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Identity Construction and Body Manipulation in Contemporary Photography: A Gender Perspective from Balinese Culture

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Abstract

This study examines how the human body is represented and identity is reconfigured through photographic practices that deliberately transcend the conventional binary of masculinity and femininity. Employing a critical descriptive approach, it analyzes a significant aesthetic shift—from the exoticized, colonial legacy of traditional body imagery toward fluid, contradictory, and politically charged representations. The findings reveal that contemporary Balinese photographers utilize visual manipulation not merely as provocation, but as a subtle strategy of identity negotiation. By appropriating and reinterpreting theatrical elements embedded in local cultural traditions, particularly cross-gender practices in classical Balinese performance, these works establish cultural legitimacy for contemporary gender discourse. Through the blurring of physical boundaries and the deconstruction of cultural symbols, such imagery functions as a critical intervention against rigid heteronormativity in the public sphere. Ultimately, the study positions the Balinese body in contemporary photography as a contested and dynamic site of meaning, where tradition and modernity intersect to articulate more inclusive understandings of human identity.

1. Introduction

The history of Bali's visual representation in the medium of photography has long been constrained by a problematic aesthetic construction, wherein the island is persistently positioned as a static and ahistorical "last paradise" (Holt, 2000). Since the early twentieth century, through the lenses of colonial photographers and Western explorers, Balinese bodies have been appropriated as objects of exotic spectacle. Within this visual narrative, Balinese bodies—particularly women depicted bare-chested or men posed in rigid, theatrical stances—are presented not as subjects endowed with agency, but rather as decorative elements within a

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cultural landscape imagined as pure and untouched by modernity. This standardization of imagery produces what may be termed visual colonialism: a mode of seeing that freezes Balinese identity within a narrowly defined traditional frame, while neglecting the lived human dynamism and social complexity that exist beyond such aesthetic surfaces.

In the contemporary era, the dominance of the "exotic Bali" narrative has begun to fracture with the emergence of a new generation of visual practitioners and photographic artists who adopt a critical stance. These artists no longer find themselves represented in the superficial beauty perpetuated by conventional photography. Instead, they actively deconstruct these outdated images, recognizing that beneath the celebrated visual allure lies a structure of power that constrains and suppresses expressions of identity (Ajidarma, 2020). One of the most salient issues to emerge in this context is gender manipulation. This issue arises as a critical response to the rigid codification of gender identities historically shaped by patriarchal values intertwined with the expectations of the tourism market. Within this framework, photography is no longer regarded as a neutral tool for objectively recording reality; rather, it transforms into a site of radical experimentation. The human body is repositioned as a "living canvas" through which artists interrogate and renegotiate the meanings of masculinity and femininity within a Balinese society that is deeply ritualistic and governed by stringent social norms.

Gender manipulation in contemporary Balinese photography generates a discourse that challenges the boundaries of traditional binaries. Whereas in everyday social structures the roles of men and women are often dichotomized to serve ritualistic and domestic functions, within the lens of contemporary photography these boundaries are deliberately blurred. This blurring is not merely an attempt to produce visual novelty; rather, it constitutes a strategy of identity politics (Ajidarma, 2017). Photographic artists employ techniques such as distortion, cross-gender attributes, and digital intervention to demonstrate that gender is performative—constructed and, therefore, open to deconstruction. This phenomenon creates a productive tension between biological bodies and cultural identities, compelling audiences to reconsider the extent to which local culture accommodates diverse forms of self-expression beyond dominant heteronormative standards.

Importantly, contemporary artists' engagement with gender manipulation does not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it intersects with elements of Balinese tradition that have historically accommodated ambiguity and fluidity. Within the corpus of Balinese performing arts, the notion of "cross-gender" expression is not entirely foreign. The Arja dance tradition, for instance, frequently features male performers portraying female characters (and vice versa), while the Janger dance illustrates more flexible dynamics of social interaction. The presence of such transgressive roles within tradition provides a form of cultural legitimacy for photographers to explore identities beyond binary constraints without entirely severing ties with local rootedness. However, tensions arise when these traditional elements are translated into the static medium of photography, which is often interpreted literally by general audiences. It is at this juncture that the critical thrust of this study emerges: how contemporary photography recontextualizes these traditional values of ambiguity to challenge a form of moral conservatism that has, paradoxically, intensified in the modern era.

