

Balinese Cultural Continuity: Heroine's Role in *Luh Ayu Manik Mas at War with the Spirit World*

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Abstract

This research explores the role of the heroine in preserving Balinese cultural identity, focusing on the character of Luh Ayu Manik Mas from the children's story, "At War with the Spirit World." By employing Roland Barthes's mythological analysis, we delve into the denotative and connotative meanings embedded within the narrative. Denotatively, the heroine is portrayed as an independent and strong figure, essential for cultural continuity. She actively engages in preserving Balinese traditions, such as participating in water rituals and protecting the environment. Connotatively, the heroine embodies qualities of bravery, sacrifice, and a deep connection to Balinese cultural values. Her actions highlight the significance of environmental sustainability and the preservation of cultural heritage in the face of modern challenges. By analyzing the character of Luh Ayu Manik Mas, this research demonstrates how literature can contribute to the maintenance of cultural identity. The heroine's journey serves as a powerful tool for transmitting cultural values and inspiring future generations to embrace and preserve Balinese traditions.

Keywords: *cultural continuity, children's literature, Balinese culture*

Introduction

Cultural continuity becomes an issue in the modern era. Cultural continuity refers to a culture's ability to maintain its traditions, values, and practices over generations. This process involves transmitting cultural heritage, which helps to protect and sustain the vitality of a cultural identity. The strategy of maintaining cultural identity in entering the era of globalization is a discourse that is often echoed by a number of parties in order to maintain the noble heritage passed down by their predecessors (Widana & Juliaaningsih, 2023). In Bali, the preservation of cultural heritage amidst modernism is a critical concern for both local communities and organizations. These stakeholders have undertaken various initiatives to protect and promote the island's rich cultural traditions, ensuring that the essence of Balinese identity is maintained despite external

influences. Local communities play a vital role in this effort through the continuity and adaptation of traditional practices (Mahendra, 2024).

The effort of maintaining Balinese cultural identity is drawn in a children and teen story entitled *Luh Ayu Manik Mas: Kaengkebang Wong Samar (At War with the Spirit World)*. The main character in this picture book is a Balinese teen girl named Luh Ayu. She performs as a heroine due to her struggle and transformation to be a female superhero, Luh Ayu Manik Mas. In many cultures, heroines serve as pivotal figures who navigate the complexities of their worlds, often facing supernatural challenges. Luh Ayu Manik Mas, a contemporary Balinese heroine, embodies the timeless archetype of the warrior-maiden. Analyzing her character and her battle against supernatural forces highlights the enduring impact of myth and legend on cultural identity. Her journey serves not only as a form of entertainment but also as an educational tool, preserving the cultural heritage and values of her community. She is portrayed as a courageous and resourceful figure who confronts the spirit world with determination and wisdom. Her actions reflect the traditional virtues of bravery, loyalty, and resilience, which are essential when facing adversity.

There are diverse discussions about cultural continuity that bear vital importance in preserving not only shared communal identities but also sacred traditional knowledge that helps bridge the gap between what-so-called modernity and tradition. Syam et al. (2024), for instance, investigated an oral literary practice of Dayak Kanayatn people that was threatened by the influence of modern forms of entertainment. This issue is strategic to explore in answering how the preservation of social identity can be maintained through oral literature. Cultural continuity needs to also be examined further since it helps indigenous youth in Canada to decrease the ever-increasing suicidal rate. Addressing this issue, Yuen et al., (2019) reported that cultural continuity along with the cultural connectedness, and cultural revitalization were key elements in promoting life and wellness amidst the rise of suicide rate among the indigenous youth. However, the exploration of the issue of cultural continuity as a central topic in literary works remain scarce.

To address this gap, this study attempts to explore how cultural continuity is functioned for preserving environment. The discourse appeared in this story is that if people do not care the environment well, the invisible creatures will get angry and destroy human. The belief probably sounds like superstition; however, its role is effective. This research discusses how heroine's role constructed in cultural continuity. Roland Barthes' notion of mythology is used as the framework to help unveil the multilayered of meaning implicitly attached in the story.

Method

This research is a descriptive qualitative research method focusing on describing connotative and denotative meanings that are contained in *Luh Ayu Manik Mas: At War with the Spirit World*. The researchers present the data which are taken from the story that contain connotative and denotative meanings. The data from this research are words, phrases, and sentences that contain connotative and denotative meanings.

Results

Denotative Meaning

Luh Ayu's independence is proved when suddenly she sees a mysterious man in cloak carrying a boy. Luh Ayu separates herself from the group and chases the man down. The man is Badra Semara, the leader of *wong samar* troop in Caturdesa hill. Transforming into the superhero Luh Ayu Manik Mas, she faces Badra Semara without others' help. She dialogues politely with Badra Semara to get mediation in order to return the kidnapped children. As he does not care to Luh Ayu Manik Mas' request, she then uses her power to fight Badra Semara.

