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Bulian Saa: More Than Words

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Abstract

This study examines the metaphorical system of *Bulian Saa*, the ritual language of the Bali *Mula* community in *Bulian* village, North Bali. Drawing on linguistic analysis, ethnographic insights from prior studies (Putra et al., 2025), conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008), and metaphor identification procedure (Group, 2007), the study identifies key conceptual metaphors shaping the community's spiritual worldview, including notions of the divine, ritual practices, and nature. Findings reveal a coherent metaphorical framework in which abstract spiritual concepts are rendered tangible, namely the divine as a sovereign, nature as a purifying force, and devotion as a spiritual ascent. This exploratory analysis highlights the unique cognitive and cultural structure of *Bulian Saa*, contributing to its documentation, preservation, and the broader understanding of ritual language in anthropological linguistics.

1. Introduction

The Bali *Mula* indigenous community in *Bulian* village preserves unique traditions, *Bulian Saa*, a ritual language employed exclusively in sacred ceremonies. *Bulian Saa* functions as a conduit for spiritual knowledge, embodying centuries of cultural and religious understanding. This study investigates the language's metaphorical system, focusing on how abstract concepts of the divine, nature, and devotion are expressed through conceptual metaphors that shape the community's spiritual worldview and ritual practices. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach (Salsabila et al., 2025) and conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008), the analysis reveals systematic metaphorical mappings that render complex spiritual realities comprehensible. By documenting and analyzing this previously unexamined metaphorical system, the study highlights *Bulian Saa*'s distinct identity within Balinese Hindu ritual speech (Putra et al, 2025) and contributes to broader

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discussions in cultural linguistics and language documentation (Ericha & Rahardi, 2023). Ultimately, this research provides an integrated understanding of how language, cognition, and ritual intersect to sustain the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Bali *Mula* community.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (2008), which views metaphor as a fundamental cognitive mechanism rather than a rhetorical device. CMT provides the analytical framework for exploring how *Bulian Saa* maps concrete experiential domains onto abstract spiritual concepts. This perspective is particularly relevant for ritual languages, which, as Kádár (2024) argues, serve not only ceremonial functions but also construct shared cognitive frameworks within communities. The research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach (Salsabila et al., 2025), integrating linguistic analysis and ethnographic insights**.** Data consist of *Bulian Saa* ritual language expressions documented from previous fieldwork and scholarly studies (Putra et al., 2025). The analysis followed four steps: (1) compiling a corpus of ritual expressions; (2) applying the metaphor identification procedure (MIP) to systematically detect metaphorical usage (Group, 2007); (3) classifying metaphors into source and target domains; and (4) interpreting recurring patterns within the Bali *Mula* ritual and cultural context. By situating the analysis within previous work (Engberg-Pedersen, 2023; Putra et al., 2025) and employing established methodological approaches (Ericha & Rahardi, 2023), this study ensures scientific rigor and reproducibility. The methodological integration of linguistic and ethnographic perspectives enables the uncovering of *Bulian Saa*'s cognitive and cultural logic, contributing to its documentation while enriching broader debates in anthropological linguistics and cultural heritage studies (Caesarine & Setyaningsih, 2023).

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Results

Bulian Saa, the ritual language of the Bali *Mula* indigenous community, possesses a rich and coherent system of conceptual metaphors. Ritual speech *Saa* is uttered by the priestess *Jero Sedahan Ni Ketut Rentini* at Taman Sari Temple, *Bulian* village (Putra et al., 2025). These metaphors serve as a powerful cognitive tool, enabling the community to conceptualize and articulate abstract spiritual concepts in tangible and comprehensible ways. The analysis of *Bulian Saa* reveals a systematic mapping of concrete experiences onto abstract spiritual domains, forming a foundational framework for their worldview. This section will delve into three core metaphorical concepts that permeate *Bulian Saa*: the divine as sovereign, nature as a purifying force, and devotion as spiritual ascent. Below is a comprehensive table of identified metaphors in the ritual language, categorized by their conceptual domains:

Core Metaphor 1: The Divine as Sovereign

In *Bulian* Saa, deities are consistently conceptualized as royal figures endowed with supreme authority, reflecting and reinforcing hierarchical social structures. Expressions such as *Ratu Gede Sasuhunan Siwa* ("The Great Lord Siva, the Revered One") and *Ratu Gede Luhuring Akasa* ("The Great King of the Highest Sky") exemplify this metaphorical mapping. These expressions frame the divine as an ultimate ruler whose authority parallels earthly governance, establishing a coherent cosmic and

social order. Ritual phrases like *Nawegang Ida Ratu Panembahan* ("I humbly present myself to the revered Lord/ One") further emphasize the deferential relationship between humans and deities, mirroring the protocols of approaching a monarch.

