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The Existence of Bale Pengaruman Architecture in the Context of Hindu Cosmology: A Study of the Bedawang Nala Ornament in Sibang Kaja, Bali

Made Aries Hartadijaya [1], Anak Agung Ayu Oka Saraswati [2], Antonius Karel Mukti Wibowo [3], Eka Diana Mahira [4], Tri Anggraini Prajnawrdhi [5]

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Abstract

This study investigates the symbolic significance and spatial embodiment of the *Bedawang Nala* ornament within the *Bale Pengaruman* structure at *Pura Dalem Gede* in Sibang Kaja, Bali, positioning it as a visual and spiritual manifestation of Hindu-Balinese cosmology within sacred architecture. Diverging from its conventional placement in *Padmasana* and *Meru* shrines, this research uncovers the ornament's function as a metaphysical axis in *Bale Pengaruman*, a ritual space that mediates the interaction between the physical (*sekala*) and metaphysical (*niskala*) realms of Balinese religious life. Employing a philosophical hermeneutic approach, the study interprets the *theriomorphic* depiction of *Bedawang Nala*—resembling a bovine figure with a forward-facing head—as a localized cosmological reinterpretation symbolizing equilibrium and spiritual grounding. The presence of the entwining dragons *Anantabhoga* and *Basuki* further underscores the dualistic cosmology of earth and water, essential elements believed to uphold universal balance. These findings demonstrate that the *Bale Pengaruman* transcends its role as a mere ritual structure; it emerges as a liminal space facilitating the convergence between human experience and the divine. Traditional Balinese architectural forms, therefore, are not merely visual constructs but are deeply embedded with local wisdom, mythology, spatial philosophy, and ecological awareness.

[1] *Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia. Arieshartadijaya91@gmail.com*
[2] *Architecture Professor at Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia. Saraswati@unud.ac.id*
[3] *Ass. Prof. of Architecture at Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia. antonius@unud.ac.id*
[4] *Ass. Prof. of Architecture at Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia. diana.mahira21@gmail.com*
[5] *Ass. Prof. of Architecture at Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia. anggieprajnawrdhi@unud.ac.id*

1. Introduction

Traditional Balinese architecture is a harmonious synthesis of aesthetics, functionality, and spirituality. Architectural ornaments in Balinese design are not merely decorative but serve as symbolic conveyors of philosophical and cosmological meaning, reflecting the Hindu worldview and the Balinese philosophy of life (Idedhyana & Rijasa, 2022). One such ornament is *Bedawang Nala*, depicted as a colossal tortoise, which in Hindu mythology is believed to support the weight of the world. In sacred structures such as the *Padmasana* and *Meru* shrines, *Bedawang Nala* is traditionally positioned at the foundation, symbolizing the cosmic base that upholds the balance among the three realms—*Tri Loka*: *bhur* (the underworld), *bwah* (the earthly realm), and *swah* (the celestial sphere) (Paramadhyaksa, 2010).

Within this cosmological framework, *Bedawang Nala* is associated with the concept of the cosmic fire that resides at the base of Mount Meru, playing a crucial role in preserving the universe's stability and preventing its collapse. Thus, while *Bedawang Nala* serves a decorative function, it simultaneously embodies profound metaphysical significance.

Previous studies on *Bedawang Nala* have primarily focused on its presence within the architectural contexts of *Padmasana* and *Meru* (Sudarsana, 2021; Ayu et al., 2020). However, its application within the *Bale Pengaruman* structure remains underexplored. Typically situated in the *utamaning mandala* (main sanctum) of Balinese temples, *Bale Pengaruman* functions as a sacred resting place for deities or ancestral spirits during religious ceremonies (Windhu, 1984). Architecturally, the *Bale Pengaruman* comprises three main components—roof (head), supporting columns (body), and base—each adorned with culturally embedded ornamental elements that carry symbolic resonance.

At *Pura Dalem Gede* in Sibang Kaja, the *Bale Pengaruman* features a distinctive *Bedawang Nala* ornament that diverges in form from conventional representations. Despite undergoing restoration on May 13, 1941, the structure has retained its original architectural and ornamental characteristics. This unique integration of *Bedawang Nala* into the *Bale Pengaruman* reveals the ornament's broader symbolic application, extending beyond its traditional placement in *Padmasana* and *Meru*, and affirming its role as a metaphysical and spiritual support element within the sacred architecture of Balinese ritual spaces.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the existence, form, and symbolic significance of the *Bedawang Nala* ornament as integrated into the *Bale Pengaruman* at *Pura Dalem Gede* Sibang Kaja. It seeks to explore how this ornament functions as a visual representation of Hindu cosmological principles within the broader context of Balinese sacred architecture. The interpretation of such sacred ornamentation is essential, as it reflects the deep internalization of cosmological teachings within the cultural and spiritual consciousness of the Balinese community. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how spiritual, philosophical, and ecological values are preserved, adapted, and reinterpreted through the enduring architectural traditions of Bali.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the existence and symbolic interpretation of *Bale Pengaruman* architecture through the lens of the *Bedawang Nala* ornament. The qualitative approach facilitates an in-depth, contextualized analysis of the research object, allowing for the exploration of complex symbolic and cultural meanings embedded within Balinese sacred architecture.

The research was conducted within the temple complex of the Sibang Kaja Traditional Village, located in Badung Regency, Bali. This village is home to three *Pura Dalem* temples: *Pura Dalem*

Tarukan, *Pura Dalem Desa Adat Lambing*, and *Pura Dalem Gede Desa Adat Sibang*. The primary focus of this study is the *Bale Pengaruman* structure at *Pura Dalem Gede*, which prominently features the *Bedawang Nala* ornament at its base—an element seldom found outside the contexts of *Padmasana* and *Meru*.

Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants, most notably Ida Bagus Alit Alita, a respected local architect and expert in traditional Balinese architectural principles. Additional insights were gathered from other local cultural figures, providing a comprehensive understanding of the form, physical attributes, and symbolic meanings associated with the *Bale Pengaruman* and its ornaments. Secondary data sources included scholarly books, peer-reviewed academic journals, photographic documentation, and relevant online references, all of which served to complement and triangulate the primary data.