The rapid sociocultural transformations occurring in Bali further heighten the urgency of this inquiry. Bali today constitutes a highly contested site where global cosmopolitan values intersect with enduring agrarian-religious traditions. Globalization introduces discourses of openness and individual rights, while, conversely, the imperative to preserve cultural "authenticity" for tourism often results in the standardization of identity. This tension between

the aspiration toward modernity and the obligation to remain traditional generates internal conflict in the representation of Balinese bodies. Contemporary photography captures this anxiety by positioning the body as a site of negotiation (Tami, 2021). Through deliberate visual manipulation, artists articulate the notion that to be "Balinese" does not necessitate conformity to a singular, rigid model of gender representation.

Accordingly, interrogating the practice of gender manipulation in contemporary Balinese photography becomes crucial for re-mapping the position of the subject within visual culture. This study seeks to move beyond purely aesthetic considerations toward an understanding of how images can reshape societal perceptions of the body and identity. The deliberate visual manipulations employed by photographers constitute a subversive act against the dominant "gaze" that has long consumed Balinese bodies as compliant objects of tourism. By presenting bodies that are ambiguous, fluid, and defiant, contemporary Balinese photography constructs an alternative narrative of humanity—one that is more autonomous and self-determined. Such representations invite a critical recognition that Balinese identity is inherently dynamic, fluid, and continuously evolving in response to historical change, while simultaneously affirming that tradition should function as a space of liberation rather than a constraint upon individual identity. Through this critical examination, it is anticipated that a renewed awareness will emerge: that behind every photographic representation of the Balinese body lies a profound struggle for identity and a desire to be acknowledged fully as an autonomous subject.

2. Material and Method

This study fundamentally employs a qualitative methodology integrated with a critical descriptive approach to interrogate complex visual phenomena (Abdussamad, 2021). This framework is deliberately selected to enable the researcher to excavate layers of meaning underlying bodily representations, which are approached not merely as aesthetic objects but as dynamic social constructions. Data collection is conducted comprehensively through an extensive literature review, complemented by a curatorial process involving contemporary photographic works on gender themes in Bali produced over the past decade.

The analytical focus is sharply directed toward two principal dimensions: first, the formal aspects of photography, encompassing compositional techniques, lighting manipulation, and subject arrangement; and second, the contextual dimension, which mediates the relationship between visual imagery and the culturally embedded narratives of Bali, rich in symbolic meaning. Furthermore, the study deploys semiotic analysis and gender performativity theory as its primary analytical instruments to interpret the intentions and latent meanings embedded in the artistic practices of bodily manipulation. Through these theoretical lenses, gender manipulation is no longer construed as a mere technical distortion but rather as a deliberate articulation of identity—one that is consciously staged before the photographic lens (Budianto, 2007).

The entire analytical process is subsequently structured narratively to elucidate the intrinsic linkage between the aesthetic choices made by the artists and the ideological messages concerning identity fluidity conveyed to audiences. In doing so, this methodological approach facilitates a holistic understanding of how photography operates as a site of articulation for gender-related discourses within the framework of contemporary Balinese culture (Astharianty, 2013).

3. Results and Discussion

In the practice of contemporary photography in Bali, gender manipulation is manifested through both post-production editing techniques and artistic staging that emphasize the blurring of physical boundaries. The body is no longer perceived as a fixed biological entity; rather, it is

understood as a mutable cultural construct. Artists frequently employ traditional attributes—such as customary attire, elaborate headdresses, and dramatic facial makeup—to construct figures that embody an "androgynous" presence. The utilization of these traditional elements is particularly significant, as it conveys the impression that such transformations of identity are not alien to Balinese culture, but instead constitute a continuation of its longstanding theatrical ethos. In this context, the practices of bodily manipulation in contemporary photography can be elaborated as follows.

