasti Sarggah (XXII) bait 48 dan 49  
*Ndā tar wismaya tar legō lagi manon utpata tar  
pét hayu, mangkin darppa sirār asō papagaken  
tang wānarā ngembuli, mangrangkul ya  
pareng manék kasaputan tāwak nira wré kabéh,  
kadyangga nikanang gunung papupulan ning  
mégha sigrānaput*

[Kumbakarna showed no astonishment, nor did he falter upon witnessing the dire omens - he knew there would be no salvation.

With intensified fury, he surged forward to confront the vanara horde that swarmed upon him. They clambered and clung to his body in unison, enveloping him entirely. Like a mountain, suddenly shrouded by swift-moving clouds]. [Quotation 5]

The comparative analysis of performance archives by I Ketut Madra (1980) and Ida Wayan Pangsua Dharma (2020) reveals a dynamic evolution in audience reception. In Madra's rendition, Kumbakarna's death is framed through the collective mourning of the *punakawan* (comic servants), emphasizing pathos and communal grief. In contrast, Pangsua's interpretation reconfigures death as an affirmation of *ksatriya dharma*, narrating Kumbakarna's fall not as loyalty to his brother, but as a dignified sacrifice for the nation. This dramaturgical variation reflects the audience's negotiation of sacrificial meaning within contemporary contexts, while simultaneously offering an implicit critique of spiritual commodification in the traditional performance industry.

Symbolic elements - such as the arrow as a marker of *dharma*, or the white cloth in the *balaganjur-ogoh-ogoh* procession in Bakas' *Kumbakarna Lina* (2015), which evokes the *pelebon/ngaben* (Balinese cremation rite) - demonstrate how performative space becomes a locus for revitalizing the value of *mesatya* (loyalty). Thus, *Kumbakarna Lina* functions as a framework of transformative thanatology, bridging tragic narrative and spiritual transcendence while reaffirming Balinese cultural resilience within evolving global discourses on death and meaning.

#### 4.1.2 Spiritual-Political Intersectionality: Mesatya as the Axis of Loyalty and Resistance

The performance of *Kumbakarna Lina*, as staged by I Wayan Nardayana and other contemporary *dalang*, exhibits a dramatic structure that, on the surface, parallels Joseph Campbell's monomythic framework of departure–initiation–return. However, a fundamental divergence emerges in the return phase: in Balinese *wayang*, *Kumbakarna Lina* does not culminate in the hero's reintegration into the profane world, but rather in an existential union through *mokṣa*. This narrative trajectory exemplifies a form of “dharmic dissolution” - a non-teleological heroism that eschews triumph or reintegration, privileging sacrifice and cosmic interconnectedness.

The departure phase begins with Kumbakarna's appointment as commander of Alengka's army, a role he assumes not merely by virtue of lineage, but as an ethical response to his duty toward the state and its people. The initiation phase encompasses his inner struggle under Rahwana's coercion (P2–P7), Dewi Triawati's plea (P9–P10), and Sangut's admonition, which expands the meaning of *mesatya* (loyalty) (Figure 3). As cited:

“My life shall be sacrificed... my purpose is to surrender it entirely”; Sangut responds: “Whatever the ruler of this land commands, I must obey - such is my devotion, even my life may be offered.” [Quotation 6]

The return is represented through a *mokṣa* sequence, symbolized by the white cloth, *kayonan*, and flame - signifying not a return to the mundane, but a release into sanctity. This dramaturgical pattern reframes the heroic arc as a spiritual transcendence, positioning *Kumbakarna Lina* within a Balinese cosmology that privileges purification and metaphysical resolution over narrative closure.



Figure 3. Scene of Kumbakarna Embracing Dewi Triawati, Accompanied by Sangut and Condong, Depicting a Dramatic Moment of Inner Conflict and *Mesatya* Loyalty (Source: Wicaksana, 2007).

The structural distinctiveness of *Kumbakarna Lina* becomes increasingly evident when juxtaposed with the six closure options for the hero outlined in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 2004, pp. 179–229), all of which emphasize the protagonist's reintegration into the social realm: *Refusal of the Return*, *The Magic Flight*, *Rescue from Without*, *Crossing the Return Threshold*, *Master of Two Worlds*, and *Freedom to Live*. In Balinese *wayang* performance, this final phase is replaced by a moment of cosmic unification through death as *dharma*, thereby dismantling the Western narrative teleology that privileges the cyclical return to worldly life.

A comparative diagram underscores that while the *departure* and *initiation* phases remain structurally parallel, the *return* is supplanted by *mokṣa* - death as both spiritual resolution and affirmation of *mesatya* (loyalty). In this regard, Balinese *wayang* does not merely adapt Campbell's model; rather, it decolonizes the concept of heroism by presenting an alternative paradigm rooted in Hindu-Balinese cosmology. Here, loyalty is not directed toward worldly triumph, but toward cosmic truth that transcends life and death, see (Figure 4).



