

Symbolizing Desire: *Barong* and *Rangda* Performance in a Balinese Hindu Newborn Ritual

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Abstract: Although *Barong–Rangda* is widely recognized today as a touristic performance linked to Bali’s cultural tourism, its sacred ritual functions continue in Bali, showing that commodification has not erased its religious significance. This article examines the *nyambutin* ritual, a Balinese Hindu ceremony welcoming newborn babies, focusing on the inclusion of *Barong–Rangda* performance in a traditional Balinese village. Using ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews, and textual analysis, the study applies semiotic perspectives from Barthes, Eco, and Peirce to interpret the ritual’s symbolic meanings. The findings show that *Barong* and *Rangda* represent disciplined and uncontrolled forms of desire, reflecting moral tensions within Balinese cosmology. The performance functions as embodied moral education, introducing ethical values through ritual experience rather than verbal instruction. Sustained by local ritual authority, the tradition continues as religious knowledge transmission while resisting full commodification despite the global circulation of *Barong* imagery through tourism.

Keywords: *barong*; *rangda*; male and female desires; *nyambutin* ritual

1. Introduction

In Balinese Hindu society, ritual is not merely a religious obligation but a central semiotic arena through which cosmological ideas, social values, and embodied experiences are communicated and reproduced. Ritual performances function simultaneously as symbolic representations and pedagogical instruments that shape collective understanding of life, morality, and the human body. As Clifford Geertz (1973, pp. 93–94) argues, ritual acts as both a “model of” reality and a “model for” reality, reflecting existing cultural conceptions while actively guiding social behavior. Within this framework, ritual symbols are not static;

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rather, they are continuously interpreted, negotiated, and recontextualized by the community that performs them.

One of the most prominent ritual-symbolic figures in Bali is *Barong*, often paired with *Rangda*. Throughout Bali, *Barong–Rangda* performances are widely recognized as representations of the cosmic tension between *dharma* and *adharma*, order and chaos, protection and destruction. These figures appear in various ritual contexts, temple festivals (*odalan*), purification rites, and communal exorcisms (*niskala* interventions), as well as in contemporary touristic performances staged for economic and cultural consumption (Picard, 1996; Bandem, 1976). This ubiquity raises an important question: if *Barong* exists everywhere in Bali, why does the *Barong–Rangda* performance associated with the *nyambutin* ritual appear to be localized and symbolically distinctive in Penarukan Village, Tabanan.

The *nyambutin* ritual, performed for infants at approximately 105 days after birth according to the Balinese calendar, marks the child's formal introduction into social, spiritual, and customary life. While *nyambutin* is practiced throughout Bali, the inclusion of a *Barong–Rangda* performance as an integral symbolic component is not universally found. In Penarukan, a traditional agrarian village in Tabanan, Bali, this performance occupies a specific ritual space and meaning that differs from *Barong* performances in other ceremonial or touristic settings. Rather than functioning primarily as a cosmic battle or protective spectacle, *Barong* and *Rangda* in the *nyambutin* context are interpreted locally as symbolic representations of masculine and feminine desire (*kāma*), which must be harmonized from the earliest stages of human life.

This localized interpretation reflects what semioticians describe as the contextual layering of meaning. According to Umberto Eco (1976), signs do not possess fixed meanings; instead, they generate meaning through culturally specific codes and interpretive frameworks. In Penarukan, *Barong* is symbolically associated with male desire, dynamic, outward-moving, and generative, while *Rangda* represents female desire, powerful, inward, and potentially destructive if uncontrolled. These symbolic associations do not imply moral hierarchy but emphasize the necessity of balance between complementary forces. *Barong* and *Rangda* can be interpreted as symbolizing a non-dual reality in relation to *Advaita Vedānta* (AV), a Hindu philosophical tradition that emphasizes the ultimate unity of all existence beyond apparent oppositions (Radhakrishnan, 1994; Śaṅkarācārya, 2006). Within this perspective, apparent dualities are understood as expressions of a single underlying truth. The performance thus functions as a form of ritual pedagogy, encoding ethical and psychological insights about desire, self-control, and harmony within a culturally intelligible form.

At the same time, contemporary transformations of *Barong–Rangda* performances complicate these meanings. Since the 1980s, *Barong* has become one of Bali's most recognizable cultural icons, frequently staged for tourism and global audiences. Scholars have noted that touristic performances often prioritize visual spectacle and narrative simplification, resulting in a partial detachment of symbols from their ritual and pedagogical functions (Barker, 2012; Eiseman, 1990). This raises a further analytical question: how does the ritual performance of *Barong–Rangda* in the *nyambutin* ceremony relate to, resist, or coexist with the touristic *Barong* performances that dominate popular representations of Balinese culture?

By focusing on the *nyambutin* ritual in Penarukan Village, this study narrows its analytical scope while simultaneously engaging broader debates on ritual meaning, localization, and cultural commodification. The *Barong–Rangda* performance examined here is neither a generalized Balinese phenomenon nor a touristic spectacle; it is a situated semiotic practice embedded in a specific village tradition. Through a semiotic analysis of symbols, movements, narrative structures, and community interpretations, this research seeks to uncover how male and female desires are symbolically represented, disciplined, and transmitted as cultural knowledge. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Balinese ritual performance continues to function as a living system of meaning amid social change and cultural globalization.

2. Literatur Review

Etymologically, the word *Barong* derives from the Sanskrit *b(h)arwang*, meaning “bear”, a hairy animal also featured in *Tantri* stories. Another interpretation comes from the root *ba-ru-ang*, where *ru* and *ang* assimilate into *rang*, meaning “two spaces,” corresponding to the physical structure of *Barong*, which requires two dancers inside. The word *Rangda* comes from Old Javanese, meaning “widow.” In refined Balinese (*basa alus*), it refers to a widow from the *Tri Wangsa* class, while in common Balinese it is called *balu* (Boon, 1990).