Deconstruction of the Biological Body: Theatrical Tradition as the Legitimation of Androgyny

Within the landscape of contemporary Balinese photography, the phenomenon of gender manipulation transcends a mere aesthetic trend; it represents a systematic intellectual and artistic endeavor aimed at dismantling the foundational assumptions underlying conventional understandings of the human body. For centuries, within dominant cultural narratives, the body has often been confined within rigid biological determinism, whereby anatomical sex is presumed to dictate social roles, modes of expression, and even moral boundaries (Bourdieu et al., 2000).

Through the lens of contemporary photographers, however, the Balinese body is liberated from such biologically deterministic constraints. It is reconstituted as a fluid entity—an "elastic cultural construction." This perspective resonates with the theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender is not an innate attribute possessed at birth, but rather something enacted and reiterated through repeated performances of actions and symbols (Figure 1).



I Made Oka Swantara in *balutan kostum penari Bali*
Source : Collection of I Made Oka Swantara, 2025

This practice of deconstruction is realized through precise digital editing techniques and highly meticulous artistic staging, both in studio settings and on location. Contemporary artists no longer merely capture what is visible; rather, they actively "construct" what they intend to communicate. The blurring of physical boundaries between masculinity and femininity is achieved through interventions in anatomical features or by juxtaposing visual elements that have traditionally been perceived as contradictory. A male subject, for instance, may be rendered with softened skin textures and graceful, fluid gestures while retaining a structurally masculine

bone framework, or vice versa. Such manipulation generates a visual tension that compels viewers to suspend binary classifications of male and female, and instead perceive the subject as "human" within a broader and more fluid spectrum.

The deployment of traditional Balinese attributes constitutes a central axis in this visual strategy (Hohn, 1997). Modified dance costumes, intricate headdresses (gelungan), and dramatic facial makeup no longer function solely as markers of social status or religious identity; rather, they become primary instruments for the construction of androgynous figures. Herein lies a compelling critical paradox: contemporary photographers appropriate the most "sacred" and "traditional" symbols within Balinese culture to articulate the most "progressive" and "contemporary" ideas. The incorporation of these traditional elements carries significant theoretical weight, as it operates as a bridge connecting global modernity with the historically grounded specificity of Balinese culture. By employing a localized visual language, the discourse on gender fluidity is not perceived as an externally imposed Western narrative, but rather as a rediscovery of values already embedded within the collective memory of Balinese society.

The legitimizing force of this photographic practice is deeply rooted in Bali's longstanding tradition of theatricality. Balinese culture possesses a rich history of cross-gender performance in the performing arts, such as in the Arja dance drama, where male roles may be performed by female actors, as well as in dances like Janger and Gandrung, which often embody role ambiguity. Within this framework, identity manipulation in contemporary photography can be understood as a creative extension of this philosophical tradition. Balinese cultural practices have long acknowledged that identity—including gender—is something that can be performed and exchanged (Salma P. Nua et al., 2026). Contemporary photographic artists effectively relocate this performative stage from temple courtyards into the digital frame. Consequently, the emergence of androgynous figures in contemporary photographic works should not be interpreted as an anomaly or cultural "deviation," but rather as an aesthetic evolution that celebrates the inherent flexibility of human subjectivity.

Moreover, the deconstruction of the biological body also functions as a form of resistance against normative standards of beauty and bodily representation imposed by the tourism industry. Bali has long been constructed as a compliant visual object, wherein men are expected to appear strong and virile, while women are rendered graceful and delicate in order to sustain their marketability as products of exoticism. Contemporary photography disrupts these expectations by presenting bodies that are "difficult to define." The androgynous body thus assumes a distinctly political dimension, insofar as it resists being consumed through conventional visual frameworks. It challenges the dominant gaze that seeks categorical certainty in gender. As physical boundaries dissolve, so too do the structures of patriarchal authority that depend upon such binaries ("Challenging the patriarchal culture; Feminist critical discourse analysis of the Indonesian environmental heroines," 2023). This shift signifies that Balinese artists are reclaiming sovereignty over their own bodies, asserting that Balinese individuals are complex subjects endowed with psychological depth and entitled to non-singular identities.