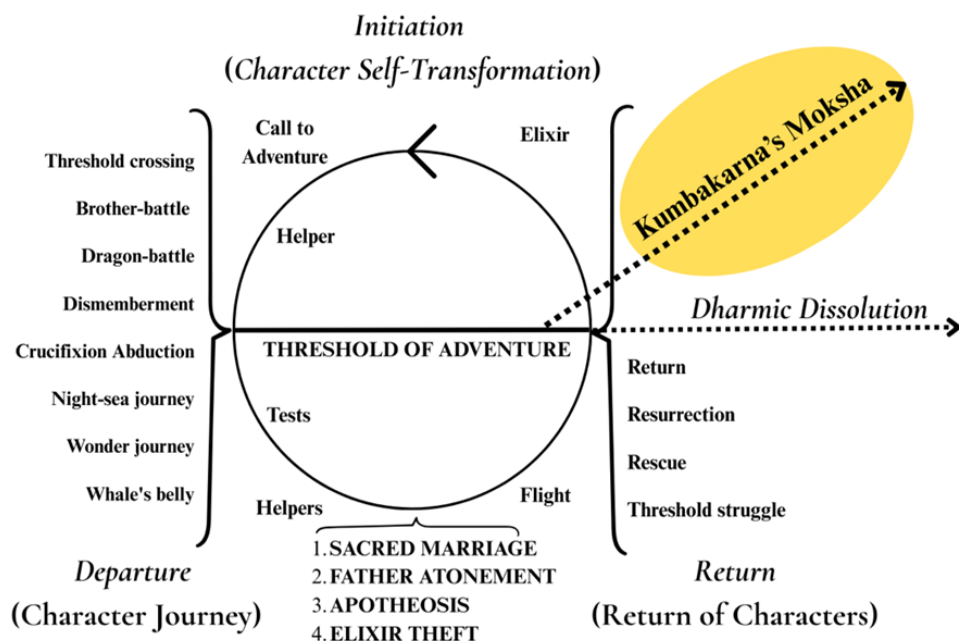


Figure 4. Comparative Diagram of Campbell's Monomyth Structure and the Dramatic Arc of *Kumbakarna Lina*, Highlighting the Shift from the Return Phase to *Mokṣa* as Dharmic Dissolution (Source: Researcher's Data, 2025).

*Mesatya* in *Kumbakarna Lina* does not merely signify blind loyalty; rather, it embodies an ambivalent politico-spiritual stance. In the *petangkilan* scene, Kumbakarna confronts Rahwana with a critical tone, amplified by Sangut's remark: "As leaders, we must be open to criticism... so that we may engage in self-reflection" [Quotation 7]. Rahwana's response, however, is marked by rage - he points, curses, and even spits at Kumbakarna, with the red *blencong* lighting intensifying his image as a repressive sovereign. This is further illustrated in the dialogue: Kumbakarna: "Indeed, brother... many speak with reason, though few are heard" Rahwana: "Iiih, Kumbakarna! Great is your sin, lacking proper reverence!... You dare defy the *raksasa* order!" [Quotation 8].

The *punakawan* Delem adds satirical weight by mocking Sangut, thereby exposing the fragility of Rahwana's authority. This scene reveals an ethical paradox: *mesatya* compels Kumbakarna to advance for the sake of the nation, even as he recognizes the tyranny of its ruler. At this juncture, *mesatya* serves a dual function - preserving cosmic order while simultaneously enabling resistance against despotic power. This representation may be interpreted through Agamben's framework of sovereign exception, yet it is reconfigured by the Hindu-Balinese concept of *dharma sesana*, wherein cosmic loyalty legitimizes critique of a king who deviates from *dharma*.

The performance of *Kumbakarna Lina* underscores that death is not portrayed as a tragic end, but rather as a form of transcendence, paralleling the *pelebon/ngaben* cremation rites in Balinese Hindu tradition. Archival footage of the *ngaben* ceremony led by dalang I Dewa Gede Sasih (2017) features the descent of a *jempana/bade* (a pagoda-like cremation tower used to carry the deceased in Balinese funerary rites) shaped like a *kayonan* (Figure 5), draped in white cloth and accompanied by *gender wayang* and *balaganjur* ensembles - elements that visually correspond to Kumbakarna's *mokṣa* depicted on a white *kelir* screen, illuminated by fire and arrows.



Figure 5. The *Yadnya Pelebon/Ngaben* Ritual of I Dewa Gede Sasih, featuring the *Menur Jempana/Bade* structure shaped like a *Kayonan*, flanked by *Gender Wayang* ensembles on both sides. Family members dressed in ceremonial white attire- symbolizing ritual purity - accompany the procession as part of the sacred *Pitra Yadnya* rites (Source: Wicaksana, 2017).

The musical aesthetics of *balaganjur*, dominated by *ceng-ceng* cymbals, *gender wayang* in *slendro* tuning, and chant excerpts from the *Putru* palm-leaf manuscript (*lontar*), evoke a sacred yet therapeutic atmosphere. However, the gravity of death is softened through the comedic interventions of the *punakawan*, particularly in the dialogue between Delem and Cenk, who mock the absurdity of war (“If they die, does that mean I have to die too?”), thereby generating collective catharsis amid grief.

Documented audience responses - ranging from amusement to affective resonance - on the “Cenk Blonk” channel (2024) underscore *wayang*’s dual function: as a performative vehicle for entertainment and as a culturally embedded practice of psychosocial restoration. This dramaturgical pattern

aligns with findings in global dramatherapy and performative arts research (Hankir et al., 2017; K. Nelson et al., 2024), affirming that *Kumbakarna Lina* is not merely an epic narrative, but a performative conduit that bridges Hindu-Balinese cosmology with contemporary existential reflection.