Table 1. The Divine as Sovereign

No	*Bulian* Saa Phrase/ Concept	English Translation	Metaphorical Expression	Connotative Meaning
1	*Ratu Gede/ Panembahan*	Great King / The Revered One	The Deity as a "Divine Sovereign"	The Deity is portrayed as the supreme ruler who governs and structures the cosmos.
2	*Ratu Gede Luhuring Akasa*	The Great King of the Highest Sky	The Sky as a "Celestial Kingdom"	The Deity's realm is envisioned as a transcendent kingdom, symbolizing ultimate authority.
3	*Ratu Ayu Manik Kembar*	The Beautiful Queen of the Twin Jewels	The Goddess as "Twin Jewels"	The Goddess embodies duality and harmony, representing balance within the universe.
4	*Ratu Gde Panyineb*	The Great Lord of the Closing	The Deity as the "Master of Endings"	The Deity governs closure and transitions, ensuring order in the cycle of existence.
5	*Ratu Gede Patih Ngapit Lawang*	The Great Lord, Guardian Flanking the Gate	The Deity as a "Sacred Gatekeeper"	The Deity protects sacred thresholds, safeguarding the boundary between realms.
6	*Singgih nawegang Ratu Gede Sasuhunan Siwa…*	Humbly, I petition before the Great Lord Siwa	Nawegang as "Respectful Petition"	An act of humbly requesting with reverence, expressing deep respect and acknowledgment of divine authority.
7	*Titiang nambet, ngiring Ida Ratu Panembahan…*	I, a humble custodian of the Great Lord	The Priest as a "Custodian of the Great Lord"	The priest assumes responsibility for maintaining the sacred bond between the Deity and the community.
8	*Nawegang Ida Ratu Panembahan…*	Humbly, I petition before the Revered Lord	Revered Lord as "Sacred Sovereign"	The Deity is acknowledged as the sacred ruler to whom

				one presents respectful petitions.
9	*Nawegang*	Humbly petition / With due respect	Petition as "Facing the Divine"	Conceptualized as respectfully approaching the Divine, acknowledging human inferiority while honoring divine authority.
10	*Titiang nambet*	I am a humble servant	The Priestess as a "Sacred Guardian"	The priest acts as a guardian of sacred duties, mediating divine presence within the community.
11	*Nyuryanin*	To shine upon	Divine Grace as "Spiritual Light"	Divine blessing is conceptualized as light that dispels ignorance and guides the faithful.

Core Metaphor 2: Nature as A Purifying Force

Another pervasive conceptual metaphor in *Bulian Saa* is the understanding of natural elements as agents of spiritual purification. This goes beyond mere physical cleansing, imbuing natural phenomena with profound spiritual efficacy. The metaphorical framework reflects the Bali *Mula* community's deep connection to their natural environment, where mountains, lakes, and other natural features are not merely physical entities but sources of spiritual power and purification. Ritual expressions such as *trebesan danu, crapcapan bukit* ("water from the lake and mountain for purification") and *bungan asep* ("flower of smoke") exemplify this conceptualization. Water and smoke are not merely physical elements but vehicles of spiritual renewal, emphasizing the intertwined relationship between humans, nature, and the divine. It highlights a worldview where the natural environment is an active participant in their spiritual lives, providing not only sustenance but also the means for spiritual purification and connection to the divine.

Table 2. Nature as A Purifying Force

No	*Bulian* Saa Phrase / Concept	English Translation	Metaphorical Expression	Connotative Meaning
1	*Bungan asep*	Flower of smoke	Incense Smoke as a "Flower"	Incense smoke is imagined as a living flower, a delicate offering that carries prayers to the heavens.
2	*Trebesan danu, crapcapan bukit*	Water from the lake and mountain	Nature as a "Purifying Force"	Water is invoked as both physical and spiritual cleanser, symbolizing renewal and purity.