Data were analyzed interpretively using a philosophical hermeneutic framework. In this approach, symbols are not treated as static icons but as dynamic entities of meaning embedded in cultural and historical contexts. Drawing on the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004), the analysis views meaning as emerging through a dialogical process between the interpreter and the symbolic tradition. Accordingly, *Bedawang Nala* is treated as a "cultural text" that invites interpretation on multiple levels: historically, spiritually, and existentially.

Symbolic interpretation was conducted through three layered dimensions of meaning—semantic (the literal and referential content), reflective (the symbolic and philosophical implications), and ontological (the existential and spiritual depth)—as proposed by Bleicher (2013). This layered hermeneutic method allows for a deeper reading of symbols such as *Bedawang Nala*, not merely as visual or decorative forms, but as encoded cultural signifiers that articulate the relationship between humanity, the cosmos, and the divine.

In this context, the *Bedawang Nala* ornament is understood not only iconographically, but also as a metaphysical symbol deeply rooted in Balinese cosmology and ritual practice. Drawing on interpretive anthropological insights from Geertz (1973) and Turner (1967), the study situates these symbols within the broader cultural reality of Bali—where spiritual symbolism, ritual performance, and architectural expression are profoundly interconnected.

2.1 Existentialism

Existentialism in architecture asserts that space and form transcend their physical dimensions to become expressions of human existence—deeply embedded in historical continuity and environmental context (Liana & Albertus, 2023). Architectural meaning emerges not in isolation but through reflective engagement with the built environment and through intersubjective relationships with surrounding objects. Drawing on Heidegger's (1951) notion of "dwelling," architecture is understood as a manifestation of human *being-in-the-world*, wherein existence is constituted through spatial and temporal experience. Space, in this view, does not inherently possess meaning; rather, meaning is constructed through lived experience, interaction, and the embodiment of existential presence—where existence precedes essence (Lutfi, 2023).

Architecture thus becomes a cultural artifact shaped by shared memory and collective experience. Norberg-Schulz (1980) emphasized the identity of place, arguing that architectural space must evoke local character and express the *genius loci*—the spirit of place. Architecture is not merely functional; it serves as a symbolic language articulating the intimate bond between humans and their environment. Geertz (1973) underscores the central role of symbols in cultural life, positioning

architecture as a medium through which symbolic meaning is both materialized and ritualized, linking the human, the natural, and the transcendent realms.

Sacred architecture, in particular, embodies the symbolic systems of a culture, transforming physical space into a site of spiritual encounter. Space becomes sacred not by form alone, but through its symbolic charge, which mediates the relationship between human beings and cosmic or divine realities. As Eliade (1959) argues, architecture serves as an existential center—a spatial axis through which individuals orient themselves spiritually and discover the profound meaning of their existence. The embedded values of myth, belief, and tradition in sacred architecture do not merely ornament the structure; they are constitutive of its essence, informing its design, construction, and spiritual function (Subroto, 2019).

Thus, existentialism in architecture enriches not only the functional and aesthetic dimensions of spatial form but affirms architecture as a vital existential medium—one that conveys human experience, cultural memory, belief systems, and identity in their intricate relationship to space, time, and meaning.

2.2 Function, Form, and Meaning

Architecture embodies a dialectical relationship between form and meaning, wherein each reinforces and gives depth to the other. It transcends its physical constitution to become a meaningful entity infused with social, cultural, emotional, and symbolic significance. Architectural form does not arise arbitrarily; rather, it manifests embedded values, lived experiences, and the spatial functions that shape human life. The experience of architectural space engages the full range of human perception—sight, hearing, smell, and touch—as emphasized by Rasmussen (1962), who argues that architecture must be understood as a multisensory phenomenon. Through these sensory modalities, form reveals itself not merely as structure but as space rendered meaningful. When form engages the senses, it fosters an emotional bond between humans and their environment.

Aristotle's classical assertion that form follows function (Jensen, 2015) frames architectural essence as rooted in purpose—not solely technical, but also emotional, psychological, and social. In line with this, Salura and Fauzy (2012), drawing on Krier's theory, stress the necessity of a balanced relationship between form and function. An overemphasis on visual appeal at the expense of functional integrity—or vice versa—diminishes spatial depth and undermines the experiential quality of architecture. Zumthor (2006) similarly contends that meaningful architecture "speaks" through its atmosphere, with form, material, light, and rhythm crafted with contextual awareness to evoke an immersive experience that resonates with the human soul.

From a cultural perspective, Geertz (1973) underscores that meaning is generated within the structures of culture, shaped by the collective memory and lived experience of a community. In this context, architecture functions as a visual narrative—a system of signs, as Jencks (1969) describes, which conveys values, worldviews, and symbolic ideas. Pallasmaa (2005) expands the concept of function to include embodied perception and human consciousness, proposing that meaningful space is not only used but also felt, touched, and fully inhabited—by both body and mind.

Ornamental form, in particular, plays a critical role in enriching architectural meaning, extending beyond superficial decoration to become a profound expression of cultural values, spirituality, and collective identity. Ornaments, composed of motifs, patterns, and symbols embedded in physical structures, operate as a visual language that encodes social meaning and spiritual memory (Summerson, 1963). Sunaryo (2009) views ornamentation as a conduit for transmitting cultural and social values across generations, reinforcing emotional attachment to space and place. Rapoport (1969) emphasizes that architectural form and ornament are inextricably linked to the societal value system, as both reflect prevailing norms, lifestyles, and communal structures.

In traditional contexts, such as Hindu-Balinese architecture, ornament serves a dual function: as an aesthetic embellishment and as a cosmological symbol that embodies philosophical and religious depth (Idedhyana, 2022). These symbolic forms articulate notions of harmony, spiritual orientation, and the interconnectedness between humanity and the cosmos. Ornament thus contributes not only to visual identity but also to the preservation of cultural memory and local distinctiveness (Schwarzer, 1997). It resists homogenization and asserts cultural specificity in an increasingly globalized built environment. Ultimately, ornamentation emerges as a vital element in the harmonization of form, function, and meaning, requiring a deep sensitivity to cultural, local, and existential dimensions.