#### 4.1.3 Local Epistemology and Medium Transformation: From Kakawin to the Contemporary Stage

The primary corpus of this study originates from the *Kakawin Rāmāyana*, preserved in palm-leaf manuscripts (*lontar*) (Hinzler, 1993) written in Old Javanese (*Kawi*) using ancient Balinese script, archived at the Bali Cultural Office. These manuscripts were subsequently translated and transliterated into printed editions *Kakawin Rāmāyana I* and *II* (1987) thereby opening epistemic space for new interpretations. Whereas the original texts circulated within limited customary circles, their printed academic form renders them more accessible and inclusive.

From this textual foundation, the medium undergoes transformation into performative conventions, such as the *Pakem Wayang Kulit Parwa* and *Ramayana* (Wicaksana, 2005), which preserve the narrative continuity of *Sarggah* (chapter) XIV, XXII, and XXIII, while simultaneously introducing aesthetic modifications through dramatic structure and *antawacana* (dialogic technique). This shift illustrates a cross-media hermeneutic mechanism, wherein classical texts are not treated as fixed documents but as symbolic reservoirs subject to ongoing reconfiguration.

Consequently, the epistemological hierarchy privileging written texts over oral-performative traditions is critically diminished: the text serves as an initial source, yet the authority of meaning is ultimately materialized through performative enactment. This perspective aligns with a passage from the *Dharma Pawayangan* manuscript, which affirms the *dalang* (puppet master) as “*Sanghyang Kawicarita... tan narang dadi dalang*” [Quotation 9] (Wicaksana, 2018, p. 126), a legitimate interpreter who transcends literary boundaries and enters the spiritual domain.



Figure 6. Three-Stage Transformation of Epistemic Transmission: *Lontar* → Print → *Pakem*: (a) *Kakawin Rāmāyana* in its original *lontar* manuscript form, written in Old Balinese script and archived by the Bali Cultural Office. (b) Printed edition of *Kakawin Rāmāyana* resulting from translation and transliteration efforts. (c) Transformation of *Kakawin* into performative *pakem* texts for *Wayang Parwa* and *Ramayana* productions (Source: Wicaksandita, 2025).

The subsequent transformation unfolds in the digital era, wherein the narrative of *Kumbakarna Lina* is documented in audio-visual formats through commercial CDs and online platforms such as YouTube. Notable examples include the *Cenk Blonk* performance (2024), which garnered 738,000 views, and the *golek* rendition by the late Asep Sunandar Sunarya (2024), with 187,000 views, and also other *Kumabakarna Lina/kumbakarna Gugur* with accumulation of millions of views. These digital publications are not mere redistributions; rather, they constitute a refiguration of reception that carries epistemological implications: *wayang* knowledge is now mediated by algorithms, user comments, and engagement metrics.

Audience responses such as “*Even in his laziness, Kumbakarna still speaks with sacred wisdom*” (@gedepasekbrahmanandachanne3478, 2020) and “*Deeply moved by Kumbakarna Lina, truly rwa bhineda*” (@dewatahits, 2024) indicate that viewers interpret the performance not solely as entertainment, but as philosophical reflection. This digital reception reconstructs epistemology from a philological paradigm into a phenomenology of online performance, wherein authenticity no longer resides in the original manuscript but in the resonance of meaning within interactive spaces. Thus, digital platforms shift the epistemic locus from text to audience, from closed knowledge systems to participatory hermeneutics - without entirely relinquishing the symbolic sacrality preserved by the *dalang* through the use of *Kawi* language and ritual preambles.



Within the framework of Balinese local epistemology, the *dalang* functions not merely as a storyteller, but as a *kawī dalang* - a spiritual hermeneut who interprets cosmology through the medium of *wayang* (Sedana, 2019, p. 16). The implementation of the *trisandi* model - character, plot, and form - enables the structuring of *Kumbakarna Lina* not as a reproduction of the *kakawin*, but as a production of meaning that resonates with contemporary existential reflection. This practice was tested in the researcher's 2015 performance at the Bali Arts Festival, which commenced with the ritual of *ngungkab gedog* (opening the puppet box) and the creation of *tirta suci* (sacred water), signifying the cognitive internalization of spiritual *wayang* knowledge to be embodied through performance.

This underscores the interrelation between performativity and sacrality. Iconic visuals - such as Kumbakarna pierced through the mouth, armless, and bereft of his crown - are not mere representations of tragedy, but transformations of the *Kakawin Rāmāyana* and *Dharma Pawayangan* into performative forms that shift knowledge from the cognitive domain of narrative and cultural values into the affective realm. At this level, the phenomenology of performance emerges as a locus of knowledge: every puppet gesture, *punakawan* humor, and *batel wayang* musical tone becomes a field of articulation for the *kawī dalang*.

A series of interviews with *dalang* across generations - including the late I Made Sidja, I Ketut Kodi, and I Wayan Nardayana - enriches symbolic understanding and reveals interpretive variations across genres (Balinese, Javanese, Sundanese). These variations do not undermine authenticity; rather, they expand the epistemic horizon.



Figure 7. Performance of *Wayang Kumbakarna Lina* by the Researcher: (a) Figure left: The researcher (left) and *mangku dalang* I Made Lamu (right) during the ritual procession of *ngungkab gedog* (opening the puppet box) (Source: Wicaksana, 2015); (b) Figure right: Scene depicting Kumbakarna pierced by arrows in the performance of *Kumbakarna Lina* by the researcher (Source: Wicaksana, 2015).