From an ethnographic perspective, *Barong* represents protective masculine energy, while *Rangda* symbolizes feminine energy associated with mystical power and the control of desire. In Bali, both figures function in dual capacities, as profane entertainment and as sacred performances within religious contexts. This study focuses specifically on the symbolic representation of male and female desires in the performance of *Barong* and *Rangda*, analyzed through a cultural semiotic framework. The *nyambutin* ritual in Penarukan Village, Tabanan, is employed as the contextual setting in which these performances are examined in their sacred dimension.

Several previous studies have examined the *Barong* and *Rangda* performances from various perspectives, although none have specifically addressed the symbolic representation of male and female desires in the context of the *Nyambutin* ritual. Suta (2009) in his research found that the aesthetic aspect is inseparable from the implementation of rituals in Bali. The *Barong* and *Rangda* performances are always accompanied by artistic touches that enhance the procedures, processes, and outcomes of the ceremony. From the perspective of Hindu religious education, the performances emphasize the belief in *Pañca Śraddhā* (the five core tenets of Hindu faith), thereby containing theological-philosophical meanings that represent the relationship between positive and negative forces, right and wrong (Suta, 2009).

Suparman (2014) through his study revealed that religious values are manifested in the community's religious emotions, belief systems regarding the sacred powers of *Barong* and *Rangda*, as well as the performance of rites involving collective prayer and reverence toward *Ida Betara* (The Divine Lord) enthroned in those forms. Aesthetic values have undergone a transformation from mere entertainment to sacred expression in accordance with their original meanings. These findings are relevant to understanding how the *Barong* and *Rangda* performances serve a dual function: as profane entertainment and as a medium for the sacralization of values (Suparman, 2014).

Wirawan (2019) in his study emphasized that *Barong–Rangda* is not only present as a visual symbol but also as a manifestation of cosmic entities. *Barong* is depicted as the *murti* of Lord Śiva in the form of *Banaspati Raja*, while *Rangda* is associated with Goddess Durgā, wife of Lord Śiva, often linked to the *Calonarang* figure, Diah Natengdirah. *Barong–Rangda* is understood as a sacred symbol whose interpretation varies among communities, and its performance is carried out by specially appointed individuals known as *juru sunggi* (sacred object bearer) (Wirawan, 2019). In conclusion, Wirawan research finds that *Barong–Rangda* functions not only as a sacred symbol with diverse communal interpretations but also as a living tradition sustained by ritually authorized performers; therefore, it is suggested that future studies further explore its philosophical meanings and support the preservation of the *juru sunggi* tradition through community-based cultural programs.

Brahmandika's research (2024), describes the process of creating *Barong* and *Rangda* beginning with *matur piuning* (offering a prayer of notification to the deities) at the temple, accompanied by supernatural signs as divine approval. Before undergoing sacralization, *Barong* and *Rangda* are merely profane art objects devoid of religious meaning. Sacralization transforms them into *Pratima*, religious symbols endowed with spiritual power. These findings reinforce the view that the symbolic meaning of *Barong–Rangda* is constructed through a long cultural and religious process.

3. Method and Theory

3.1 Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a semiotic theory to analyze the symbolic representation of male and female desires in the performance of *Barong* and *Rangda*. The *nyambutin* ritual in Penarukan Village, Tabanan Regency, Bali, was selected as the research setting because the village preserves a sacred performance context in which *Barong* and *Rangda* remain actively integrated into life-cycle rituals. In addition, the ritual tradition is still maintained through strong communal participation and localized religious authority, allowing symbolic meanings to be transmitted across generations. The village also represents a significant site for examining how sacred performances continue to function as religious pedagogy amid the increasing commercialization and touristic transformation of *Barong* performances in Bali. This setting provides a culturally authentic environment where symbolic expressions are maintained, allowing for a deeper semiotic interpretation of the meanings embedded in the performance. The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon through participants' perspectives and the local cultural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The semiotic method is used to analyze the signs, icons, and symbols that emerge during the performance, considering the relationships between the signifier, the signified, and the culturally constructed meanings within the community (Barthes, 1977; Chandler, 2017).

Data collection was conducted through ethnographic observation during three *nyambutin* ceremonies in Penarukan Village, Tabanan Regency, Bali, between June and August 2025. The observations were carried out on 3 March, 7 July, and 9 August 2025, following the local Balinese calendrical determination of each child's life-cycle ritual. Each observation lasted approximately 6–8 hours, covering the preparatory stage, the ritual procession, the *Barong–Rangda* performance, and post-ceremonial communal interactions. The researcher directly engaged in the ceremonial environment to document ritual sequences, symbolic gestures, performance structures, and interactions among ritual participants, religious leaders, performers, and family members. This repeated observation enabled a deeper understanding of the consistency and variation of symbolic meanings embedded within the ritual context.

In-depth interviews were conducted using purposive sampling with traditional leaders, artists, parents of the infants, and community members to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the symbolic interpretations of male desire (*Barong*) and female desire (*Rangda*). In addition, documentation studies were carried out in the form of photographs, video recordings consisting of primary documentation produced by the researcher during fieldwork in those

dates, as well as supporting archival recordings obtained from local community members who have documented previous performances, and local texts such as *lontar* manuscripts or ritual notes. Data analysis was conducted thematically and contextually, combining interpretive approaches with semiotic analysis to reveal the interrelationships between symbolic meanings, social structures, and spiritual values embedded in the performances (Miles et al., 2014).

