

“The Child Misses Its Mother” - Balinese Place Experience of the Ngaben Ritual Event

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ABSTRACT

Balinese people have a sacred mortuary ritual event the *Ngaben* that moves outwards from the house compound gate (the *pamesuan* or *pamedalan*) and eventually towards the original point of departure, that is in front of the *pamesuan* or *pamedalan*. It indicates that the architecture of the *pamesuan* or *pamedalan* has an inherent culturally important meaning. This study was conducted through direct participant experience from within this ritual at *Puri Gerenceng, Denpasar - Bali*. The study aimed to obtain findings on the architectural theory of Balinese place meaning through the interpretation of the art factual accessories of place. The findings show the nature of the spirit of place in Balinese traditional architecture as expressed within the *Ngaben* sacred ritual event.

KEY WORDS: Balinese architecture, accessories of place, spirit of place

INTRODUCTION

Ngaben is one a series of sacred ritual events associated with death (and involving the cremation of the deceased body) conducted by the Balinese (Figure 1). For the Balinese, their successful performance of *Ngaben* for their family members results in happiness, one reason being that this event is believed to precipitate the release of the spirit-soul bonded within the deceased body. The *Ngaben* as a *pitrayadnya*, being one event from *pancayadnya* as five offerings in Hindhu religion. Balinese practice several types of *Ngaben* sacred rituals, from the main majestic ritual to simple versions of such. This is affected by the *desa, kala and patra* or the place, time and condition whereby this sacred event is performed. The *Mawangun* type of sacred ritual event constitutes the main type of sacred ritual event of *Ngaben* (cremation) which incorporates several symbols of the deceased. For example after the corpse is burned, the remaining ashes are formed into a figure which is called *puspalingga*. There are several stages performed in the *Mawangun* type of *Ngaben* sacred ritual event, one of them is *medal lungakasetra* (going to the graveyard) and *medal lungakasegara* (going to the sea). This sacred ritual event include the symbols of the deceased as the ritual procession move outwards beginning from the gate in the wall of the house compound, the *pamesuan* or *pamedalan*.



Figure 1. Sacred ritual event of *Ngaben* moved from PuriGerenceng toward the Graveyard (or Setra) of Badung in Denpasar, Bali
Photo: Indah (Saraswati, PhD Thesis)

The experience of place in this ritual event occurs repeatedly throughout one's life, as many as twelve times per year, indeed in every year of one's adult life, and this event remains performed throughout Bali up to the present. Each time one participates in the ritual, there is opportunity for emotional immersion and reflective thought as to its deep meaning and value to self.

The *pamesuan* or the *pamedalan* (as it is named in the cultured Balinese language) is the gate, either the gate of a house (*umah*), the gate of a Balinese traditional housing compound yard, the gate of a temple or the gate of a village. According to the principal author (Saraswati), *pamesuan* or *pamedalan* is based on a Balinese root word which has a sense of an out/exit place [1] and has an outward orientation (*pesu/medal*). (It is not as one would expect in English that the gate means entrance.) It will be explained that the pleasure of the Aesthetics of Place during this event is inseparable from the architecture of the *pamesuan – pamedalan* as a place.

Interpretation of such sacred ritual events and their objects is not an easy task; nevertheless it is necessary for interpretation to be done throughout the research process [2]. Derrida also argued that interpretation of meaning is bound to the context and cannot stand independently by itself. According to Derida (in Lajar) [3] and Lawrence [4] every community has its own viewpoint which is influenced by its local situation and particular

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history. Besides, the interpretation is done simultaneously[5], in a circular mental process[6] (or a feedback loop), and according to Hall in Attoe [7] not in a linear process.

In a phenomenological approach [8] objects cannot be separated from their history (in space and time), in which the objects regarded as the subject, talk about themselves, as they are, by radiating symptoms (or properties) whose essence can be captured, in the context where they exist, including all aspects related to the social, economic, and cultural conditions, and the way of life, as well as their history which constitutes a "spatial experience" of the researcher in the field. Moreover, the interpretation in addition to being dependent on the researcher within their context of space and time, also reveals that through hermeneutic interpretation, understandings are within the context of some truth value or world view [9], as well as being interpreted through the senses.