The integration of Ricoeur's hermeneutics through the stages of mimesis - prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration - demonstrates that the epistemology of performance cannot be reduced to textual interpretation or visual documentation alone; rather, it necessitates embodied engagement. The application of this framework compels the researcher to relinquish the epistemic distance between audience and academic, assuming a dual role as *dalang*, active participant, artist, ritual practitioner, and member of the Balinese indigenous community. This aligns with Ricoeur's assertion: "You must understand in order to believe, but you must believe in order to understand" (2000, p. 298), which lies at the heart of the hermeneutic circle and bridges aesthetic experience with cultural faith.

As both *dalang* and academic, the researcher (I Dewa Ketut Wicaksana and I Dewa Ketut Wicaksandita) occupies an insider - outsider position, wherein scholarly objectivity must be negotiated through spiritual participation. The *Lontar Dharma Pawayangan* affirms that the *dalang* is required to embody *Sanghyang Lokapala* and *Sanghyang Kawicarita* (Wicaksana, 2018, p. 126), indicating that epistemic authority extends beyond rational analysis to encompass the *dalang's* transcendental experience. In this regard, the study of *Kumbakarna Lina* offers a model of embodied scholarship - an epistemic production that integrates aesthetic, ritualistic, and reflective dimensions.

By comparing cross-genre practices (Balinese *wayang kulit*, Javanese *wayang*, *golek*, *kecak*, and public sculptures of Kumbakarna), this research underscores the dynamic nature of local epistemology: it preserves sacrality while remaining open to digital and global adaptations. Therefore, the transformation of the *Kakawin Rāmāyana* into contemporary performance is not merely a textual translation, but a multilayered epistemological process that interweaves philology, phenomenology, and research ethics within the cosmological framework of Balinese Hinduism.

## 4.2 Discussion

This *discussion* critically elaborates the study's main findings by positioning *Kumbakarna Lina* as a dialectical field between classical texts, *wayang* performativity, and digital mediation. The analysis unfolds across three interrelated subsections: first, a deconstruction of fatalism within a cross-civilizational thanatological horizon; second, the articulation of *mesatya* as a political ethics of loyalty; and third, the transformation of sacred narratives from *kakawin* to the digital domain. This progression not only underscores the complexity of Kumbakarna's figure but also advances new conceptual categories in the study of death, performance, and cultural spirituality.



#### 4.2.1 *Who Dies for Whom? Reconstructing Death as Cosmic Integration in Contemporary Performance*

An analysis of the field findings demonstrates that the dramatic construction of Kumbakarna's death in *Kumbakarna Lina* cannot be reduced to a mere narrative of fatalism or conventional heroism. Rather, it constitutes an epistemological arena that enables a reconstruction of death's meaning as a transformative event. Within the framework of Heidegger's *Being-towards-death* (2001, p. 295), Kumbakarna's courage in facing mortality should be interpreted as an ontological awareness of existential thrownness into the inescapable horizon of death. Yet Nardayana's performance illustrates that such awareness does not end in the affirmation of human finitude but is rearticulated through the Hindu-Balinese cosmology of *dharma*, *karma*, and *moksha*, positioning death as a moment of self-union with the cosmic order.

The visualization of Kumbakarna's fallen body facing the northern sky while his soul looks upon it with joy, as staged in Nardayana's *Kumbakarna Lina* (2007), is not merely an aesthetic imagery but a performative metaphor of *moksha*, where death is conceived as the culmination of *yajña* and *mesatya*. In this regard, the play dialectically disrupts the limitations of Western paradigms that tend to frame death as a linear finality, instead offering a horizon of meaning in which death signifies a cosmic transition.

Kumbakarna's ethical conflict—caught between genealogical loyalty to Rahwana and transpersonal responsibility to the people of Alengka—emerges as a dialectical arena where Mbembe's necropolitics (2001, 2003) intersects with Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (1986, pp. 6–7). Rahwana's oppressive gesture of power positions death as an instrument of the regime; however, Kumbakarna's declaration, “*I go to the battle field not to defend my brother... whom do I defend? My homeland*”, affirms death as *sovereign death*: an ontological agency that liberates itself from corrupt genealogical structures toward the indigenous cosmology of *dharma–moksha* (Donder, 2007; Yudabakti & Watra, 2007).

The psychic tension between resisting *adharma* and maintaining hierarchical obedience resonates with Festinger's matrix of dissonance. Yet the resolution is not utilitarian rationalization, but a *dharmic* act free of Aristotelian *akrasia* (Aristotle, 2009), aligned with the *niṣkāma karma* ethic of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2.47; 3.19) (Tim Pengkaji Dan Penerjemah Pustaka Suci Veda (Vedānuvāda Samiti), 2021, pp. 59 & 87). The utterance “*even if my breath becomes the end of me*” signals a resolute decision that transcends moral calculation toward cosmic attunement. In Heideggerian terms, this represents a transition from *das Man* toward authentic existence within the horizon of *Being-towards-death* (Heidegger, 2001, p. 295), visually embodied through the iconography of the joyous soul gazing upon its body and the sacralized death of the knight as depicted in the

*Kakawin*. Thus, Kumbakarna does not merely negate tragic fatalism, but affirms death as an autonomous space of ethical and cosmological significance.