2.3 Hermeneutic

This research adopts an interpretive hermeneutic approach grounded in the philosophical framework of Hans-Georg Gadamer, which conceptualizes understanding not as the passive reproduction of meaning, but as an active, dialogical, and historically situated process between the interpreter and the cultural object. Central to Gadamer's (2004) hermeneutics is the notion of the *fusion of horizons* (*Horizontverschmelzung*), wherein the historical horizon of a symbol encounters the interpreter's present horizon of understanding. This dialogic interplay yields dynamic and context-sensitive meanings that remain open to reinterpretation.

Such an approach is particularly pertinent in analyzing the *Bedawang Nala* symbol, which transcends its aesthetic function within sacred architecture to occupy an epistemic role in the Hindu-Balinese cosmological worldview. As a symbolic form, *Bedawang Nala* participates in the knowledge system through which the Balinese conceptualize the interrelationship between the cosmos, humanity, and the sanctity of space. Within the framework of visual culture studies, symbols are understood as *cultural image-schemata*—visual configurations that materialize abstract concepts into concrete spatial and architectural forms (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Zhang & Hu, 2008).

From a hermeneutic perspective, symbols are treated as cultural texts, inherently polysemous and perpetually open to reinterpretation. They serve as both a "model of" and "model for" reality—simultaneously reflecting the world and actively shaping it (Geertz, 1973). As Ricoeur (1976) contends, symbols possess "a surplus of meaning," requiring interpretation that is embedded within historical, social, and spiritual contexts.

To guide this interpretive process, the study employs Bleicher's (2013) three-tiered hermeneutic framework: semantic, reflective, and ontological (or existential) levels of analysis. The semantic stage focuses on the visual form of *Bedawang Nala* in relation to its architectural and ritual function. Here, the symbol is analyzed not merely as a visual motif but as an integral structural element that mediates the ritual function of the *Bale Pengaruman*, thus linking architectural space with the metaphysical dimensions of Hindu-Balinese cosmology (Ramseyer & Tisna, 2001).

At the reflective stage, the analysis delves into the spiritual and mythological values encoded in the symbol. As depicted by Covarrubias (1937), *Bedawang Nala* symbolizes the primordial geological forces that sustain the world, while simultaneously representing the threat of cosmic instability—requiring ritual appeasement to maintain universal balance. Lansing (1983) further illustrates how symbols in Balinese religious systems function as markers of ecological harmony and social order within sacred cosmological structures.

The ontological stage transcends representation, interpreting the symbol as an expression of the collective existential condition of the Balinese people. At this level, *Bedawang Nala* is understood through experiential engagement—as a manifestation of the deep interconnection between

humanity, the cosmos, and sacred existence. Local interpretations, such as those advanced by Williams (1999), underscore the symbol's role in cultivating ontological awareness and cultural self-understanding.

Danesi (2004) positions symbols as cultural codes that not only signify meaning but also construct cognitive frameworks within a society. These codes are internalized through ritual, mythology, and spatial practice, becoming part of a habitual cosmological grammar (Belo, 2010). Within this interpretive model, *Bedawang Nala* is analyzed as a living symbolic system—dynamic, open, and culturally situated. It operates as a central axis of meaning, enabling a deeper comprehension of how sacred architecture, cosmological thought, and spiritual consciousness are intricately interwoven in Balinese culture. Ultimately, symbols such as *Bedawang Nala* animate space, transforming sacred structures into ontological media that bridge the visible and invisible, the physical and metaphysical realms.

3. Results and Discussions

Entity of Bale Pengaruman

The vertical structural articulation of traditional Balinese architecture reflects a symbolic analogy to the human body, comprising the head, body, and legs—corresponding to the triadic concept of *Tri Angga* (Paramadhyaksa, 2010; Sutaba, 2001; Geriya, 2003). *Tri Angga* represents a cosmological hierarchy expressed through three vertical layers, each embodying distinct ontological and spiritual values: the upper (*utama*), middle (*madya*), and lower (*nista*) realms.

The Head (Utama) – Interpreted as the locus of the highest spiritual value, this section is architecturally represented by the roof structure. In sacred architecture, such as *bale*, *merajan*, and *pelinggih gedong*, the roof often adopts the *tumpang siki* (tiered) form, most prominently exemplified by the *meru* structure. These tiered roofs are constructed in odd-numbered multiples—commonly 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, or 11 levels—each carrying symbolic cosmological significance (Sudarsana, 2013). The apex is often adorned with *murdha* ornaments and finely detailed stone carvings that mark the sacred crown of the structure (Goris, 1954).

The Body (Madya) – This middle section symbolizes the transitional realm, representing balance and human-centered value. Architecturally, it is articulated as the *rong* or spatial chamber, which may be either enclosed or open. Enclosed *rong*, typically accessible via doors, are characteristic of structures such as *pelinggih meru*, *gedong*, and *merajan*, emphasizing sanctity and containment. Conversely, open *rong*—as seen in structures like *pelinggih bale*—highlight communal function and spatial openness, symbolizing the reciprocal interaction between the physical (*sekala*) and metaphysical (*niskala*) worlds (Windia & Sutrisna, 2010).

The Base (Nista) – This lowest structural level, known as *bebaturan*, reflects foundational or earthly value. It is typically adorned with a variety of ornamental motifs that serve both protective and aesthetic purposes. These include *karang manuk* (bird-shaped motifs), *karang gajah* (elephant-shaped motifs), *pepatran* (floral motifs), and other geometric or zoomorphic forms that act as symbolic guardians and representations of natural harmony (Yuliana, 2018).

Together, these vertically stratified elements not only structure the architectural form but also articulate a deeply embedded cosmological and philosophical system. The *Tri Angga* concept thus functions as both a spatial and symbolic grammar, translating metaphysical beliefs into the material fabric of Balinese sacred architecture.