3.2 Theory

The study employs semiotic theory as its primary analytical framework, integrating the perspectives of Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, and Charles Sanders Peirce. Barthes' theory of myth is used to uncover how the *Barong-Rangda* performance operates beyond its immediate ritual function as a second-order signification system that naturalizes cultural understandings of desire and morality (Barthes, 1972). Eco's concept of semiotic codes provides a framework to interpret how ritual elements, costume, movement, spatial arrangement, and timing, function as culturally structured systems of meaning rather than isolated symbols (Eco, 1976). Meanwhile, Peirce's triadic model of sign (icon, index, symbol) enables a deeper reading of how *Barong* and *Rangda* simultaneously signify cosmological realities and ethical orientations through embodied representation (Peirce, 1958). This semiotic framework is further deepened through the lens of Advaita Vedanta, especially as articulated by Adi Shankaracharya, which posits that apparent dualities are ultimately expressions of a single non-dual reality (*Brahman*). From this perspective, *Barong* and *Rangda* are not merely binary oppositions but symbolic manifestations of *māyā*, the phenomenal differentiation that veils underlying unity. Thus, the semiotic reading expands from decoding cultural signs to recognizing how these signs participate in a metaphysical pedagogy that points beyond dualistic perception (Śaṅkarācārya, 2006).

This theoretical integration is particularly appropriate because the *Nyambutin* ritual does not transmit ethical knowledge discursively but performatively. The *Barong-Rangda* encounter functions as a mythic dramatization of *kāma* within the Balinese cosmological framework of *rwa bhineda* and *sakala-niskala*. Semiotics provides the necessary tools to interpret how meaning is constructed through ritual embodiment rather than textual doctrine, while *Advaita Vedanta* reframes this duality as provisional rather than ultimate. Barthes helps explain the normalization of moral cosmology through mythic imagery, Eco clarifies how local cultural codes sustain ritual intelligibility, and Peirce enables analysis of how signs mediate between visible performance and invisible metaphysical principles. Advaita Vedanta complements these by revealing that the tension between *Barong* and *Rangda*

is not a final ontological division but a didactic illusion guiding consciousness toward non-dual awareness. In this sense, the ritual encodes not only moral pedagogy but also an implicit metaphysical insight: that desire, conflict, and balance are stages within the realization of unity. Thus, semiotic theory, enriched by *Advaita Vedanta*, accommodates multilayered meaning-making, allowing the study to bridge symbolic anthropology, religious studies, and non-dual philosophy in explaining how cosmology and ethical consciousness are inscribed at the earliest stage of human life.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 *Barong and Rangda in Balinese Ritual Cosmology*

In scholarly and popular discourse, *Barong* is often perceived as a ubiquitous cultural icon in Bali, leading to the generalized assumption that “*Barong* exists everywhere in Bali” with a uniform meaning (Segara, 2000). However, within Balinese ritual cosmology, *Barong* and *Rangda* cannot be understood merely as aesthetic or performative figures. They are embedded in a complex theological, cosmological, and ritual system that governs the relationship between the seen (*sakala*) and unseen (*niskala*) worlds. Their presence and meaning are always context-dependent, determined by the type of ritual, spatial setting, and theological intention.

In general, *Barong* and *Rangda* function as symbolic embodiments of *rwa bhineda*, the Balinese principle of duality that emphasizes the coexistence of opposing yet complementary forces. This duality does not imply moral absolutism but rather cosmic balance, wherein *dharma* and *adharma*, order and chaos, purity and danger continuously interact to sustain universal harmony (Segara, 2000; Boon, 1990; Eiseman, 1990). The *Barong-Rangda* performance should also be understood within the broader framework of Balinese dance heritage, which has been internationally recognized by UNESCO. In 2015, UNESCO inscribed the “Three Genres of Traditional Dance in Bali” on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, encompassing nine representative dances across sacred (*wali*), semi-sacred (*bebali*), and entertainment (*balih-balihan*) categories. Within this classification, the *Barong Ket* dance, depicting the mythological struggle between *Barong* and *Rangda*, represents the *balih-balihan* genre, highlighting how cosmological dualism is embodied in performative practice (UNESCO, 2015).

Within Balinese Hindu ritual life, *Barong* primarily serves as a medium of cosmic protection and purification. During *odalan* (temple anniversary ceremonies), *Barong* is ritually summoned (*tedun*) and paraded around the temple complex or village territory (*ngelawang*) to neutralize negative forces and reaffirm the sanctity of sacred space. In this context, *Barong* operates as a

guardian figure (*pangraksa desa*), believed to embody divine protective energy that restores balance after periods of ritual vulnerability (Hobart, 2014).

In *niskala* cleansing rituals, such as post-epidemic rites, purification following social disturbances, or life-cycle ceremonies, *Barong* is invoked as a counterforce to *bhūta kala*, the chaotic energies associated with time, decay, and disorder. Rather than eradicating these forces, *Barong* symbolically contains and pacifies them, reflecting the Balinese cosmological understanding that destructive energies must be managed, not annihilated (Lansing, 2006).

Rangda, on the other hand, occupies a more ambivalent position within ritual cosmology. While often feared due to her terrifying appearance, *Rangda* represents destructive energy that is simultaneously regenerative. Identified with Goddess Durgā or the fierce aspect of Śiva's *śakti*, *Rangda* embodies the necessary power of dissolution that precedes renewal. In Balinese theology, destruction is never absolute; it is a prerequisite for transformation (*pralina* leading to *utpatti*) (Titib, 2003). Thus, *Rangda* is not merely an antagonist to *Barong* but an essential counterpart. Her appearance in ritual performances dramatizes the latent dangers of uncontrolled desire, ego, and spiritual ignorance, while also reaffirming the cosmic necessity of destruction within the cycle of creation and preservation.

It is crucial to emphasize that not all *Barong* performances carry identical meanings or ritual efficacy. A clear distinction must be made between *wali* (sacred), *bebali* (semi-sacred), and *balih-balihan* (entertainment) performances. Only *Barong* and *Rangda* that function as *pralingga*, ritually consecrated sacred embodiments, possess theological authority and cosmological function (Eiseman, 1990). Performances outside this ritual framework may reproduce symbolic forms without activating their religious potency.