Luh Ayu Manik Mas takes a long breath. Determined to respond politely. "But Sir, do not make such accusations. Not all humans do wicked things. You are wrong in the judgment you have made. I beg you, as the Commander, to return the children that you have kidnapped."

Badra Semara merely roars with laughter. Luh Ayu Manik Mas recites a mantra, and a magic mace appears before her. In a second, Commander Badra Semara is protected by blue light. "Your weapon is useless," he crows (Manuaba et al., 2022).



Figure 1. Luh Ayu Manik Mas is confronting Badra Semara

The quotation and picture show that Luh Ayu Manik Mas represents independence as she feels responsible for the villagers. She is graced supernatural power to be a superhero, hence she acts as the real heroine. She also represents strength. Transforming into female superhero and fighting against Badra Semara needs special power and not all people are capable.

Connotative Meaning



Figure 2. Luh Ayu Manik Mas is fighting against Badra Semara

Luh Ayu Manik Mas' bravery reflects the spirit of Balinese female figures. Balinese women, often seen as gentle and demure, possess a remarkable inner strength and resilience. Balinese Hindu people believe on the goddesses and worship them. The goddesses are worshipped in certain pura (temple). Dewi Sri (goddess of rice and fertility) is worshipped in Pura Subak. Ida Bathari Dewi Danu (goddess of water) is worshipped in Pura Ulun Danu. Dewi Saraswati (goddess of knowledge) is worshipped in Pura Taman Saraswati. Dewi Durga (goddess of destruction) is worshipped in Pura Dalem. Despite the patriarchal society,

Balinese women have their own power and play

important role in Balinese everyday life.

For the second point of connotation, that is sacrifice, Luh Ayu Manik Mas presents it by risking her life to save the villagers. After the first trial of fighting against Badra Semara, she suddenly changes into common girl and is stranded in a shrank lake.

Suddenly, Luh Ayu Manik Mas has turned back into an ordinary human. The world of wong samar has vanished. She is standing on the edge of almost dried up lake, with her body covered in mud. She must know what she must do. She goes to find Jero Bendesa to tell him the children have been kidnapped by the wong samar (Manuaba et al., 2022).



Figure 3. Luh Ayu suddenly comes back to real world and is covered with mud

The spirit of sacrifice represents what Balinese women do every day. Balinese women are dedicated to preserving their rich cultural heritage, including traditional arts, crafts, and rituals. They often face challenges in balancing modern life with traditional responsibilities, but they persevere in their commitment to their culture.

Luh Ayu Manik Mas concerns toward environmental sustainability, emphasizing on keeping water source. Water is something essential for Balinese Hindu, therefore there is a ritual namely Danu Kerthi. Danu Kerthi means purifying water source in lakes and rivers (Parayusa et al., 2024). The temple for doing Danu Kerthi is Pura Ulun Danu. In Bali, there are five lakes and they have their own Pura Ulun Danu. For managing irrigation system, Balinese people have subak. In subak, there is structural organization and the place for worshipping Dewi Sri called Pura Subak. From water existence, the culture hopefully runs forever as water existence encourages many rituals involving many people. Balinese culture without customary rituals will lose its parts of identity. The myths: Balinese cultural identity consisting of local belief and woman's role constructs the heroine's concept. Luh Ayu Manik Mas utilizes those myths for maintaining Balinese culture, one of them is water source.

Discussion

Mythology by Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes, a modern French linguist emphasized on how a language structure works. His thought was influenced by three other great linguists; Ferdinand De Saussure, Karl Mark and Sigmund Freud in different aspects. As Saussure reinforced that the fundamental connectedness in language is word and reality and the sign is arbitrary, Barthes has his own thought that there are three types of sign, namely iconic, motivational and arbitrary. Furthermore, in his *Mythologies* book, Barthes analysed the French society based on the existing myth; the right and left myth. This analysis was inspired by Mark's perspective on proletary and Bourjois. Barthes developed that analysis on society ideology. Sigmund Freud influenced Barthes' perspective on the sign and signifier. As Freud differed between the sign and signifier as a system, Barthes stated that one sign probably has various signifiers.