The performance of *Kumbakarna Lina* enacts *restored behavior* (Schechner, 2020, p. 10), re-inscribed through Sedana's *trisandi* (2019, pp. 11–12), whereby the puppeteer's body functions as a hermeneutic medium that resemanticizes the *Ramayana* within the Balinese thanatological horizon. The climax of Rama's fiery arrow dissolving Kumbakarna's body is projected as a performative *ngaben*: the figure of the soul gazing at the corpse on the white screen, *kayonan*, fire, and the idioms of *balaganjur* and *gender wayang* music forming a ritual condensation that channels sacred meaning without diminishing performativity.

Referring to Turner (1982), this frame generates a liminoid space that shifts the audience from profane awareness to sacred proximity, transforming spectators into participants in the protagonist's spiritual transformation. Unlike Western tragedies (e.g., *Othello* or *King Lear*) that affirm futility (Hamm, 1926), this strategy stages death as an ethical-cosmological integration and a social function of the hero. Thus, the performance not only reiterates the classical text but also grafts war into the register of death rites, offering a decolonial aesthetics in which sacredness is restored through theatrical mediation rather than reduced to spectacle.

A micro-narrative analysis of gestures and stage arrangements reveals how Kumbakarna's ethical tension is concretized as affective choreography linking death symbols with the affirmation of *dharma*: his gaze toward the reddening sky, the "rain of blood," and scattered entrails enact the death omens in the *Kakawin Rāmāyana* (Dwi Wingasti Sarggah XXII:48–49), not as a paralyzing *memento mori*, but as an "indicator of readiness" substantiating cosmic devotion. In dialogue with Butler, where Antigone unsettles the binary between positive law and divine law, embodying a form of life deemed grievable yet unrecognized legally (Butler, 2000), Kumbakarna instead operates within a logic of synthesis: *dharma sesana* as a resolution binding the sacred-political realm into the order of *rta* without rigid dichotomy. Consequently, tragic agency arises not from defiance but from reconciliation between genealogical loyalty and cosmic responsibility. At the psycho-ethical level, this integration condenses cognitive dissonance into embodied stance - the open shoulders, the forward stride of Kumbakarna - marking a resolute decision akin to *Being-towards-death* yet free of solipsism, as courage is oriented toward cosmic rhythm. The result is a Southeast Asian model of "heroic self-effacement": an active self-surrender that rearticulates the signs of death into an ethic of public action, while demarcating epistemological distance from Hellenistic tragic individualism - where Antigone affirms resistance to *nomos*, Kumbakarna affirms the convergence of *dharma* - *rta* as a horizon of sovereign, meaningful death for the community.

The contemporary audience's reception of this performance indicates an ongoing negotiation of the meaning of sacrifice within the context of global existential concern. In public discourse, Kumbakarna is often positioned as an archetype of altruistic sacrifice relevant to modern challenges such as political moral degradation, identity conflict, and social alienation. However, within the ecosystem of the traditional performance industry, there lies a risk of spiritual commodification - where symbols of *moksha* and *mesatya* are re-produced as aesthetic consumption devoid of ethical depth. This critique is crucial to ensure that the revitalization of noble values through *restored behavior* does not fall into mere reproduction of form without substance. The performance of *Kumbakarna Lina*, which preserves the integration of sacred narrative, death rites, and cosmological symbols, thus exemplifies how traditional theatre can resist the erosion of meaning through cultural mechanisms that withstand commodification.

By synthesizing Heidegger's *Sein-zum-Tode* with Hindu-Balinese cosmology (*dharma*–*moksha*), *Kumbakarna Lina* presents a model of transformative thanatology in which death is not the negation of life but the culmination of *dharmic praxis* that unifies ethics, aesthetics, and cosmology. Kumbakarna's joyful monologue before death and the visualization of his body dissolving under Rama's arrow signify the internalization of cognitive dissonance into an authentic moral decision. The mechanism of *restored behavior*, combined with the *kawī* epistemology of the puppeteer and the *trisandi* model, renders ritual symbols (fire, white cloth, arrows, and *balaganjur*) as strategies of resymbolization that reclaim death as *sovereign death* - an ontological agency rejecting Rahwana's genealogical reductionism. Within the global horizon, this model addresses Bauman's *liquid death* (1992), not as traditionalist nostalgia but as a form of creative anachronism that mobilizes indigenous wisdom to confront modern existential concern. Therefore, the play offers an alternative epistemic framework that challenges Western nihilism and reclaims death as a moment of cosmic reconciliation productive for contemporary thanatological discourse.

#### 4.2.2 Resisting Rāvaṇa, Restoring Rta: Mesatya as Postmemory and Political Aporia in Balinese Wayang

Findings from Results 1–3 indicate that *mesatya* in the figure of Kumbakarna operates as a form of creative resistance that deconstructs Campbell's departure–initiation–return structure through *dharmic dissolution*—a self-emptying within the rhythm of the cosmic order (*rta*), rather than a symbolic triumph. The scene of the burning body within a sacred setting signifies heroism as spiritual *kenosis*, rather than individual apotheosis. Within the framework of

the *third space* (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38), Kumbakarna reconfigures heroism through *hybridity*, rejecting Western binarism and articulating a critical fidelity to the cosmos rather than submission to corrupt power. This pattern parallels the non-linear narrative of the *Sundiata* epic, in which Sogolon negotiates moral agency indirectly (Mukenge & Nkaongami, 2018, p. 7), as well as the ethical transformation of Gilgamesh through death and cosmic awareness (De Villiers, 2024, p. 7). Kumbakarna's heroism, therefore, is not merely an adaptation but a spiritual affirmation that negates the ego and provides a global alternative to hegemonic Western narratives, wherein *mesatya* is articulated as critical fidelity—resisting corrupt figures of power such as Rāvaṇa while preserving the integrity of the Hindu-Balinese cosmic hierarchy.