In this sense, *Barong* and *Rangda* in Balinese ritual cosmology are not fixed symbols but dynamic agents whose meanings emerge through ritual context, theological intention, and communal belief. Their interaction represents an ongoing negotiation between cosmic order and disorder, protection and danger, discipline and desire. This reinforces the Balinese worldview that harmony is not achieved through the elimination of negative forces but through their ethical and spiritual regulation within a divinely ordered cosmos.

4.2 The Nyambutin Ritual in Penarukan Village: Structure and Local Specificity

Desa Adat Penarukan is a traditional village situated in Kerambitan District, Tabanan Regency, Bali Province. It lies approximately 9 kilometers southwest of Tabanan City and about 29 kilometers from Denpasar. Covering

an area of around 111 hectares, Penarukan is home to approximately 3,214 residents living in 995 households. The entire population adheres to Hinduism and actively sustains Balinese customary traditions, particularly through the consistent performance of ritual obligations within the framework of *Panca Yadnya* (refers to the five sacred categories of sacrificial rituals in Balinese Hinduism) (Penarukan Village Office, 2024). Through these ongoing practices, Penarukan functions as a living repository of local religious knowledge, where cosmological ideas are embedded in everyday ceremonial life.

In Hindu doctrine, *Panca Yadnya* designates five categories of sacred offerings that actualize the concept of *Tri Rṇa*, the three existential debts inherent in human life. These consist of *Dewa Rṇa* (debt to the gods), fulfilled through *Dewa Yadnya* and *Bhūta Yadnya*; *Pitṛ Rṇa* (debt to ancestors), realized through *Pitṛ Yadnya* and *Manuṣa Yadnya*; and *Rṣi Rṇa* (debt to sages and spiritual teachers), expressed through *Rṣi Yadnya* (Titib, 2003). Within this system, *Manuṣa Yadnya* occupies a central position because it regulates ritual processes accompanying human existence from conception to marriage, ensuring that biological growth remains aligned with cosmic and spiritual order.

In the tradition of Desa Adat Penarukan, *Manuṣa Yadnya* is expressed through a structured sequence of life-cycle rituals (*samskāra*). These include *Pagedongan* (ritual at conception), *Dapetan* (birth ritual marked by the burial of the placenta), *Kepus Puser*, *Ngelepas Hawon* (twelfth day after birth), *Tutug Kambuhan* (forty-two days), *nyambutin* (three-month ceremony), *Satu Oton/Ngotonin* (210 days), *Ngempugin* (teething), *Makupak* (loss of baby teeth), *Munggah Deha/Raja Sewala* (coming of age), *Mapandes* (tooth filing), and *Wiwaha* (marriage) (Mantra, 1996). This sequence reflects a ritualized understanding of human development as a gradual integration into social, ancestral, and cosmic structures.

Nyambutin, the focus of this study, is a life-cycle ritual practiced widely across Bali, marking a baby's first formal introduction to the social and spiritual world. It is generally conducted when the child reaches 105 days (three *wuku* cycles) (as shown in Figure 1), signifying the transition from a liminal state into recognized human personhood (*manusa utuh*). At this stage, the baby undergoes ritual cleansing, receives a name, and is symbolically aligned with ancestral and divine forces believed to accompany the individual throughout life (Geertz, 1973; Eiseman, 1990). In most regions, *nyambutin* involves offerings (*banten*), mantras recited by a priest or *pemangku*, and domestic rites performed within the household compound.



Figure 1. The infant undergoing the *nyambutin* ritual (Source: Author's documentation, March 2025)

Despite this shared structure, *nyambutin* rituals display notable local variation shaped by village-level religious knowledge (*desa kala patra*). In regions such as Gianyar, Buleleng, and Karangasem, the ritual typically remains within the domestic sphere, emphasizing purification (*melukat*), ancestral acknowledgment, and the symbolic grounding of the child's soul (*atma*) without the inclusion of sacred performance elements. Ethnographic accounts from these areas consistently note the absence of *Barong* or *Rangda* as ritual agents, highlighting instead priestly mediation, prayers, and offerings (Covarrubias, 1937; Lansing, 2006).



Figure 2. Implementation of the Final Sequence of the *nyambutin* Ceremony with a *Barong* and *Rangda* Performance (Source: Author's documentation, July 2025)

In Penarukan Village, however, *nyambutin* takes on a distinct ritual configuration. The inclusion of a *Barong–Rangda* performance is not treated as an optional addition but forms part of the ceremony's concluding sequence (as shown in Figure 2). Rather than functioning as entertainment, the performance is understood as a *wali* (sacred) act embedded within the ritual logic of spiritual protection and ethical orientation. It takes place at a ritually determined moment following the core *nyambutin* rites, within a consecrated space, and involves specific ritual actors, including the baby's family, village *pemangku*, *tapakan* (sacred bearers), and community members responsible for maintaining ritual purity.

This inclusion reconfigures *nyambutin* in Penarukan from a primarily domestic rite into a communal cosmological event. *Barong* and *Rangda* act as *pralingga*, or sacred embodiments, believed to engage directly with unseen forces (*niskala*). Within Balinese mythology, *Barong* is commonly associated with *dharma* and *Rangda* with *adharma*. Local interpretations in Penarukan, however, move beyond a simple moral binary. Here, *Barong* and *Rangda* are also understood as symbolic representations of masculine and feminine libido inherent in human

beings, energies that must be balanced to sustain psychological and spiritual well-being (Eiseman, 1990; Hobart, 2014). Their interaction introduces the infant, at a symbolic level, to fundamental cosmological tensions, protection and danger, desire and restraint, creation and dissolution, while also situating these tensions within a broader framework of balance.