Figure 1. The General Structure of Bale Pengaruman (1) and the Use of Bedawang Nala (2) (Photo & Analysis: Hartadijaya, 2025)

Within the cosmological framework of Balinese belief, *pesamuan* refers to a sacred, human-scaled space that facilitates encounters between the human and the transcendent realms (Menderi, 2017). According to local cultural figure Alita (2025), *pengaruman* is understood as a manifestation of temporally sacred reality—serving as a medium for unifying the metaphysical presence (*Ida Bhatara*) of each *pratima* or temple structure with the physical presence of humans. In this sense, the *Bale Pengaruman* emerges as a symbolic threshold or liminal space, mediating the spiritual and profane dimensions of existence through collective ritual practice.

From a spatial perspective, Dwijendra (2003) categorizes Balinese sacred spaces horizontally using the *Tri Mandala* concept, aligning macrocosmic and microcosmic principles within the spatial orientation of *hulu-teben*. Sulistyawati (1985) further expands on this concept through three axes of spatial influence: (1) the terrestrial axis (*kaja-kelod*), denoting the mountain-to-sea orientation; (2) vertical elevation (*tegeh-lebah*), indicating high and low placements; and (3) the cardinal directional axis (East–West), based on solar movement. The *Bale Pengaruman*, in its physical and ritual function, occupies the *utama mandala*—the most sacred central zone among other *pelinggih*, anchoring the core of the temple's spiritual energy.

Beyond its architectural function as a ceremonial site, the *Bale Pengaruman* serves as a spiritual mediator. Its manifestation at *Pura Dalem Gede Sibang Kaja* follows symmetrical proportions with equal width and length, aligning with the anthropomorphic logic of traditional Balinese architecture. The roof adopts a pyramidal form crowned with *murdha*, an ornamental apex typical of sacred *raab* structures. The *murdha* symbolizes the "head" in the tripartite cosmology of *Tri Angga* and is commonly found atop the *pelinggih* structures in temple compounds.

Architecturally, the *Bale Pengaruman* is supported by *saka* (columns) with parallel lines visually connecting the body and roof, resembling the form of a *gedong*. The *stana* or ritual throne is oriented toward three directions—right, left, and front—while the rear side functions as a solid backdrop. Red brick constitutes the main structural material, with ornamental details carved from *batu paras* (limestone).

The *Bedawang Nala* ornament at the base of this structure—crafted by the local *undagi* (traditional architect)—demonstrates the community's ingenuity in visually representing the

philosophy of balance. Rather than a singular typology, *Bedawang Nala* takes multiple forms, dimensions, and materials depending on available resources. Typically depicted as a colossal turtle (*theriomorphic*), it may also appear in *therio-anthropomorphic* forms, combining animal and human characteristics to embody a complex symbolic entity. Hartadijaya (2022) describes this figure as featuring an open mouth, exaggerated symbolic teeth, and flame-like hair, while Idedhyana (2022) notes its consistent representation in Java and Bali as a turtle supporting sacred structures—with the head facing forward and the feet visible at the four corners of the square base. This symbolism draws from the mythology of Mount Semeru and local folklore, which link *Bedawang Nala* to natural phenomena such as earthquakes and tsunamis.

The materials used to construct *Bedawang Nala* are varied, including red brick, *batu paras*, and *batu candi* (volcanic temple stone). The central body of the *Bale Pengaruman* features ornaments such as *palih taman* or *palih pancak*, depicting floral and geometric motifs. The base includes the *Gajah Asti* ornament, situated above *Bedawang Nala* and flanked by two dragons—*Ananthaboga* and *Basuki*—that coil around the building's body. Notably, the head of *Bedawang Nala* faces directly forward, diverging from the more common upward-facing representations. Both dragons also face forward, adorned with distinctive scale and wave patterns symbolizing their identities: circular motifs for *Ananthaboga* (earth/serpent), and flowing water-like patterns for *Basuki* (water/dragon).

Norberg-Schulz (1980) posits that sacred spaces serve not only functional roles but also act as "existential centers" where humans orient themselves spiritually and cosmologically. In this view, the *Bale Pengaruman* functions as a liminal space, echoing Turner's (1969) concept of the ritual threshold—a transitional realm between the human and transcendent, made accessible through ceremonial practice. Though temporally activated during specific rituals, the *Bale Pengaruman* possesses high spiritual intensity, serving as the ritual locus where metaphysical and material realities converge.

Eliade (1959) asserts that sacred space represents the *axis mundi*—the cosmic axis that links heaven, earth, and the underworld. The *Bale Pengaruman* thus becomes a convergence point of the *Tri Angga* vertical structure and the *Tri Mandala* horizontal order. Its ornamentation, orientation, and ritual timing are inseparable from the macrocosmic framework that underpins Balinese cosmology. Ardika and Sutaba (2020) argue that the intersection of sacred time (*kala*) and sacred space (*desa*) fosters collective interaction with the transcendent, wherein architecture and ritual coalesce into an integrated, living system. As such, the *Bale Pengaruman* operates as a cosmic mediator—a performative architectural space through which universal order is re-enacted cyclically via ritual.

This sacred space functions not merely as a physical setting, but as a vessel for ritual performance, sacred objects, and liturgical temporality. Bell (1992) emphasizes that rituals construct and regulate social reality through symbolic, repeated acts. In this context, the *Bale Pengaruman* emerges as a liminal entity, a symbolic cosmogram, and a collective performative site—bridging embodied human experience with the spiritual universe.

Bedawang Nala in Balinese Cosmology

Bedawang Nala occupies a central position in the cosmological framework of Hindu-Balinese belief, symbolized as a colossal turtle bearing the weight of the island of Bali upon its back. Its movements are believed to cause earthquakes, a mythic explanation that reflects the Balinese people's intricate understanding of natural phenomena and geodynamic instability. To stabilize these elemental forces, *Bedawang Nala* is entwined by two guardian serpents—*Naga Basuki* and *Naga Anantabhoga*. These dragons function not only as protectors but also as cosmological agents of balance within the lower realm (*bhur loka*), representing the elemental principles of water and earth respectively (Pucci et al., 2004).