Within the framework of political theories of loyalty, Kumbakarna's position represents a complex ethical paradox: he inhabits the zone of exclusion under Agamben's (1998) notion of *sovereign exception* (Rahmawati & Sulistyowati, 2022), yet simultaneously activates the *katechontic* function as formulated by Schmitt (Falk, 2022, pp. 13–14). When he declares, "I go not for Rāvaṇa, but for this land," he articulates not merely genealogical loyalty but a *qualified life* that resists reduction to *bare life*. Here, *mesatya* functions as a restraining force (*katechon*) against the collapse of Alengka's cosmic order, not through betrayal but through the sublimation of militaristic duty into *yajña*—self-sacrifice for the *dharma* of the state. This strategy integrates passive-active resistance akin to *wu-wei* in Daoism, wherein harmony with the heavenly order is attained not through confrontation but through action aligned with cosmic principles (Slingerland, 2000, pp. 310–315). As Slingerland notes, just as Shun ruled through ritual silence (Analects 15.5) (2000, p. 310), Kumbakarna rejects *adharma* through a heroic silence imbued with *de*—a moral charisma that animates the cosmos. Dalang Nardayana underscores how Rāvaṇa manipulates Kumbakarna's cosmic position to lock his political choice, rendering him a *homo sacer* who nonetheless preserves cosmic unity through a sacred death. In this regard, *mesatya* is not a matter of fatalistic obedience but a form of *satyagraha* which, as Gandhi practiced in Africa, was grounded in self-reliance, self-sacrifice, and faith in God (Singh, 2007, p. 72).

The adaptation of *Kumbakarna Lina* in Bali reconstructs the *Kakawin Rāmāyana* narrative as an arena for negotiating moral resistance within corrupt political structures, wherein Kumbakarna's sacrifice functions as a paradigmatic figure of *postmemory* (Hirsch, 2008) (Hirsch, 2008) that mediates intergenerational cultural memory through ritual aesthetics. The visualization of war, rains of blood, trembling earth, reddened skies, reactivates cultural memories of political upheaval, functioning as what Conquergood (2002) identifies as embodied knowledge that operates through performance rather than direct political

discourse. This performative strategy bears parallels to what Kershaw (1992) analyzes as “radical theatre” in post-conflict societies, where theatrical space becomes a legitimizing arena for exploring moral responsibility. However, unlike Western political theatre traditions that employ direct confrontation (Paget, 1987), the Balinese *wayang* tradition operates through what Spivak (1988) conceptualizes as “strategic essentialism”, mobilizing cultural authenticity to create spaces for critical reflection while avoiding direct political provocation.

The integration of *dharma* and cosmological frameworks creates what Turner (1982) identifies as a “liminal space” where conventional political hierarchies are temporarily suspended, enabling critical examination of power relations through sacred narrative. This strategy aligns with Conquergood’s (1991) “dialogical performance,” where meaning emerges through dynamic interaction between performer, text, and audience, positioning the performance as cultural therapy that processes collective anxieties about political legitimacy through aestheticized symbolic representation rather than direct confrontation.

The structure of power critiqued in this performance operates in dual dimensions: on the one hand, it subtly exposes the corruption of Rāvaṇa’s tyranny as an allegory for modern corrupt regimes; on the other hand, it preserves the cosmic hierarchy through recognition of the king’s rightful role as guardian of *ṛta*. This paradox becomes possible because *mesatya* is positioned as a politico-spiritual category that transcends personal loyalty. In Hindu-Balinese cosmology, loyalty to the state is not loyalty to the individual ruler but to the cosmic principle embodied in the state order. By integrating the concept of *dharma sesana* - the ethical obligations of Hindus (Arsana et al., 1992) - with Schechner’s (2020) notion of *restored behavior*, the performance functions as a mechanism of cultural resilience: it restores collective memory of the ideal form of power while simultaneously critiquing the corruption of actual regimes.

The political dimension of *Kumbakarna Lina* illuminates a profound ethical paradox wherein loyalty transcends personal moral conviction, revealing what Williams (1981) conceptualizes as moral luck within systems of corrupt governance. Kumbakarna’s unwavering devotion to Alengka despite recognizing Rahwana’s tyranny exemplifies what Foot (2001) theorizes as a moral dilemma, where competing ethical obligations create irreconcilable tensions between personal conscience and institutional duty. This phenomenon resonates with Arendt’s (1994) analysis of bureaucratic loyalty operating independently of moral judgment, yet Kumbakarna’s case reveals a distinctly different dynamic where cosmic responsibility (*dharma*) supersedes both personal ethics and political allegiance.