The *nyambutin* ritual in Penarukan Village generally lasts between four and six hours, depending on the ritual complexity, the number of family offerings, and the ceremonial preparations conducted by the household and ritual specialists. Within this sequence, the *barong-rangda* performance usually takes approximately 45–60 minutes and is performed after the main purification stage of the infant ritual. The performance is conducted collectively by a local *sekaa barong-rangda* and accompanied by live *gamelan batel* music rather than recorded audio, emphasizing the sacred and communal character of the ceremony. Families customarily provide *sesari* as a ritual offering and symbolic honorarium to the performers and musicians. In ethnographic observations conducted during three *nyambutin* ceremonies in 2025, the performance involved ritual dancing, protective gestures toward the infant, and the distribution of *tirta* associated with the *barong* as a medium of spiritual purification and protection. Such ritual use of Barong reflects its longstanding role as a sacred protector within Balinese Hindu cosmology (Bandem, 1976; Lansing, 2006).

In collective *nyambutin* ceremonies, several infants may undergo the ritual simultaneously while sharing one *barong-rangda* performance under the supervision of village ritual authorities. Community informants explained that the performance is ideally conducted within the customary and ritual space of the village because the sacred authority of the *barong* is tied to local temple networks and communal obligations. Although some residents may conduct *nyambutin* rituals in a *griya* or outside the village for practical reasons, these ceremonies do not always involve the *barong-rangda* performance. According to local belief, the absence of the performance does not invalidate the ritual entirely, but it reduces the symbolic and protective dimensions associated with the sacred balance of *rwa bhineda*. The relationship between the performance and the ritual is therefore not merely aesthetic but cosmological, functioning as a medium for spiritual equilibrium, ethical instruction, and ritual protection for the child and family (Boon, 1990; Howe, 1984).

From a semiotic perspective, the *Barong-Rangda* performance operates as a layered system of signs. Following Barthes' (1977) framework, meaning emerges not only from mythological narratives but also from choreography, costume, spatial arrangement, musical accompaniment, and communal reception. In the specific context of *nyambutin*, the performance marks ritual closure, indicating that the child has entered the social and cosmic order structured by *rwa bhineda*,

the dynamic interplay of opposing yet complementary forces. At the same time, a closer reading of the performance suggests that its meaning is not solely derived from abstract symbolic interpretation but is grounded in how participants experience and interpret the ritual in practice.

Importantly, available ethnographic records and local oral narratives indicate that the inclusion of a *Barong–Rangda* performance in the *nyambutin* ritual is not common in other regions of Bali. Neither classical ethnographies nor more recent ritual studies identify *Barong–Rangda* as constitutive elements of *nyambutin* outside Penarukan. Interviews with ritual specialists and village elders further confirm that this practice is regarded locally as a *warisan lokal* (local inheritance), transmitted primarily through oral tradition rather than formal textual prescription (Pinandita Tapakan, interview, March 3, 2025). However, the precise historical emergence of this configuration, including when and how it became established within the community, remains an area that would benefit from further investigation.

This local specificity highlights the dynamic character of Balinese Hindu ritual practice, in which broader theological concepts are articulated through localized forms of ritual creativity. The *nyambutin* ritual in Penarukan demonstrates how sacred performance may be integrated into life-cycle rites to address particular communal concerns, especially those related to the early management of spiritual potency (*śakti*) and desire (*kāma*). At the same time, it is important to distinguish between interpretations that arise from within the community and those developed through external analytical frameworks. Accordingly, this ritual should not be generalized as a Balinese norm but understood as a contextually grounded expression of local religious knowledge that contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Balinese ritual cosmology.

4.3 Semiotic Interpretation of *Barong* and *Rangda* as Male and Female Desire

The *Barong–Rangda* performance in Bali is often framed as a traditional spectacle or as a mythological dramatization of the opposition between good and evil. Yet within particular ritual settings, including the *nyambutin* ceremony in Penarukan Village, the performance operates as a dense semiotic field through which ideas of desire (*kāma*), gendered energy, and moral discipline are conveyed. Rather than presenting a simple dualism, the interaction between *Barong* and *Rangda* reveals a more complex symbolic structure that resonates both with local cosmology and with broader philosophical reflections, including those found in *Advaita Vedānta* (the non-dualistic school of Vedānta philosophy), where apparent oppositions are understood as expressions of an underlying unity. In this sense, *Barong* and *Rangda* can be read as culturally encoded figures of male and female desire whose encounter stages not only tension but also

interdependence. Their presence within the ritual sequence thus enacts an early form of moral orientation, communicated through embodied symbols rather than through explicit instruction.

Drawing on semiotic approaches developed by Eco (1976), Peirce (1931–1958), and Barthes (1972), this analysis treats the *Barong–Rangda* performance as a layered system of signs mediating between *sakala* (the visible, material world) and *niskala* (the invisible, spiritual realm) in Balinese Hindu thought. At the same time, the interpretation is grounded in the specific ritual context observed in Penarukan, where the performance is carried out at the closing phase of *nyambutin*, following offerings, purification, and naming rites. *Barong* typically enters first, accompanied by *gamelan*, moving in controlled, rhythmic patterns around the ceremonial space, often circling the infant and family as a gesture of protection. *Rangda* appears later, interrupting this ordered movement with abrupt gestures and intense expressions, creating a charged interaction that draws the attention of participants. Within this sequence, desire is not negated; it is staged, negotiated, and ritually contained, allowing it to be integrated into a broader cosmological order rather than excluded from it.

At the level of signification, *Barong* operates through a combination of iconic, indexical, and symbolic modes (Peirce, 1931–1958). His large body, covered in fur, brightly colored, and adorned with gold ornaments, visually conveys vitality, strength, and expansiveness. Movement reinforces this impression: forward-directed steps, rhythmic stamping, and controlled bursts of energy synchronized with the *gamelan* ensemble. These elements index a form of masculine energy that is active, outward-oriented, and protective, yet not excessive. Within Balinese cultural codes (Eco, 1976), *Barong* comes to signify an idealized masculinity, expansive but restrained, powerful yet disciplined, closely aligned with *dharma*. In this context, *kāma* is not denied but regulated; it becomes a force directed toward balance and continuity. From a Barthesian perspective, *Barong* functions as a mythic figure through which this regulated desire appears natural and self-evident (Barthes, 1972).