Myth in the cultural study refers to a story either sacred or traditional that depicts a culture or natural phenomenon of a certain time and place. It can be a belief or a false idea. However, in semiology, myth is a product of culture that naturalizes social and political conditions. In his *Mythologies*, Barthes depicted that myth is not a concept, idea or even an object, but a message that is intended to be delivered to the reader. Myth lies in the second level of the sign system. After the sign system is formed, the sign will become a new signifier which then has a second signifier and forms a new sign. then has a second signifier and forms a new sign. Construction The first sign construction is language, while the second sign construction is myth. This second level of significance is understood by Barthes as meta-language (Sartre, 1994). Barthes' mythology criticism analyzes the ideology in cultural phenomena. He reinforced that a myth is not merely an ancient story but is constructed by narratives consisting of a certain dominant ideology. Barthes stated that the readers played an important role in examining the phenomenon. First, there is a claim that words and thus works have meaning only in relation to discursive conventions and habits of readers which must be studied if one is to understand literary structure. The reader thus becomes important as the repository of conventions, the agent of their application. The second claim is that the most interesting or most valuable literature is that most vigorously exercises the reader, challenging and calling attention to the structuring activity of reading (Culler, 2002).

As Barthes defines myths as cultural signs that naturalizes the legitimate ideology and political power, his analysis employed two orders of signification; denotative and connotative. The signification can be conceived as a process; it is the act which binds the signifier and the signified, an act whose product is the sign (Yan & Ming, 2015). Denotative and connotative meaning are in different stages; denotative meaning is in the first stage while connotative meaning is the second stage. Barthes refers to the denotation since it refers to the sign's literal meaning, and is significant because it provides the relationship between the signifier and the signified in a sign to external reality (Chambers, 2007). The second level, which Barthes refers to as connotation, is an interaction that takes place when a sign interacts with the audience's sentiments and emotions and highlights the sign's actual content (Rivière, 2008). Connotation is a symbol of dominant ideology which is usually determined as a myth in a certain period of time.

Navigating Balinese Cultural Identity: Tradition vs. Modernity

Bali is well known as a thousand temples island. The popularity of Bali started at the beginning of 20th century when Indonesia (formerly Dutch East Indies) was under Dutch colonialism. Dutch government promoted Bali as tourist destination in 1920's as the impact of 'tired Europe' that sought for refreshment. The natural beauty of tropical island along with its tradition attracted the Europeans to visit Bali. Therefore, Bali was popularly called island of paradise. Suddenly wild Bali became a tame and attractive "Island Eden." (Vickers, 2012). Dutch government really kept the Balinese tradition including the Hindu culture. Although Bali was promoted for tourism, Dutch government defended Bali from other cultures and religions. Bali must be in indigenous Balinese and Hindu tradition. Almost in every sector, Balinese culture was strengthened, not only for tourism. In educational matter, Balinese language lesson was applied. In architecture, the Dutch government fully supported traditional Balinese building design. Any non-Hindu influence was forbidden including the mission of Christianity and Islam. Dutch government projected Bali to focus in traditional culture preservation in order to avoid the nationality growth. The movement was named as *Baliseering* (Wicaksono, 2021).

After Indonesian independence, Bali was still reputable for tourism. Indonesian government, either Old Order or New Order regime, put much effort in making Bali as the top tourist destination. The movement of keeping Balinese culture was back again with the different name, that is *Ajég Bali*. It began after the Bali Bomb 2002. *Ajég Bali* movement aimed to return Balinese image as the friendly island for everyone (Pageh et al., 2021). Up to now, Bali is considered successful in preserving its traditional culture. It was proved by the existence of religious rituals in Balinese daily, Balinese values in formulating local regulations (*awig-awig*), art, architecture, local belief, and traditional laws. The Balinese cultural is more strengthened in a movement named *Nangun Sat Kerthi Loka Bali* established since 2020. Vision and Mission *Nangun Sat Kerthi Loka Bali* implies: "maintaining the sanctity and harmony of Bali's nature and the contents, to create prosperous and happy Balinese life *sekala* and *niskala* (Candranegara et al., 2021).

From the explanation, Balinese cultural identity has been being maintained since long time ago. In this research, the discussion of Balinese traditional culture emphasizes the local belief and women's role. Those aspects are supposed to be helpful in constructing the heroine's role in *Luh Ayu Manik Mas: At War with the Spirit World*, this study employs Barthesian semiosis as the theoretical framework (Barthes, 1957). In elucidating how cultural continuity is unveiled in *Luh Ayu Manik Mas' At War with the Spirit World*, we need to look closely at the notion of denotative and connotative meaning of signs provided in the comic. This layer of analysis is beneficial to help decode what ideological discourse is at play, particularly in challenging patriarchal practices of society. Barthesian semiosis is incorporated as the basis in comprehending the complex intersection between signs and how they weave specific meanings in the context of Bali's spiritual and social belief system