Contemporary parallels emerge in Primo Levi’s (1988) documentation of grey zone figures who maintained institutional roles while internally



opposing the systems they served, demonstrating how moral agency operates within constrained circumstances. Kumbakarna's sacrifice functions through what Taylor (1989) identifies as strong evaluation, wherein higher-order values override lower-order preferences, distinguishing itself from Western tragic heroism that typically privileges individual conscience over collective obligation. The performance thus articulates what Levinas (1979) theorizes as ethical responsibility that precedes ontological freedom, wherein obligation to the Other supersedes self-preservation or moral consistency. This framework challenges liberal assumptions about autonomous moral agency by demonstrating how cosmological loyalty can simultaneously critique and sustain corrupt systems through what Derrida (1992) conceptualizes as "aporia", the impossible decision that nonetheless must be made, positioning *mesatya* not as blind obedience but as ethically informed sacrifice that maintains cosmic order while exposing political corruption.

*Mesatya* in the figure of Kumbakarna must therefore be understood as a strategy of cosmic resistance grounded in *dharma*, *karma*, *mokṣa*, and *ṛta*, rather than passive obedience or the legitimization of tyranny. This heroism transcends militaristic-political logic by manifesting as critical fidelity that resists cooptation by corrupt regimes through existential affirmation of the cosmic order. The integration of Heidegger's *being-towards-death*, Festinger's cognitive dissonance, and Schechner's *restored behavior* with Hindu-Balinese epistemology affirms, as Smith (2021, p. 5) argues, that decolonial research must "work with, alongside and for Indigenous communities," thereby positioning local knowledge as a subject of epistemic dialogue rather than an object of subordination.

In this respect, Smith's notion of the "outsider within" demonstrates how *mesatya* operates from within a fractured system, much like trans-Indigenous festivals that Knowles (2020, p. 78) views as spaces of identity negotiation across cosmologies. In line with Bharucha's (1993, p. 2) critique of Euro-American interculturalism that reduces the East to "oriental theatre," *Kumbakarna Lina* resists epistemic domestication and positions *mesatya* as decolonial heroism - a performative resistance that reaffirms the plurality of Balinese cosmology while simultaneously challenging corrupt regimes within a more inclusive horizon of global epistemology.

#### 4.2.3 Algorithmic Sacrality and Cross-Media Hermeneutics: Reframing Sacred Transmission in Digital Performativity

The transformation of *Kumbakarna Lina* from classical *kakawin* to digital platforms illuminates critical epistemological tensions between traditional sacred transmission and algorithmic mediation, fundamentally reconfiguring spiritual efficacy across cultural boundaries. This metamorphosis traced through palm-



leaf manuscripts (*lontar*) to printed academic editions (Warna et al., 1987) and YouTube performances, exemplifies what this study advances as “cross-media hermeneutics,” a theoretical framework that synthesizes Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology (2000) with Jenkins’s transmedia storytelling paradigm (2006) and local epistemological frameworks such as Sedana’s *trisandi* model (2019). This analytical apparatus operates not as linear translation but as dynamic resemanticization wherein classical texts function as symbolic reservoirs subject to continuous performative recontextualization, thereby enabling interpretive processes that transcend conventional boundaries between textual preservation and embodied adaptation.

Unlike many traditional performance forms that experience framework erosion under market pressures during digital transition, the *Kumbakarna Lina* corpus demonstrates distinctive mechanisms of cultural resilience that preserves cosmological coherence while adapting to transnational circulation, revealing how cross-media hermeneutics can illuminate the complex negotiations between inherited structure and contextual innovation that characterize living traditions in globalized contexts.

This textual genealogy disrupts conventional epistemic hierarchies privileging written preservation over embodied interpretation, aligning with the *Dharma Pawayangan* manuscript’s affirmation of the *dalang* as “*Sanghyang Kawicarita*”, a spiritual interpreter transcending literary boundaries (Wicaksana, 2018, p. 126). Through Sedana’s *trisandi* model (2019, pp. 11–12), performance emerges as the primary locus of meaning production, challenging Western academic assumptions about textual authority versus experiential knowledge while contributing to decolonial discourse on knowledge hierarchies in traditional performance studies.

Contemporary digital transformation introduces qualitatively distinct epistemological challenges that exceed accessibility concerns, fundamentally refiguring reception contexts through what I term “algorithmic sacrality”, sacred content shaped by platform dynamics that transcend traditional *guru-sisya* transmission protocols. YouTube documentation, including the *Cenk Blonk* rendition (738,000 views) and Asep Sunandar Sunarya’s *golek* version (187,000 views), represents algorithmic mediation that restructures sacred knowledge through user engagement metrics and comment-based interpretation. Audience responses such as “*Even in his laziness, Kumbakarna still speaks with sacred wisdom*” indicate that digital audiences engage through philosophical rather than aesthetic frameworks, creating interpretive communities employing participatory hermeneutics while maintaining cosmological engagement. This reception pattern suggests digital mediation generates what Appadurai

(2010) conceptualizes as “disjunctive global flows” enabling cross-cultural philosophical engagement without compromising cosmological authenticity.

Cross-genre analysis across Balinese *wayang kulit* (I Wayan Nardayana), Javanese variants (Ki Manteb Sudarsono), and Sundanese *wayang golek* (Asep Sunandar Sunarya) reveals how medium shapes narrative structure and spiritual intensity. Balinese performances emphasize ritualistic preparation through *panca dewata* invocations and *parhyangan-pawongan-palemahan* cosmological ordering, while Javanese variants privilege philosophical elaboration through *suluk* verses thematizing moral complexity, and Sundanese interpretations integrate contemporary political commentary reframing Kumbakarna's resistance as authoritarian critique. These variations challenge essentialist authenticity notions, positioning authenticity as dynamic negotiation between symbolic coherence and adaptive innovation rather than originary preservation.