This triadic configuration aligns with the concept of *Vadavamukha*, the fiery, submarine source of destructive cosmic energy—often interpreted in relation to volcanic activity, particularly those occurring beneath the sea (Hopkins, 1915). Such associations demonstrate the Balinese people's nuanced fusion of spiritual doctrine and environmental consciousness. Ancient Javanese literature, such as the *Adiparwa*, identifies *Bedawang Nala* as "empas," a mythic turtle figure aligned with *Kurma Raja*, the avatar of *Batara Vishnu*, reinforcing its Vedic lineage (Zoetmulder, 2005).

The myth of *Samudra Manthana* provides further cosmological depth, portraying *Bedawang Nala* as the stabilizing base of Mount Mandara, which is churned by gods and demons to extract *amrita*—the elixir of immortality. *Naga Basuki* coils around the mountain, functioning as the churning rope, symbolizing the eternal interplay between divine and demonic energies in the process of cosmic renewal. According to Paramadhyaksa (2012), *Bedawang Nala* embodies the dialectic of destructive and generative power—a spiritual metaphor for the regenerative cycles of the universe.

Wiana (2004) argues that this symbolism articulates the dynamic relationship between *bhuana alit* (microcosm) and *bhuana agung* (macrocosm), capturing the reciprocal and interconnected nature of human life and the cosmos. In this way, the spiritual role of *Bedawang Nala* is inseparable from ecological ethics, with Wirawan (2019) emphasizing that its imagery reinforces the sacred relationship between humans and the environment.

In sacred architecture, *Bedawang Nala* transcends its aesthetic dimension to serve as a profound cultural signifier that integrates spiritual, ecological, and philosophical values. Adnyana & Arwati (2020) interpret the figure as a repository of indigenous ecological knowledge—conveying themes of disaster, sustainability, and cosmic balance through architectural form. Mudra (2016) further posits that *Bedawang Nala* operates as a symbolic reminder of ecological stewardship, reinforcing the view that architectural spaces in Bali function as philosophical expressions of cosmological insight and existential awareness.

The Manifestation of Bedawang Nala in the Bale Pengaruman

The symbolic presence of *Bedawang Nala* is vividly manifested in the *Bale Pengaruman* at *Pura Dalem Gede Sibang Kaja*, particularly at the *nista* (base) level of the structure. This foundational section features a layered composition that includes *Gajah Asti* (elephant motif) seated above *Bedawang Nala*, which is further encircled by two dragons. The body (*madya*) of the building is adorned with *palih taman* or *palih pancak* ornaments—floral and geometric carvings that reinforce its sacred function and aesthetic harmony.

In this specific *Bale*, the figure of *Bedawang Nala* diverges from conventional depictions. Instead of a typical upward-facing orientation, the turtle's head faces directly forward. The body features motifs resembling fiery hair, and its form closely resembles a cow—signifying a localized reinterpretation of the mythic archetype. The two dragons that encircle *Bedawang Nala* also face forward. Their bodies are inscribed with distinctive visual patterns: coiled, scale-like motifs symbolizing *Naga Anantabhoga* (earth element), and wave-like, fluid motifs associated with *Naga Basuki* (water element). These symbolic attributes reinforce the duality and interdependence of the elemental forces they represent.

Hartadijaya (2022) identifies two common typologies in the architectural placement of *Bedawang Nala*: one with a single dragon and another with two dragons. The dual-dragon configuration—evident in this case—encodes the coexistence of *Basuki* and *Anantabhoga*, elemental deities representing vital cosmological principles: *Basuki* as the water element and sustainer of life, and *Anantabhoga* as the earth element and provider of sustenance. The interaction between these

dragons serves as a visual metaphor for cosmic equilibrium, encapsulating the harmony between solidity and fluidity, stability and transformation (Paramadhyaksa, 2010).

In contrast, configurations featuring a single dragon may represent either entity independently or symbolically merge the two into one unified force. This condensed representation may reflect a syncretic or localized understanding of the cosmic balance, wherein duality is transcended in favor of an integrated symbolic totality. Thus, the unique artistic execution of *Bedawang Nala* in the *Bale Pengaruman* does not merely serve decorative or canonical expectations, but rather reflects a profound ontological expression. It materializes local cosmological knowledge, mediates between micro- and macrocosmic orders, and signifies the continuous negotiation between cultural tradition, spatial symbolism, and ecological consciousness.

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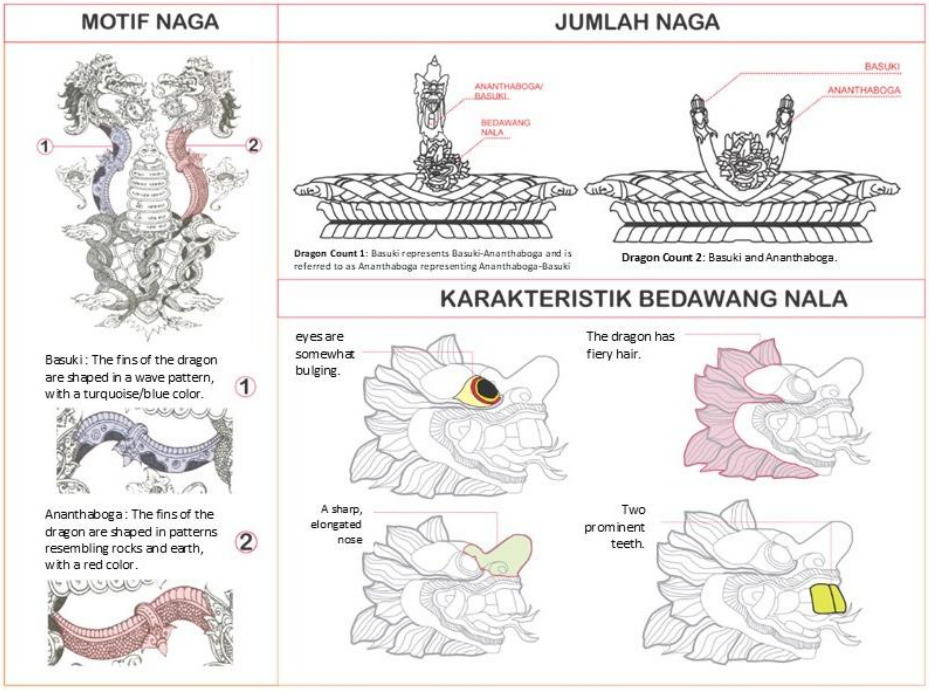