This reading corresponds with Hindu ethical formulations that place *kāma* within the guiding framework of *dharma* (Yuliadi, 2022). The distinction between *śreya* (the higher good) and *preya* (immediate pleasure), as articulated in the *Katha Upaniṣad* (I.2.1–2), provides a useful parallel: *Barong* may be understood as embodying desire oriented toward *śreya* (ultimate good), where strength is governed by responsibility. At the same time, from the perspective of *Advaita Vedānta*, this disciplined form does not stand as an ultimate reality but as a provisional expression shaped by *māyā*, the domain of differentiation. *Barong* thus represents not an absolute principle but a conditioned manifestation of a deeper unity that underlies both order and tension.

Rangda, by contrast, presents a semiotic configuration marked by ambiguity and intensity. Her iconography, disheveled hair, protruding tongue, elongated nails and teeth, signals excess, instability, and latent danger. Movement amplifies this: irregular gestures, sudden shifts, and emotionally charged expressions that evoke both fear and fascination. Within the ritual sequence, *Rangda* does not simply negate *Barong*; she disrupts, challenges, and reconfigures the space established by him. As a sign, she articulates a dimension of desire that remains uncontained, closer to raw impulse than to regulated force.



Figure 3. Climax of the *Barong* and *Rangda* performance, showing the *Barong*'s vital, protective strength as it overpowers *Rangda* (the antagonist) (Source: Author's documentation, July 2025).

At the connotative level, as shown in the figure above, *Rangda* is associated with feminine power understood through the concept of *śakti*, a creative energy inseparable from destruction. Her link to Durgā situates her within a broader Hindu symbolic field in which feminine force generates, transforms, and

dissolves. In this sense, *Rangda* represents *kāma* prior to its ethical modulation, a form of energy that must be engaged rather than simply suppressed. While psychoanalytic parallels, such as Freud's notion of libido before sublimation (Freud, 1920), may illuminate aspects of this dynamic, the local interpretation emphasizes not pathology but potency. From a Peircean perspective, *Rangda* also functions symbolically as a generative field (*kṣetra*), echoing the imagery of *Manusmṛti* IX.33 (Olivelle, 2005), where feminine capacity is likened to fertile ground. Her destructive dimension, therefore, does not cancel her creative potential; instead, it underscores the necessity of balance.

The presence of *Barong* and *Rangda* within the *nyambutin* ritual raises an important question: why introduce such charged symbols in a ceremony centered on infancy? Observations in Penarukan suggest that the performance is directed not toward the infant alone but toward the collective field of participants, including family and community members. As noted by Ida Bagus Nyoman Sunantara (interview, June 9, 2025), “the child is present, but the ritual is for everyone: the family, the ancestors, and the unseen forces that surround them.” During the encounter, *Barong*'s circling movements and *Rangda*'s interruptions create a dynamic tension that is ritually resolved without a definitive victory. This tension, according to Sunantara, reflects “the balance that must always be maintained, not defeated, because both forces are part of life.” The infant is positioned within this space, often held by family members, becoming part of a sensory environment shaped by sound, movement, and affect. Through this process, the child is not taught in a cognitive sense but is inscribed into a relational and cosmological order, where harmony emerges through the ongoing negotiation of opposing yet complementary forces.

Within Balinese Hindu thought, humans are understood to embody both *daivī sampad* (constructive tendencies) and *āsurī sampad* (destructive tendencies), as described in the *Bhagavadgītā* XVI.4 (Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, 1983). The *Barong–Rangda* interaction externalizes this condition, rendering it perceptible and experientially accessible. *Nyambutin*, in this light, functions as an early moment of orientation, where the regulation of *kāma* is introduced as a foundational principle. Yet, when viewed through *Advaita Vedānta*, this duality is not final; it belongs to the empirical level of experience. The ritual can thus be read as guiding participants through differentiation while implicitly pointing toward an underlying non-duality that transcends opposition.

Eco's concept of cultural codes helps clarify how these meanings are sustained within the community, while Peirce's triadic model explains how *Barong* and *Rangda* operate simultaneously as icons, indices, and symbols. Their interaction, situated within the *sakala–niskala* framework, connects visible performance with invisible forces, aligning the child's social incorporation with

a cosmological orientation. Barthes' notion of myth further illuminates how this structure becomes internalized as common sense: harmony is achieved not by eliminating desire but by regulating it. At the same time, ethnographic evidence from Penarukan indicates that local participants often articulate these meanings in practical rather than abstract terms, emphasizing protection, balance, and continuity. The analytical reading presented here, including its dialogue with *Advaita Vedanta*, therefore extends rather than replaces local interpretations. It highlights how a specific ritual configuration, whose historical emergence still invites further study, can sustain multiple layers of meaning, linking lived practice with broader philosophical reflection.

4.4 The Uniqueness of Penarukan: Local Knowledge, Tradition, and Ritual Authority

The presence of a *Barong–Rangda* performance within the *nyambutin* ritual in Penarukan Village should not be treated as incidental or merely aesthetic variation. Instead, it is better understood within the framework of local religious knowledge (local religious epistemology) and ritual authority that determine what is considered legitimate, necessary, and efficacious in a specific Balinese village context. This perspective clarifies why such a configuration is sustained in Penarukan while remaining absent in many other regions of Bali.