A comparative interrogation of digital transformation trajectories in the performing arts reveals a heterogeneous field in which *institutional logics*, market imperatives, and technological affordances converge to produce context-specific modalities of adaptation (Dickelman, 2023; Poell et al., 2022). In East Asian performance ecologies, leading institutions have implemented hybridized distribution architectures, strategically combining in-situ programming with curated digital dissemination, not simply as a reactive pandemic measure, but as a deliberate recalibration of audience reach vis-à-vis the preservation of artistic ontology (Dickelman, 2023).

Conversely, theatre systems across Europe and North America exhibit a marked orientation toward embedding interactive media as immersive augmentation, expanding dramaturgical repertoires while generating persistent tensions between technologically mediated liveness and the phenomenological core of co-present performance (Baugh, 2013). While such institutionally orchestrated adaptations often foreground technological innovation as a primary metric of cultural vitality, the Kumbakarna Lina corpus articulates an alternative paradigm of resilience: operationalizing *cross-media hermeneutics* to sustain cosmological coherence, evidencing narrative structures whose adaptive elasticity resists ontological or spiritual compromise.

This analysis contributes to transformative thanatology by demonstrating how death symbols maintain spiritual efficacy across transmission contexts. Visual symbols white cloth, arrows, fire, continue articulating existential courage for global audiences lacking Hindu-Balinese cosmological grounding, operating within Heidegger's *Being-towards-death* horizon (2001, p. 295) while remaining anchored in specific cosmological frameworks. The companion concept “dharmic dissolution” emerges as theoretical innovation describing how individual mortality integrates within cosmic order through performative

enactment, distinguishing itself from Western tragic models affirming individual agency or Christian martyrdom validating transcendent truth by positioning mortality as relational transformation reconstituting social-cosmic harmony through embodied performance rather than doctrinal instruction.

The researcher's (IDewa Ketut Wicaksana and IDewa Ketut Wicaksandita) dual positioning as academic analyst and practicing *dalang* - incorporating performance at the 2015 Bali Arts Festival and ritualistic practices - exemplifies embodied scholarship aligning with Ricoeur's assertion that "you must understand in order to believe, but you must believe in order to understand" (2000, p. 298), enabling recognition of interpretive tensions while revealing how sacred performance knowledge operates through affective dimensions exceeding textual documentation.

The trajectory from *kakawin* to digital media ultimately illuminates sacred knowledge constitution in globalized contexts, wherein dharmic dissolution's persistence within algorithmically mediated environments challenges deterministic digital desacralization accounts. The concepts of transformative thanatology and dharmic dissolution contribute to performance studies scholarship by providing analytical frameworks adequate to traditions where death functions as spiritual transformation enacted through collective witnessing, while digital mediation creates unprecedented possibilities for cross-cultural philosophical engagement maintaining cosmological authenticity through performative rather than textual fidelity.

## 5. Conclusion

This study elaborates on key findings that collectively enrich the understanding of existential dialectics and the value of *mesatya* within the Balinese shadow puppet performance *Kumbakarna Lina*. By synthesizing visual, narrative, and performative evidence, the study affirms the emergence of the concept of transformative thanatology, in which death is positioned as the culmination of self-integration with the cosmic rhythm, while simultaneously articulating an ethical resistance against corrupt regimes of power.

The integrated analysis reveals that the adaptation of the *Kakawin Rāmāyana* into contemporary performance media does not merely preserve symbolic authenticity but also actualizes its relevance in addressing modern value concern. Overall, these findings provide a solid empirical foundation for re-examining paradigms of heroic death across civilizations and open new avenues for interpreting the role of performing arts in the reconstruction of values.

Theoretically, this study expands Heidegger's epistemic framework of *Being-towards-death* through its integration with the Hindu-Balinese

cosmology of *dharma*, *karma*, and *moksha*, thereby forming the conceptual foundation of transformative thanatology. It reconfigures Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance within the dialectic of genealogical loyalty and cosmic responsibility, while advancing Schechner's concept of restored behavior as a cultural mechanism for revitalizing *mesatya* amid epistemic fragmentation and normative dislocation in the global sphere. Thus, this study not only validates existing theoretical perspectives but also offers a nuanced reformulation rooted in local epistemologies, thereby enriching cross-cultural theoretical discourse on death, sacrifice, and spiritual performativity.

Practically, this research provides applicable insights for artists, puppeteers, art curators, and cultural policymakers in managing and modernizing traditional performances without compromising their spiritual depth. The findings are also relevant for digital media developers of performance arts in designing adaptation strategies that respect symbolic authenticity while expanding global audience reach. In the field of cultural education, the study can serve as a reference for art literacy programs that integrate philosophical and performative dimensions to strengthen intergenerational understanding of ethical values within traditional arts. These implications highlight the potential to bridge academic research with applied strategies in the preservation and innovation of performing arts.

Despite these contributions, the study acknowledges certain limitations, particularly the restricted scope of field data, which focused on a single performance, and the limited direct comparison with non-Balinese performance traditions. Although digitalization offers broader opportunities for documentation, audience reception in digital platforms has not yet been fully explored. Future research may extend to comparative studies across regions and genres, integrate real-time online audience analysis, and further examine the mediation of spiritual values in the post-digital era. Accordingly, the foundation established by this study can be continuously enriched to expand both the theoretical and applied dimensions of performing arts and cultural philosophy.

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