Figure 2. Characteristics of Bedawang Nala (Visual: Hartadijaya, 2022)

The manifestation of cosmological ornaments in the *Bale Pengaruman*, notably the *Bedawang Nala* and its two binding dragons, embodies the symbolic realization of Shaivite cosmology within the sacred architecture of *Pura Dalem*. This temple complex functions as a transcendental space dedicated to the soul's liberation and transformative journey. Within the Hindu-Balinese cosmological framework, *Pura Dalem* represents the realm of death, transformation, and spiritual emancipation. It constitutes one of the triadic core sanctuaries of the *Kahyangan Tiga* system, an essential element embedded in the spatial and ritual organization of traditional Balinese villages.

Pura Dalem is principally devoted to the veneration of Shiva, especially in his aspect as *pemralina*—the cosmic dissolver—whose presence is often iconographically symbolized by the goddess Durga within Balinese Hindu art and ritual practice (Wiana, 2004; Eiseman, 1990). Geographically and cosmologically, the temple is customarily positioned in the downstream or *teben* zone of the village, corresponding to the lower spatial quadrant in the *hulu-teben* axis. This location aligns with the prevailing wind direction, which is associated with the deity Rudra, the fierce and

destructive form of Shiva within Shaivite tradition (Lansing, 1983). Consequently, the *Bale Pengaruman* and its symbolic ornamentation reflect a profound metaphysical schema, where architectural form and mythopoetic narrative converge to facilitate the ritual enactment of cosmic dissolution and spiritual renewal.

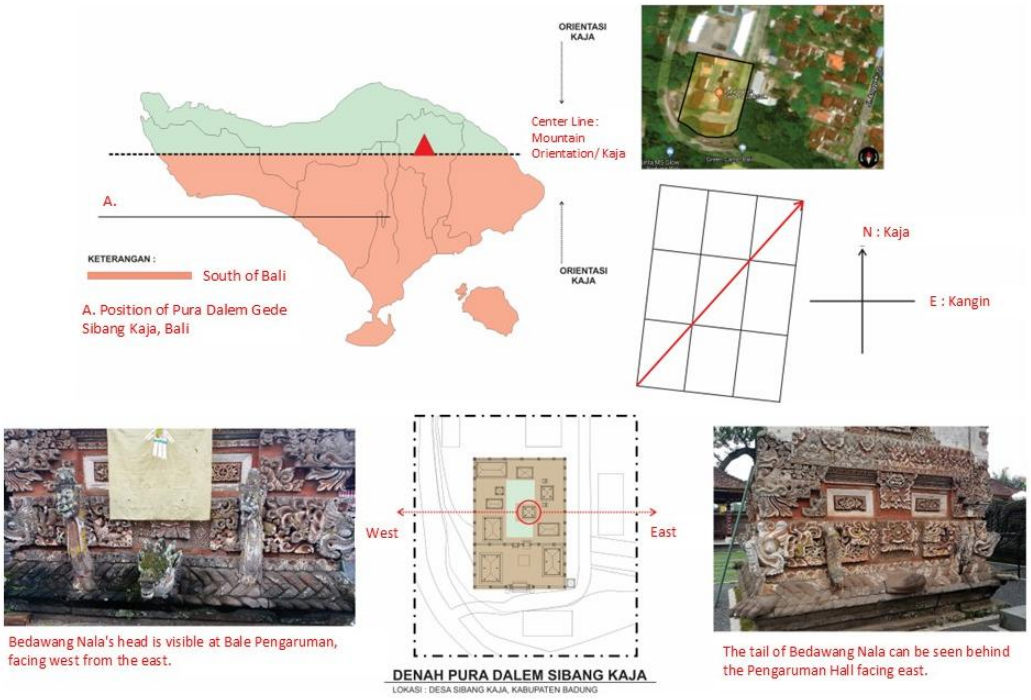


Figure 3. Bedawang Nala and Orientation (Visual by Hartadijaya, 2025)

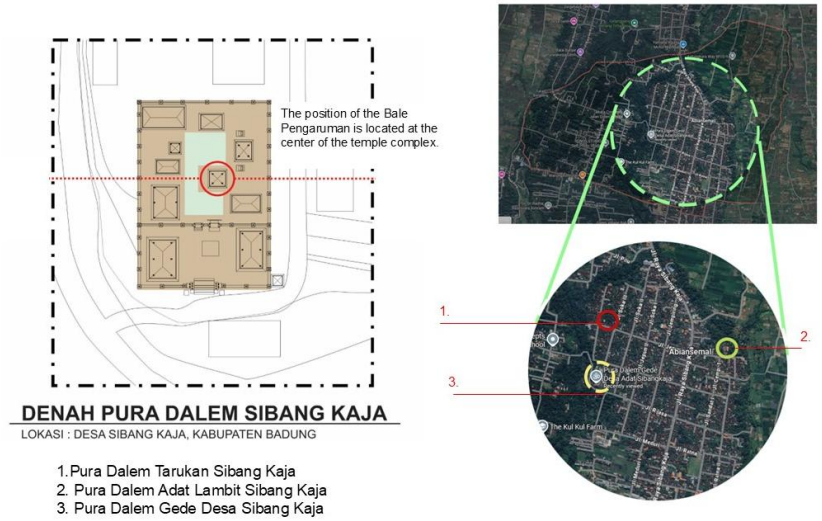


Figure 4. Position of Bale Pengaruman, Pura Dalem Gede, and Pura Dalem in Sibang Kaja (Visual by Hartadijaya, 2025)

In addition to serving as a place of worship for Lord Shiva, Pura Dalem plays an important role in the cycle of death rituals (pitra yadnya) and the worship of purified ancestral spirits. The ancestral spirits who have undergone ceremonies such as *ngaben*, *memukur*, and *nyekah* can ascend to a spiritual level as Atmasiddha Dewata, which is a sacred entity worshipped on par with the gods in the temple (Geertz, 1973; Parimartha, 2001). The cosmological belief of the Balinese people holds that the human soul does not immediately reach the realm of moksha, but requires a series of transcendental rituals to be accepted into the divine order (Bandem & eBoer, 1995). Pura Dalem, therefore, is not only the center for the worship of Lord Shiva, but also a sacred space for honoring and purifying the souls of the ancestors, making it an essential element in maintaining the spiritual continuity between the unseen (niskala) and the visible (sekala) worlds in Balinese Hindu life.