Balinese Hinduism, ritual practice does not depend on centralized orthodoxy but is shaped by *desa adat* authority, which regulates religious life through locally inherited norms (*awig-awig*), ancestral precedent (*dresta*), and the interpretive role of ritual specialists (Geertz, 1973; Lansing, 2006). Consequently, rituals such as *nyambutin*, although grounded in shared doctrine, are always locally articulated. What is considered ritually appropriate in one village may be unnecessary or even unsuitable in another. Rather than indicating fragmentation, this variation reflects the adaptive and context-sensitive nature of Balinese cosmology. For example, while the *nyambutin* in Penarukan is well-known for its elaborate *Barong–Rangda* performances, research on the *nyambutin* ceremonial language in Gianyar shows how ritual speech, ceremonial structure, and symbolic forms vary across villages, reflecting distinct local interpretive traditions and social functions (Primayanti, 2021). These kinds of localized expressions demonstrate that even within the broad category of Manusa Yadnya, variations in practice are endemic to the *desa adat* system and its negotiation of ritual appropriateness across Bali.

In Penarukan, the inclusion of *Barong* and *Rangda* in *nyambutin* is sanctioned by the *desa adat* council (*krama desa*) and ritually mediated by *pemangku* alongside senior ritual actors, who transmit this knowledge through embodied practice rather than written liturgy. As noted by Geertz (1973), Balinese religion

operates through “models of” and “models for” reality, where ritual action becomes the principal medium of theological communication. Within this setting, the *Barong–Rangda* performance serves as a locally authorized model for understanding cosmic balance and human desire, introduced symbolically at the earliest stage of life.

Ritual knowledge in Penarukan is conveyed genealogically and performatively, passed down from elder priests, dancers, and custodians to subsequent generations. This pattern aligns with Bloch’s (1989) notion of ritualized tradition, in which authority rests not on innovation but on continuity grounded in ancestral legitimacy. Local narratives consistently indicate that *Barong* and *Rangda* are not optional additions but necessary mediators linking the infant, the community, and unseen forces (*niskala*) believed to intensify during transitional moments such as birth. During the ceremony, *Barong*’s movements encircle the ritual space, while *Rangda*’s appearance introduces tension that is subsequently contained, reinforcing the protective and balancing dimensions of the rite.

It is important to note that not all villages require or permit the involvement of *Barong* in *nyambutin*. Within Balinese cosmology, *Barong* is not simply a cultural object but a consecrated presence whose participation must correspond to specific ritual conditions and local cosmological needs (Eiseman, 1990). Villages lacking a ritually consecrated *Barong*, or those whose historical narratives do not associate infancy with heightened vulnerability, typically conduct *nyambutin* without such performances. Thus, the absence of *Barong* in regions such as Gianyar, Buleleng, or Karangasem does not indicate incompleteness; instead, it reflects a different local interpretation of cosmological risk and moral formation, shaped by distinct historical trajectories that still require further study.

This situation underscores the importance of symbolic jurisdiction: ritual obligations and symbolic resources vary across villages. As Victor Turner (1967) emphasizes, symbols derive their force from social consensus and ritual context. In Penarukan, the pairing of *Barong* and *Rangda* has long been regarded as an effective symbolic mechanism for regulating *kāma* and harmonizing male–female energies. Its inclusion in the *nyambutin* ritual is therefore perceived as both necessary and efficacious.

Conversely, if the performance fails to be properly enacted, whether due to ritual omission, improper execution, or lack of communal participation, it is commonly believed that the balance between visible (*sakala*) and invisible (*niskala*) forces may be disrupted. As noted by I Ketut Kamiyana, a senior ritual practitioner and community elder actively involved in the *nyambutin* ceremony in Penarukan Village (interview, April 7, 2025), “if the ritual is incomplete or

the performance is not carried out properly, the protection is also not complete; imbalance can arise, and it may affect the child and the family.” Such imbalance is thought to potentially manifest in forms of disharmony, including physical vulnerability, emotional disturbance, or spiritual unease affecting both the child and the wider family. In this sense, the absence or failure of the *Barong–Rangda* performance does not merely reduce ritual completeness but risks weakening its protective and harmonizing functions within the cosmological order.

From an anthropological standpoint, this case illustrates that locality is central to the production of meaning. Rituals do not simply express universal doctrine; they articulate cosmologies negotiated within specific communities. The *nyambutin* ritual in Penarukan exemplifies what Geertz (1973) terms local knowledge: a system of meaning that is internally coherent, historically situated, and socially maintained. The *Barong–Rangda* performance gains significance not because of its visual impact, but because it is recognized locally as a valid intervention in the child’s moral and spiritual formation, even as analytical interpretations may extend beyond explicitly stated community meanings.

Thus, the question “why only in Penarukan?” is best approached not by emphasizing uniqueness alone, but by examining the interplay between tradition, ritual authority, and symbolic necessity. The practice endures because it is socially validated, ritually effective, and cosmologically meaningful within Penarukan’s particular religious landscape. In this light, the inclusion of *Barong* and *Rangda* in *nyambutin* should be understood not as an anomaly, but as a deliberate articulation of localized Hindu cosmology and moral pedagogy.

4.5 Ritual Performance versus Touristic Performance of *Barong* and *Rangda*

The *Barong–Rangda* performance in Bali occupies a complex position between sacred ritual and cultural spectacle. While widely known internationally through touristic presentations, its meaning and function differ radically when situated within a ritual context such as the *nyambutin* ceremony in Penarukan Village. Addressing this distinction is crucial to avoid conflating ritual efficacy with cultural entertainment and to clarify how local ritual meaning persists despite the global circulation of *Barong* imagery.

In the *Nyambutin* ritual, the *Barong–Rangda* performance functions primarily in a pedagogical–cosmological register. Its purpose is not to entertain an audience, but to symbolically mediate the infant’s transition into the social and spiritual order. Here, performance operates as a form of embodied teaching, communicating fundamental cosmological principles, such as the balance between dharma and adharma, controlled and uncontrolled desire (*kāma*), and the interaction between the seen (*sakala*) and unseen (*niskala*) worlds. The ritual audience, consisting mainly of family members and the local community,

participates as witnesses to a moral and ontological process rather than as consumers of spectacle.