3	*Ratu Ayu Taman Sari*	The Beautiful Queen of the Garden of Essence	The Goddess as the "Essence of Nature"	The Goddess personifies fertility, growth, and the sacred purity of nature.
4	*Ratu Ayu Puncaking Gunung*	The Beautiful Queen of the Mountain's Peak	The Goddess as the "Spirit of the Mountain"	The Goddess embodies the mountain as a sacred bridge linking earth and heaven.
5	*Ratu Ngurah Wayan Kebon*	The Lord Guardian of the Garden	The Deity as a "Divine Warden"	The Deity safeguards natural domains, symbolizing divine stewardship over the environment.
6	*Ngarauhang bungan asep, asep menyan majegau…*	I offer incense smoke	Incense Smoke as a "Sacred Flower"	Incense smoke is conceived as a sacred flower rising upward as a medium of prayer.

Core Metaphor 3: Devotion as Spiritual Ascent

In *Bulian Saa*, religious devotion is consistently conceptualized as an upward movement or a sacred journey. This metaphor emphasizes that spiritual practice is an active, transformative process requiring effort, humility, and a conscious striving towards higher spiritual states. This framework positions devotional acts not as passive worship but as a dynamic progression that bridges the human and divine realms. Key expressions such as "*Panjak Ida Ratu rauh tangkil ngarauhang bakti*" (Your servant comes forward to offer devotion) and the phrase "*..tangkil ngarauhang bakti*" (to ascend and present devotion) metaphorically represents approaching the divine as a sacred journey or an act of "climbing" to a higher spiritual plane. The term "*panjak*" (servant) emphasizes humility and the effort required to undertake this spiritual ascent. This expression frames devotion as an active, purposeful movement towards the divine, requiring dedication and a humble disposition.

Table 3. Devotion as Spiritual Ascent

No	*Bulian* Saa Phrase / Concept	English Translation	Metaphorical Expression	Connotative Meaning
1	*Tangkil ngarauhang bakti*	To ascend and present devotion	Devotion as "Spiritual Ascent"	Devotion is conceptualized as an upward journey toward divine closeness.
2	*Iring-iringan*	Sacred procession	Ritual as a "Holy Journey"	Rituals are seen as collective journeys, guiding participants toward a sacred goal.
3	*Baktin madaging*	Devotion has substance	Devotion as "Tangible Substance"	Devotion is viewed as a tangible essence that imbues offerings with spiritual weight.

4	*Panjak Ida Ratu rauh tangkil ngarauhang bakti...*	Your servant ascends to offer devotion	Devotion as "Ascent"	The act of devotion is described as upward movement, symbolizing proximity to the Divine.
5	*Ida Ratu madrebe bale iring-iringan...*	May the Deities dwell in procession	Ritual as "Sacred Movement"	The procession is understood as sacred movement, reinforcing communal unity with the Deities.
6	*Sampun madaging baktin panjak ratu...*	The offering is full of devotion	Devotion as "Substance"	Devotion is perceived as the essence that fills offerings, granting them spiritual legitimacy.

3.2 Discussion

The Cognitive Function of Metaphor in Bulian Saa

The systematic analysis of metaphorical expressions in *Bulian Saa* reveals that these linguistic structures are not merely decorative but serve a crucial cognitive function within the Bali *Mula* community. The three core conceptual metaphors identified: the divine as sovereign, nature as a purifying force, and devotion as spiritual ascent, collectively form a coherent cognitive framework that structures the community's understanding of their spiritual world and practices. This framework allows for the comprehension of abstract and often ineffable spiritual concepts by mapping them onto more concrete and experientially grounded domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008).

For instance, the conceptualization of the divine as a sovereign ruler provides a familiar and culturally resonant schema for understanding the power, authority, and hierarchical relationship with deities. This metaphor leverages the community's understanding of earthly governance and social order to make sense of the cosmic order. Similarly, by framing nature as a purifying force, the Bali *Mula* community imbues their natural environment with spiritual agency, transforming physical elements like water and smoke into potent instruments of spiritual cleansing and communication. This reflects a deep ecological consciousness where the sacred is not separate from the natural world but inherently intertwined with it. Furthermore, the metaphor of devotion as spiritual ascent transforms abstract religious practice into a dynamic and purposeful journey. This cognitive mapping provides a clear path for spiritual engagement, emphasizing effort, humility, and progression towards higher states of being. It makes the abstract concept of spiritual growth tangible and actionable, guiding the community's ritual behaviors and personal spiritual endeavors. In essence, these metaphors act as cognitive bridges, enabling the Bali *Mula* people to navigate and interpret their complex spiritual realities in a structured and meaningful way.