Philosophically, this practice also resonates with the concept of Rwa Bhineda, which denotes the balance between opposing forces. Within a contemporary interpretive framework, gender manipulation can be understood as an attempt to reconcile such dualities within a single corporeal form, thereby generating a new mode of harmony that transcends binary conflict. The androgynous figure in these photographic works thus becomes emblematic of a holistic human condition—one that integrates both feminine and masculine dimensions simultaneously (Murwonugroho, n.d.). Through this critical exposition, it becomes evident that contemporary Balinese photography has reconfigured the way tradition is perceived: no longer as a static relic of the past, but as a dynamic symbolic resource capable of engaging with the most fundamental questions of modern human identity. Ultimately, such visual manipulation constitutes a

celebration of identity as freedom, wherein the body is no longer bound by biological determinism, but emerges instead as an open-ended artistic possibility.

Visual Subversion of Commodification and the "Tourist Gaze"

Within the discourse of visual culture in Bali, the body has long functioned as a primary commodity consumed by the global market through the mediating lens of the camera. This phenomenon is rooted in the enduring history of the "imaging of Bali," which began in the colonial era, when Western photographers established exploitative aesthetic standards. Balinese bodies were positioned as visually captivating yet devoid of agency, giving rise to what is commonly termed the tourist gaze. This gaze is not merely a mode of seeing; rather, it operates as an instrument of power that constructs Bali as a permanently exotic, eroticized, and traditional entity.

Against this historical backdrop, the gender manipulation undertaken by contemporary photographers emerges as a profoundly radical act of visual subversion. Contemporary photographic practitioners no longer produce images that conform to the expectations of visual pleasure dictated by the tourism industry. Instead, they deploy gender manipulation as a critical apparatus to dismantle the historical commodification of the body (Ibrahim & Akhmad, 2014).



Figure 2.
I Komang Arthana Anugrah as makeup model of Bali modifikasi
Source :Collection of I Komang Arthana Anugrah, 2025

Historically, photography of Bali has been confined within a reductive gender dichotomy constructed to satisfy the visual appetites of external audiences. Balinese women have frequently been portrayed as embodiments of naïve sensuality, while Balinese men have been framed through theatrical masculinity or martial ferocity. These stereotypes were mass-produced to generate touristic appeal, ultimately freezing Balinese identity into static and limited categories. Contemporary photography, however, deliberately reverses this exploitative logic by presenting bodies that are ambiguous, hybridized, and resistant to categorical classification. By obscuring gender markers through visual manipulation—such as juxtaposing feminine attributes onto masculine physiques or applying makeup that neutralizes primary sexual characteristics (Figure

2)—photographers compel viewers to exit their zones of perceptual comfort. Audiences accustomed to consuming Balinese bodies as legible and easily interpretable objects are instead confronted with visual indeterminacy. It is precisely this indeterminacy that constitutes the core of resistance, as bodies that defy categorization are inherently resistant to commodification.

This subversive practice generates a new discourse that reconfigures Balinese identity as dynamic and fluid—an antithesis to the dominant tourism narrative that frames Bali as an unchanging "living museum." By presenting subjects that transcend binary gender boundaries, contemporary photography asserts that Balinese individuals possess psychological depth and autonomous identities that cannot be reduced to the simplified imagery of tourist brochures. Within the contemporary photographic frame, the body transforms from a passive aesthetic object into an active site of resistance. This resistance is directed not only toward external gazes (tourists), but also toward the normalization of behavior within local society itself (Tami, 2021). Traditional social structures in Bali, often characterized by conservative and patriarchal tendencies, impose rigid behavioral expectations upon men and women. Through manipulated gender representations, artists challenge the authority of tradition that seeks to standardize bodily expression.