Balinese Hindu believes the existence of spirits around them. They specially treat the spirits by presenting offerings and doing rituals, either for daily or special events, both for ancestral and evil spirits. The spirit includes the existence of *wong samar*. *Wong samar* means invisible person. In traditional Balinese historiography, *wong samar* has troop named Bale Samar. The myth of Bale Samar as the Dalem Nusa troops is accepted by the individuals of Klungkung as the source of the 'gering agung' episodes such as cholera, incessant ailment and other widespread infections. There's an "unthinkable" conviction or unthinkable for the community, particularly within the fifth and sixth *sasih* (Balinese month), to travel at certain times such as during the day and late within the dawn (*sandi kala*). These hours were considered the time for the Dalem Nusa troops to look for supporters by spreading disease. *Wong samar* attitudes sometimes depend on what people do (Mardika et al., 2022). Therefore, Balinese believes karma concept. If they do something bad, the bad things will come back to them. The replies are supposed to be by *wong samar*.

Living in patriarchal system, Balinese women are not always considered minor. They are indeed in the 'second' position after men, however Balinese Hindu culture has female figures who give impact their lives. There are several goddesses respected by Balinese Hindu people, such as Dewi Sri (goddess of rice and fertility), Dewi Durga (goddess of destruction), Dewi Saraswati (goddess of knowledge), Dewi Danu (goddess of water), and Dewi Lakshmi (goddess of fortune). Balinese Hindu people worship those goddesses in rituals and ceremonies in certain days. Furthermore, they are also worshipped in special temples built for them.

Besides the figure of goddesses, there is also a female figure respected by Balinese people, she is Men Brayut. Men Brayut is a female character in a Balinese narrative poem *Geguritan Brayut*. Men Brayut has eighteen children and all are cared by her (Indrayani, 2019). The story of Men Brayut has been an icon of a mother figure for centuries; even the Hindu community in Bali uses the statue of Men Brayut, who is depicted holding their children as a symbol of female fertility and a form of excellent and exemplary parenting patterns. Men Brayut is a symbol of Balinese woman who preserve Balinese generation (Pradnya, 2024).

In Balinese daily life, women's role is vital in cultural and religious duties. They make offerings (*canangsari*, *segehan*, *banten*) which are important in religious rituals. In Balinese Hindu social life, women must be able to do *majejaitan* (making religious rituals' equipments made from coconut leaves). In some special days, they bring the high *gebogan* (an offering consisting of fruits and constructed like a mount) on their heads. Women play a crucial and multifaceted role in Balinese daily life, contributing significantly to both domestic and community spheres

Heroine's Role Myth in Luh Ayu Manik Mas' at War with Spirit World

Luh Ayu Manik Mas: At War with the Spirit World tells about the fighting of a teen female superhero against invisible creature or *wong samar*. In her daily she is a eighth grade student and runs her life like normal teens. She can transform into a superhero when people around her need her help. In this story, Luh Ayu finds the reality that *wong samar's* anger is triggered by bad attitude of the villagers. *Wong samar* gets angry because of plastic waste, damaged forest and polluted rivers. They consider human as the main actor in environmental destruction. Therefore, they confronted the humans by hiding several children and destroying the village. Luh Ayu Manik Mas tries hard to fight against them using her superpower and weapon, but failed. However, Naga Basuki appears and helps her. Naga Basuki is a dragon king which the level is above *wong samar*.

To construct Balinese heroine in Luh Ayu Manik Mas, there are heroine concepts analyzed by mythology of Roland Barthes. Based on its mythology, heroine is viewed from two layers: denotative and connotative. Denotative meaning leads to understanding that heroine is someone who is independent and strong. That is the first layer of understanding; to go deeper, the concept goes to connotative meaning. Connotative meaning leads to analysis based on cultural background, consisting of bravery, sacrifice and preservation of tradition.

Conclusion

The story of Luh Ayu Manik Mas showcases the complexity of Balinese women's roles and their significance in Balinese culture. Despite societal expectations that often portray them as inferior to men, Balinese women possess remarkable strength, bravery, and a deep sense of sacrifice.

Luh Ayu Manik Mas embodies these qualities. Her courageous confrontation with Badra Semara and her subsequent selflessness in risking her life to save the villagers highlight the inner strength and resilience of Balinese women. These characteristics are

further reinforced by the cultural significance of goddesses in Balinese Hinduism, who are revered and worshipped for their power and influence.

Moreover, the story emphasizes the importance of environmental sustainability, particularly water conservation, which is deeply ingrained in Balinese culture. Luh Ayu Manik Mas's concern for water sources aligns with the traditional practices of Danu Kerthi and the *subak* system, both of which are essential for maintaining Balinese cultural identity and ensuring the continuity of their way of life.

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