The Distinct Identity of Bulian Saa

The metaphorical system of *Bulian Saa* not only provides a cognitive framework but also highlights its distinct identity when compared to mainstream Balinese Hindu ritual speech. While both share a common broader cultural heritage, the specific conceptualizations embedded in *Bulian Saa* reflect the

unique worldview and historical development of the Bali *Mula* community. Unlike the more Sanskritized and Old Javanese-influenced mainstream Balinese ritual languages, *Bulian Saa* retains linguistic features and metaphorical mappings that are deeply rooted in the indigenous traditions of the Bali *Mula*. For example, the specific epithets used for deities in *Bulian Saa*, such as "*Ratu Gede Sasuhunan Siwa*" or "*Ratu Ayu Taman Sari*," carry nuances and connotations that may differ from those found in mainstream Balinese Hindu prayers. These distinctions are not merely lexical but reflect fundamental differences in how the divine is conceptualized and interacted with. The emphasis on nature as a purifying force, deeply integrated with specific local geographical features (e.g., lakes and mountains), further underscores the unique ecological and spiritual relationship of the Bali *Mula* community with their immediate environment. This distinctiveness is crucial for understanding the linguistic diversity within Bali and for recognizing the importance of preserving minority linguistic traditions. *Bulian Saa* serves as a linguistic testament to the resilience and unique cultural trajectory of the Bali *Mula*, offering a counter-narrative to the more dominant cultural influences. Documenting and analyzing these distinctions contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Balinese cultural history and the multifaceted expressions of Hinduism on the island (Putra et al., 2025).

Intergenerational Transmission and Preservation

The metaphors embedded in *Bulian Saa* play a vital role in the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and spiritual concepts. By packaging complex abstract ideas into accessible and relatable metaphorical forms, these linguistic structures facilitate the learning and internalization of the community's worldview by younger generations. The vivid imagery and systematic mappings provided by these metaphors make abstract spiritual tenets more concrete and memorable, ensuring the continuity of traditional knowledge. The metaphor identification procedure was used to systematically identify and analyze metaphorical expressions in *Bulian* Saa, providing a structured approach to document their conceptual patterns (Group, 2007). However, the under-documentation of *Bulian Saa* poses a significant threat to this intergenerational transmission. As language shifts occur and external influences grow, the unique metaphorical system of *Bulian Saa* is at risk of erosion. The preservation of *Bulian Saa*, therefore, extends beyond mere linguistic documentation; it involves safeguarding the cognitive frameworks and cultural knowledge embedded within its metaphorical landscape. This research, by systematically identifying and analyzing these metaphors, contributes directly to this preservation effort. It provides a detailed record of the language's conceptual richness, which can be used for educational initiatives within the community, for linguistic revitalization programs, and for broader academic understanding. Furthermore, this study underscores the broader significance of documenting ritual languages globally. These languages often serve as repositories of unique cultural knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and historical narratives that are not always captured in other forms of cultural expression. By contributing to the documentation of *Bulian Saa*, this research supports community efforts to maintain their cultural heritage and highlights the importance of linguistic diversity as a vital component of global cultural heritage.

4. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *Bulian Saa*, the ritual language of the Bali *Mula* community, employs a coherent system of conceptual metaphors: the divine as sovereign, nature as a purifying force, and devotion as spiritual ascent, which render abstract spiritual concepts tangible and culturally meaningful. These metaphors provide a structured cognitive framework that guides ritual practice, reflects the community's hierarchical understanding of divinity, reverence for the natural

environment, and conception of devotion as a purposeful spiritual journey. By applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this research contributes to anthropological linguistics and the study of ritual languages, highlighting how metaphors organize thought, mediate cultural knowledge, and differentiate *Bulian Saa* from mainstream Balinese Hindu ritual speech. The findings also underscore the importance of documenting and preserving this under-documented ritual language, while opening avenues for comparative studies with other ritual languages and for investigating the adaptation of metaphorical systems in contemporary contexts, thereby supporting the transmission of cultural and spiritual knowledge to future generations.

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