The life of the Balinese people is divided into two activities: sacred activities related to religious rituals, and profane activities that encompass social interactions within the community. The orientation of sacred space is an important indicator in the structure of the traditional village. There are two main markers of sacredness at the village level: (1) the residential axis that follows the main road orientation of kaja–kelod, and the primary space in the dwelling; and (2) the existence of *Pura Puseh* as the center for ancestral worship (Dwijendra, 2003). The sacred directional orientation typically refers to the direction of the mountain where the ancestral spirits reside, the kaja–kelod axis (mountain-sea), which represents the path to the ancestral realm in the kaja direction, an element of nature with symbolic meaning in Balinese cosmology. The kaja kangin direction, northeast toward Mount Agung, is the peak of sacredness in Balinese belief. Traditional villages tend to manifest the concept of *Kahyangan Tiga* in a single area or physical manifestation. This village contains three Pura Dalem areas: Pura Dalem Tarukan, Pura Dalem Desa Adat Lambing, and Pura Dalem Gede Desa Adat Sibang. The term 'Gede' indicates centrality. According to the collective experience of Alita (2025), the reality of having three Pura Dalem in one traditional village is due to community migration. Pura Dalem Gede occupies the highest position in the spiritual hierarchy. This status is not only reflected in its name (the word "Gede" means big or majestic in Balinese) but also in the tiered spatial structure and the completeness of its symbolic and ritualistic elements. The 'Gede' entity also encompasses the entire territory of the village.

The spatial hierarchy in Balinese temple architecture can be seen through the approach of cosmological concepts and 'spatial ordering', as well as the influence of the social structure (Wasudewa & Edi, 2022; Pranajaya & Artayasa, 2022; Widana, Julianingsih, & Wirawan, 2023). Pura Dalem Tarukan and Pura Dalem Desa Adat Lambing can be considered secondary Pura Dalem within the context of smaller villages or banjars. Their functions are more local, both socially and spiritually. Pura Dalem Gede, located in the larger area of Desa Adat Sibang, serves as the main spiritual and social center. In Pura Dalem Gede, Bale Pengaruman serves as the center of high spirituality. This spatial structure indicates an order that is not merely functional but also reflects the values and social systems of the community (Rapoport, 1969; Rapoport, 1990). This hierarchy aligns with the cosmology of Bali, where space is a living entity that holds varying levels of spiritual significance. The re-representation of sacred space with a central and higher position signifies that its existence is not merely for habitation or transcendence but also as a locus for cosmological symbols like Bedawang Nala. Findings by Paramadhyaksa (2010) show that Bedawang Nala appears in the highest tier, a principle of the highest hierarchy and is thus interpreted as more elevated. Eliade (1959) states that sacred places are the axis mundi, the axis of the world. Bedawang Nala in Bale Pengaruman Pura Dalem Gede is thus not merely architecture but a cosmic center, existing temporarily for the people of Desa Adat Sibang Kaja. The relationship between position and orientation has a strong influence on the physical manifestation. The cow-like form in the construction of Bedawang Nala's body is a symbolic representation of Bedawang's position with Bale Pengaruman in Pura Kahyangan, Pura Dalem. The existence of Bedawang Nala in its physical form is theriomorphic (Idedhyana & Rijasa,

2022). The manifestation of Bedawang Nala does not show a predominant human-animal hybrid form but strictly represents an animal form.



Figure 5. The Form of Bedawang Nala in the Bale Pengaruman of Pura Dalem Gede, Desa Sibang Kaja (Photo and Analysis by Hartadijaya, 2025)

The existence of Bedawang Nala in the Bale Pengaruman at Pura Dalem Gede Sibang Kaja is not merely as a decorative element or supplementary symbol, but represents the pinnacle articulation of a strong cosmological symbolism within the Hindu-Balinese belief system. The theriomorphic form of Bedawang Nala, resembling a bull with fiery hair and an unusually oriented head, signals a distinctive local reinterpretation, while also demonstrating the symbolic flexibility within the cultural context of Sibang Kaja. The presence of the two binding dragons, Naga Anantabhoga and Naga Basuki, reinforces the dualistic dimensions of earth and water that support the cosmic structure, thus positioning the Bale Pengaruman not only as the spiritual center of the traditional village but also as a concrete representation of the axis mundi within Bali's sacred space. The cosmological aspect strengthens the position of Bale Pengaruman as a meeting point between the profane and sacred worlds in a temporary form, while simultaneously legitimizing the social and spiritual structure of Desa Adat Sibang Kaja through its architectural expression rich in meaning.

Meaning of Bedawang Nala

Bedawang Nala is a complex and meaningful cosmological symbol within Hindu tradition, particularly in the development of Balinese cosmology. The term "Bedawang," which in Old Javanese means tortoise, and "Nala" or "Anala," which in Sanskrit means fire (Mardiwarsito, 1990; Monier-Williams, 2019), therefore, Bedawang Nala is often interpreted as the "tortoise of fire," symbolizing the latent power of the universe hidden within the Earth's core. This concept has deep roots. The tortoise, in both Indian and Balinese traditions, is viewed as a sacred creature closely linked to cosmic principles. In both Eastern and Western cultures, the tortoise is also a symbol of wisdom and longevity

due to its ability to navigate between two elements—land and water—and its understanding of the secrets of the earth and sky (Coulter & Turner, 2012).