Critiques of the *tourist gaze* also extend to the materiality of culture. The use of ceremonial attributes or traditional attire within the context of gender manipulation should not be interpreted as a desecration of tradition, but rather as a recontextualization of symbols that have been devalued by tourism into mere cultural costumes. When such attributes are worn by androgynous or gender-fluid subjects, their exotic value as touristic commodities collapses. This disruption compels audiences to reconsider these symbols not as decorative artifacts for external consumption, but as elements embedded within the subject's personal and "spiritual" trajectory. Photography thus becomes a space in which Balinese subjects reclaim the authority to define themselves, free from the constraints of market-driven expectations that reduce their humanity to spectacle.

Furthermore, this visual subversion signals a significant shift in the locus of power within photographic narratives. Whereas representations of Balinese bodies were historically determined by external actors holding the camera, contemporary Balinese artists now assert control over both the lens and the manipulation of their own image. This constitutes a form of "aesthetic decolonization," wherein gender manipulation operates as a visual language affirming that Balinese identity belongs to the Balinese themselves, in all its complexity and ambiguity. The transformation of the body into a site of resistance demonstrates the capacity of photographic practice to dismantle entrenched stereotypes. Balinese identity is no longer framed as a static relic of the past for global consumption, but rather as an ongoing process of becoming—dynamic, contested, and resistant to simplification, while simultaneously celebrating the diversity long obscured beneath the façade of touristic exoticism.

Through this critical lens, gender manipulation in contemporary Balinese photography can be understood as a strategy of liberation. It liberates the body from the chains of commodification, emancipates the subject from the reductive *tourist gaze*, and frees culture from the obligation to conform to superficial notions of tradition. These works function as reflective surfaces that mirror the biases of their viewers, compelling them to recognize that beneath the surface of skin and the elegance of *wastra* lies a complex human subject whose identity cannot be confined by gender binaries or the economic imperatives of tourism. Ultimately, the manipulated body becomes the most truthful body—precisely because it dares to reveal contradiction, fluidity, and dynamism as the very essence of Balinese human experience.

The representation of identity in contemporary Balinese photography is no longer a mere reflection of static social reality; rather, it constitutes a symbolic battleground that encapsulates the struggles of modern individuals in negotiating selfhood amid the forces of globalization. In this context, digital technology functions not merely as a technical tool for color correction or surface enhancement, but as an ontological medium for the creation of new realities (Wanda Listiani et al., 2021). It enables photographers to challenge conventional visual paradigms that have historically constrained global perceptions of Bali. Digitality provides subjects with the capacity to intervene in their own representation, creating a space in which biological reality can be renegotiated alongside expanded imaginaries of identity.

Alongside these technological developments, a fundamental shift in identity orientation has emerged within contemporary photographic works. Identity is increasingly moving away from collective forms rooted in the communal structures of *desa adat* toward more autonomous, fluid, and expressive articulations of personal identity. Through sophisticated digital manipulation, previously marginalized or silenced dimensions of humanity are brought into visibility. Visualizations now encompass vulnerability, tender forms of masculinity, and assertive or powerful femininity (Figure 3). These micro-narratives were historically suppressed by dominant collective norms that required individuals to align with prescribed social roles. Digital manipulation disrupts these constraints, enabling the articulation of unique and autonomous subjectivities.

Critically, this phenomenon signals a profound paradigmatic shift in the conceptualization of the Balinese body. The body is no longer perceived solely as a ritual instrument or ceremonial vessel bound to communal obligations. Within traditional frameworks, the body has often been regarded as a sacred medium subject to cosmic and social regulations aimed at preserving communal harmony. However, contemporary photography—empowered by digital technologies—reconfigures the body as a site of sovereign self-expression. The body becomes the property of the individual, a locus where identity experimentation can occur without necessitating disconnection from cultural roots. In this sense, gender manipulation through digital media operates as a declaration of identity sovereignty: an assertion that Balinese individuals possess the right to define themselves beyond the narrow expectations imposed by both local traditions and global market demands.