The process of hermeneutics in the interpretation of the meaning of the architecture using the phenomenological way of thinking, emphasizes an understanding (reconstruction) of the properties arising from the being of the objects themselves. Leach [10], Lefebvre [11], and Berger in Dovey [12] thus make interpretations not just by seeing but usually by a combination of observing, feeling, experiencing and imagining the symptoms appearing from an object, as well as being fully equipped with all the ontological potency of the human onlooker's experience that also gives opportunity to engage the other senses, yielding a superiority in the understanding of the world. For example Tuan [13] conducted perception by moving around and touching objects, and moving the objects themselves. Therefore in relation to the experience of one's understanding of the objects, Derrida [14] said that phenomenology is basically a personal reference. Although it is a personal reference, it is not necessary to doubt its scientific interpretation conveyed by Poespoprodjo [15] who said that indeed not all can be proven, but certainty cannot be doubted.

Such interpretation is very helpful to understand the meaning of the things produced by human activity, because such human activities are often metaphorical or symbolic which is often as a manifestation of something else through a mental association or something outside of its realization. It is also necessary to observe that symbols in the form of ceremony or ritual emerge as a tradition or custom, and sometimes they finally obscure their actual use or function [16]. Tuan [17] has also mentioned the existence of emotional experiences, of experiences that bring imagination [18], and for Heidegger [19], that need an experience with an artistic dimension which he called a poetic experience. Moreover, Parsons in Putranto [20], Barthes in Tschumi [21], and Tschumi [22] have conveyed that the expressive symbols involving emotions of this sort are creative in their nature drawing from pleasurable events, and reflecting on the pleasure of the imagination. To summarize, from the abovementioned description, conducting interpretations of an object in use is not easy but very complex, and must allow for multiple meanings, through a simultaneous circular mental process, metaphoric in nature, and requiring the pleasure of the imagination.

The principal author's current research is aimed at exploring the dynamics of place properties in Bali which are full of sacred ritual events, and which show through their artifactual accessories of place in the *medal lungakasetra* (going to the graveyard) and *medal lungakasegara* (going to the sea), that there occurs a meaningful expression of the spirit of place in Balinese traditional architecture, and specifically in the case of the *Ngaben* sacred ritual event in PuriGerenceng, Denpasar, Bali.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted through direct participant experience, where the researcher was a primary participant in numerous *Ngaben* sacred ritual events. The level of participation involves a mindset in which one must take a certain possession of the world by the body, and also make a certain immersion of the mind and the body into the outer world, at least in the vicinity of the procession. The field researcher was involved in the *Ngaben* events as a volunteer and carried it out more than ten times during the 2000s (over ten years), in several governing regencies of Bali, one of them being at Puri Gerenceng in the Denpasar Regency in 2001. In addition to performing the *Ngaben* for aesthetic ritual pleasure, the researcher was noting and recording many aspects of the ritual to identify the aesthetics of the accessories of place (the mobile place features) and to obtain findings on architectural theory in these places through hermeneutic interpretation.

Such interpretation must be mindful of both the suffering experienced from the physical demands of the ritual procession and the simultaneous aesthetic pleasure of the procession and the places visited, relying on the senses of sight, hearing and of smell as generated by the accessories in the procession and the ultimate pleasure involved in the interpretation and revealing within one's imagination, concerning the nature and meaning of the ritual and its ultimate role in unification of spirit and body in the world. This interpretation must then be carefully described, recorded and translated into text and image.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Balinese Place

The sacred ritual events in Balinese community life are believed to be handed down in a hereditary manner such as to form a unity of spirit which is appropriate to the character of the society whose people believe that all places have a spiritual quality that can be felt, experienced and pleased at the time of the rituals. It is believed that the Balinese everyday life activities and ritual activities should form one unity [23] as well as being embodied in Balinese traditional architecture. Three principles of the creation of form in Balinese traditional architecture are (i) *tatwa* or philosophy, (ii) *tatasusila* or ethics, and (iii) *upakara* or ceremony, which are all related to one another. In this case, the architecture or place that is created cannot be formed as a place (*genah*) by the Balinese community without the sacred ritual events such as the *medal lungakasetra* (cemetery journey) and the *medal lungakasegara* (*seaside journey*), which engender a spirit in accordance with the character of this community, and which one can experience, perceived and pleased.