A central concept in Balinese cosmology is the belief in the existence of the giant tortoise known as Bedawang Nala. This tortoise is believed to support the island of Bali on its back, and every movement of this creature is thought to cause earthquakes. This belief functions not only as a myth but also as part of the local knowledge system that connects the spiritual world, Hindu cosmology, and natural phenomena. In Balinese folklore, Bedawang Nala is depicted as a giant creature supporting the island of Bali. The movement of this tortoise is believed to cause earthquakes, and the community believes that the continuity of life on Earth depends on the stability and balance of this mythological creature (Pucci et al., 2004: 186). To prevent uncontrolled movements, two cosmic dragons, Naga Basuki and Naga Anantabhoga, are tasked with coiling around and stabilizing the tortoise. These dragons are depicted in Hindu belief as guardians of the underworld, living in the levels of sapta patala, a dimension in Hindu cosmology associated with the lower world and the balance of natural energies (Hopkins, 1915: 61; Vogel, 1926: 284).

The belief in Bedawang Nala is not only reflected in oral mythology but is also immortalized in sacred architectural ornaments in Bali. In various religious structures such as meru and pelinggih, the Bedawang Nala tortoise ornament is often depicted as the base of the building, symbolizing its function as the world's support. The giant tortoise is frequently interpreted as a symbol of magma beneath the Earth's surface, whose volcanic activity could trigger earthquakes and tsunamis. This magma is surrounded by the elements of earth and water on the Earth's surface, symbolized in mythology by the two cosmic dragons, Naga Anantabhoga as the representation of earth and Naga Basuki as the symbol of water (Paramadhyaksa, 2009: 236). This interpretation links volcanic activity, magma pressure, and tectonic movement, which can cause earthquakes. Bali, as part of the Indonesian archipelago, lies within a tectonic plate convergence zone. Its geographical position makes it susceptible to earthquakes and volcanic activity. The Balinese community understands this phenomenon through mythological narratives that are linked to the balance of nature. The belief in Bedawang Nala, Naga Basuki, and Naga Anantabhoga is not merely myth, but also reflects traditional understanding of Bali's geological realities, which are prone to natural disasters. More than just a myth, this concept reflects the way the Balinese people understand and adapt to their geographic conditions, which are vulnerable to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The hidden fire beneath the ocean is called Vadava-agni, Vadava-nala, or Vadava-mukha, which is depicted as a fire in the shape of a mare's head spouting from the ocean's depths (Wisdom Library, 2022; Monier-Williams, 2019). This fire is believed to be the latent energy from the underworld that regulates the temperature balance of the ocean and prevents water from overflowing onto the land.

The Pralaya (cosmic apocalypse) occurs when this fire erupts, destroying the world through volcanic eruptions and floods (O'Flaherty, 1980). Classical Indian texts such as the Satapatha Brahmana and Bhagavata Purana also associate Bedawang or Kurma with the manifestations of Brahma and Vishnu in two stages: creation and maintenance of the world (Wilkins, 1923; Macdonell, 1897). When the world was created, Brahma incarnated as the giant tortoise, while in the process of maintenance, Vishnu assumed the form of Kurma Avatara, supporting Mount Mandara in the story of Samudra Mantana. The tortoise's back symbolizes the Earth (Prthivi), its body represents the atmosphere, and its upper shell symbolizes the sky (Thompson, 2000). The reality of Bedawang Nala is an entity of rwa-bhinneda, a reactivation of cosmogony in the form of a sacred padma, which is a prerequisite for the presence of Bedawang Nala on the pelinggih (Hartadijaya, 2022). According to Eliade (1954), myths undergo transformation into something sacred when internalized through deep principles and processes. The cosmogonic myth is understood as a sacred narrative within a religious society that explains the origin of the world and the universe, manifested through ritual interactions and symbolic communication with divine entities. The empirical and meta-empirical relationship in

cosmology, as Socrates suggests (Titisari et al., 2017), is that the empirical (visible) aspects of 'being' are inherently connected to the meta-empirical or universal (invisible) energy, which is stronger than the empirical. Cosmology can be understood through the relationship between time and space; space acquires meaning and form through its connection with specific moments in time (Bakker, 1995).

Bedawang Nala is not merely positioned as a mythological being in Balinese religious narratives but as a primary symbol in the cosmological framework that integrates spiritual understanding, geology, and concepts of time and space. The relationship between physical form (empirical) and latent energy (meta-empirical) inherent in Bedawang Nala makes it an existential axis that bridges the visible world with transcendental reality. Bedawang Nala represents the principle of rwa-bhinneda, unity within duality, the balance between latent fire beneath the Earth and its containment by cosmic dragons, between natural phenomena and spiritual order, and between myth and Bali's geographical reality. The existence of Bedawang emphasizes that sacred space in Balinese architecture is not merely an artistic representation but a realization of cosmic processes through myth, rituals, and attachment to sacred time. Bedawang Nala becomes the central meaning in Balinese spiritual architecture: the support of the universe, a marker of sacred time, and a link between the human world, the divine world, and the forces of the cosmos.

4. Conclusion

The presence of the *Bale Pengaruman* within *Pura Dalem Gede Sibang Kaja* exemplifies the embodiment of a sacred space that mediates the intersection between *sekala* (the physical realm) and *niskala* (the spiritual realm) within the cosmological framework of Hindu-Balinese thought. Functioning as an existential center, the *Bale Pengaruman* facilitates communal ritual practices while simultaneously symbolizing the universal cosmic order through its integrated symbolic and spatial dimensions. The depiction of *Bedawang Nala*, accompanied by its two binding dragons at the base of the structure, transcends mere ornamentation to become an active embodiment of cosmic equilibrium, the harmony of nature, and the soul's transformative journey toward *moksha* (liberation).

The distinctive orientation and form of *Bedawang Nala*—notably its forward-facing head and its therio-morphic representation akin to a bovine figure—articulate a heightened spiritual significance. In this way, the *Bale Pengaruman* operates as an *axis mundi*, a liminal threshold, and a cosmic mediator within the temple's architectural and ritual complex. This manifestation functions as a symbolic and spiritual focal point for the Sibang Kaja traditional community, serving as a locus where transcendental processes are actualized, thereby transcending its mere architectural existence.

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