Figure 3.
I Made Oka Swantara as model of Bali prewedding photo style
Source: Collection of I Made Oka Swantara, 2026

Amid the currents of globalization, which tend to homogenize culture through visual consumption, digital technology in contemporary Balinese photography is instead mobilized as an instrument for the particularization of identity. Artists employ techniques such as compositing, digital painting, and visual distortion not to distance themselves from their Balinese-ness, but to excavate deeper layers of identity that cannot be captured through conventional documentary photography. This digital space functions as a laboratory of identity, wherein modern Balinese individuals can assume multiple subject positions without severing their symbolic ties to their cultural roots (Bourdieu et al., 2000). The juxtaposition of futuristic digital elements with sacred Balinese symbols generates a "Techno-Bali" aesthetic, underscoring that identity is not anchored in a static past but is continuously evolving toward the future.

Furthermore, this assertion of personal identity sovereignty constitutes a form of resistance against regimes of representation historically dictated by external actors. With technology now in their hands, contemporary Balinese individuals are no longer passive objects of the photographic gaze; they become active subjects who produce, manipulate, and author their own narratives. Photography thus emerges as a space of emancipation, wherein personal identity can be expressed and celebrated in all its complexity. The proliferation of digitally manipulated gender representations signals a growing willingness to articulate non-singular, pluralized identities. In doing so, these practices challenge entrenched structures of heteronormativity and patriarchy that often operate under the guise of cultural preservation. Critically, this development demonstrates that identity sovereignty is a prerequisite for cultural vitality; a culture can only remain dynamic and sustainable when its members are afforded the freedom to express themselves autonomously.

Philosophically, the convergence of digital technology and identity sovereignty in Bali produces a robust form of hybridity (Budianto, 2007). This synthesis challenges the assumption that tradition and technology must exist in binary opposition. On the contrary, digital technology enhances the agency of Balinese individuals, enabling them to actively negotiate and reinterpret their relationship with tradition. Contemporary photography thus functions simultaneously as a cathartic and political medium, wherein each pixel and each act of visual manipulation represents a step toward the recognition of diverse, fluid, and sovereign Balinese identities on the global stage. Personal identity is no longer something passively inherited; rather, it is actively constructed, maintained, and redefined through every photographic act and every process of digital intervention.

4. Conclusion

Gender manipulation in contemporary photography grounded in Balinese culture constitutes a crucial creative manifestation, wherein traditional aesthetic heritage is no longer preserved merely as a static artifact but is dynamically integrated with the identity anxieties of modern human experience. Through a critical descriptive examination of selected works, this study demonstrates that the Balinese human body has been transformed into a discursive space open to interpretation, experimentation, and continuous reconfiguration. This visual practice effectively transcends the rigid gender dichotomy between masculinity and femininity that has long been entrenched in both social structures and tourism-driven representations. Consequently, the body is no longer understood as a fixed biological destiny; rather, it emerges as a narrative that can be rewritten in accordance with the sovereignty of each subject's personal identity.

This conclusion affirms that contemporary Balinese photographic works are not merely concerned with aesthetic achievement or technical sophistication, but rather function as profound dialogues regarding the position of the individual amid the intersecting forces of

tradition and globalization. The representations produced deliberately challenge dominant narratives—whether rooted in local patriarchal structures or in the legacy of colonial exploitation—while simultaneously opening legitimate space for diverse identities that have historically been marginalized or suppressed. This phenomenon reflects a growing willingness among artists to deploy the body as both a site of political resistance and a medium of poetic expression.

The emergence of gender manipulation within this photographic practice has significantly enriched the corpus of Balinese visual art, positioning it as a medium that remains critically incisive, contextually responsive, and relevant to contemporary transformations. Within the frame of contemporary photography, Bali is no longer rendered as a "frozen paradise," but rather as a dynamic cultural ecosystem in continuous evolution. Through the courageous redefinition of gender and identity, contemporary Balinese photography demonstrates that the enduring strength of tradition lies precisely in its capacity to adapt and to create space for forms of humanity that are more inclusive, fluid, and sovereign in the future.

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