By contrast, touristic *Barong* and *Rangda* performances are oriented toward an aesthetic-economic function. These performances are typically staged in neutral or commercial spaces, detached from specific ritual cycles, and adapted to meet the expectations of a heterogeneous, often foreign audience (Sala, 2022). Narrative elements are simplified, dramatic contrasts heightened, and performance duration standardized to suit tour schedules. In this context, *Barong* and *Rangda* are re-presented primarily as icons of Balinese culture, valued for visual impact and narrative excitement rather than ritual potency (Picard, 1996).

This shift can be understood through the processes of de-ritualization and re-contextualization. De-ritualization occurs when a performance is removed from its original cosmological framework and stripped of its ritual obligations, prohibitions, and consecrated timing (Bell, 1997). Re-contextualization follows, as the same symbols are embedded within new frameworks, tourism, heritage display, or cultural diplomacy, where meaning is reorganized around entertainment, authenticity, and economic value (Cohen, 1988). Importantly, this transformation does not erase the ritual meaning entirely, but creates parallel semiotic regimes in which the same figures operate differently.

The case of Penarukan demonstrates that ritual meaning resists total commodification. Despite the widespread commercialization of *Barong* performances in Bali, the *Barong* and *Rangda* used in the *nyambutin* ritual remain ritually consecrated (*sungsungan*), restricted in use, and governed by *desa adat* authority. They are not interchangeable with touristic *Barong* figures, nor can they be deployed outside ritually sanctioned contexts without violating local norms. This distinction aligns with what Keesing (1987) describes as the persistence of “cultural logic” beneath surface-level commodification.

Local actors in Penarukan explicitly differentiate between *Barong upacara* (ritual *Barong*) and *Barong bali-bali* (performance-oriented *Barong*). The former is believed to possess spiritual agency and is treated as a living sacred presence, while the latter functions as a representational object. This differentiation reinforces the idea that commodification operates selectively, affecting outward forms without fully penetrating the inner ritual core. As Geertz (1973) argues, religious symbols derive their power not merely from visual form, but from their embeddedness in a lived system of meaning.

From a global perspective, this case contributes to broader anthropological discussions on the relationship between ritual and tourism. Rather than viewing tourism as a unidirectional force that inevitably erodes ritual meaning, the Penarukan *nyambutin* ritual illustrates a model of selective accommodation.

Ritual actors allow *Barong* and *Rangda* to circulate globally as cultural symbols, while simultaneously protecting their ritual efficacy through local restrictions, consecration practices, and narrative control. In this sense, ritual meaning is not passively consumed by the market, but actively defended and reproduced by the community.

The contrast between ritual and touristic performances of *Barong* and *Rangda* should not be framed as a simple opposition between “authentic” and “inauthentic.” Instead, it reflects the coexistence of multiple performance regimes, each governed by distinct logics of value. In Penarukan, the *nyambutin* ritual remains firmly rooted in a pedagogical–cosmological framework, ensuring that *Barong* and *Rangda* continue to function as moral and spiritual educators rather than mere aesthetic commodities. This resistance to total commodification underscores the enduring authority of local knowledge and ritual tradition in shaping the meanings of Balinese performance.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the performance of *Barong* and *Rangda* within the *nyambutin* ritual in Penarukan Village constitutes a culturally embedded symbolic system through which male and female desires are represented, interpreted, and ritually regulated. By employing a semiotic framework, this study has shown that the *Barong–Rangda* performance is not merely an aesthetic or narrative expression, but a structured field of meaning in which desire (*kāma*) is articulated within a moral and cosmological order.

At the denotative level, *Barong* and *Rangda* appear as mythological figures engaged in a dramatic encounter. However, at the connotative and mythic levels, they function as symbolic representations of masculine and feminine energies. *Barong* signifies disciplined, outwardly directed desire associated with protection, control, and alignment with *dharma*, while *Rangda* embodies a more ambivalent form of desire, characterized by its latent, transformative, and potentially disruptive force. Their interaction does not culminate in the victory of one over the other; rather, it expresses an ongoing process of balancing opposing yet complementary forces, consistent with the principle of *rwa bhineda*. In this sense, desire is not negated but reoriented, channeled into a state of equilibrium that sustains both individual and collective harmony.

The placement of this symbolic performance within the *nyambutin* ritual further reveals how such meanings are introduced at the earliest stage of human life. The infant, although not cognitively engaged, is positioned within a sensory and relational environment shaped by sound, movement, rhythm, and affect. Through this embodied exposure, the child becomes part of a symbolic field in which fundamental cultural values, such as balance, self-regulation,

and the coexistence of opposing forces, are implicitly transmitted. The ritual thus operates as a form of early moral and cosmological inscription, where knowledge is not conveyed through verbal instruction but through participation in a structured experiential process.

This study also highlights that the integration of *Barong–Rangda* within the *nyambutin* ritual is a locally specific practice rooted in the socio-religious configuration of Penarukan Village. The authority of the *desa adat* and ritual specialists plays a central role in determining the legitimacy and necessity of this performance within the ritual sequence. This demonstrates that the meaning and function of ritual symbols are not universal or fixed, but are shaped by localized systems of knowledge, authority, and tradition. As such, the Penarukan case challenges homogenizing interpretations of Balinese Hindu rituals and underscores the importance of attending to local variations in anthropological analysis.

By distinguishing between ritual and touristic contexts, this study contributes to broader discussions on cultural commodification and resilience. While *Barong* and *Rangda* are widely circulated as cultural icons in the global tourism industry, their ritual enactment in *nyambutin* remains governed by sacred time, space, and authority, thereby preserving their symbolic efficacy. This dual existence illustrates how cultural forms can be simultaneously adapted and protected, allowing ritual meaning to persist despite external pressures of commodification.

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The authors used artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted language tools solely to improve the clarity, grammar, and readability of the manuscript. AI was not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, interpret findings, or formulate the study's conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the content presented in this article.

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