Norberg-Schulz has argued [24] that since ancient times the 'genius loci' or 'spirit of place', has been recognized as the concrete reality humans have to face and come to terms with in their everyday life. According to Norberg-Schulz place is a space which may already have a distinct character, but in general such a space must also be given a character or 'atmosphere' by humans in a place making process. In the Balinese context, the current principal researcher (Saraswati) has also stated that the 'genius loci', which is the 'spirit of place' since ancient times has been recognized as the concrete reality which humans have to face and come to terms with in their everyday lives, illustrating that places are part of the everyday life of society. As such a place is a space that has a spirit in accordance with the character of the society that maintains such a place through its day-to-day usage, whereby the place can be experienced as well as provide pleasure to the members of the society.

Pleasure of the Aesthetics of Place

Balinese traditional architecture has physical accessories both in the form of fixed ornaments as well as overlaid decorations. However, when ritual events take place, like *Ngaben*, such architecture becomes a unity of place decorated with even more beautiful accessories that stimulate the visual, audio and olfactory senses. Some of these beautiful accessories of place include *antakusuma* cloth with curved gold patterns, strains of *gambelan* rhythm and the fragrance of incense smoke, appealing to the senses of sight, hearing and smell (Figure 2). During the ritual events of *medal lungakasetra* and *medal lungakasegara* (going to the graveyard, then going to the sea), a specific pleasure set of accessories, representing the elements of place are moved outwards by the participants beginning from the *pamesuan* or *pamedalan* (the gate), then towards the place of destination and finally towards the original place of departure, that is in front of the *pamesuan* or *pamedalan*.



Figure 2: *Pamesuan-pamedalan* and place accessories of outward sacred ritual event originated from *pamesuan-pamedalan* as a place
Photo: Indah (Saraswati, PhD Thesis)

The Interpretation of Place

For the insider of Balinese culture, the interpretation of the architectural semantics of the ritual gate is complex, being based primarily on the *tatwa-tatwa* (the precepts, standards and prescribed regulations) of the divine teachings of the Hindu religion [25]. In making interpretations of the sacred ritual events that move outward and eventually towards to the *pamesuan* or *pamedalan*, both the Balinese architecture and religion require shared consideration and to be thought of as inseparable domains.

Appreciation of the event is enlightened through understanding that the aesthetic of the ritual accessories pleased by the senses of sight, hearing and smell can be interpreted to represent a place, or more specifically a set of moving place features (or properties). Thus, wherever the accessories of place representing *place* move, then the architecture of place (or *genah*) is also experienced to move. In the ritual path from place, to the graveyard, to the sea, and toward the gate (the original point of departure), these movement place properties represent an extension and then retraction of the genius loci of the gate.¹

Another experience of the participant that comes to dominate the interpretation as one proceeds through this set of ritual, is the dual (but nevertheless inter-twined) emotional dimensions of pleasure and physical hardship. The accessories of place (visual-audio-olfactory), pleasure one throughout, but as it is a long enough

¹Saraswati, O. 2013 [PhD Thesis] Surabaya. Note that it is semantically incorrect in Balinese through to think of this path as 'returning' or 'coming back'. It is more properly articulated as an extension or expansion, then contraction of properties, somewhat like the elastic nature of a balloon being blown up and then emptied.

trip (some seven kms of walking) in often hot and humid conditions, it becomes a tiring and some not easy experience. A form of struggling builds up, which is the suffering that must endure but in conjunction with the simultaneous pleasure of the aesthetic.

The repeated experience of this ritual has generated an imaginative response for the principal author (Saraswati) who poses the theoretical question, ‘Is it possible to reflect on and compare the values of “the child missed mother” in relation to this ritual?’ The bond of a child to its mother is an experience shared by most humans. If an infant is separated from its mother for too long he or she becomes unsettled, because the “child missed mother”.

From the previous imagination on the child and mother then, a further imagination is that a child’s existence is preceded by a process of pregnancy. Imagine a fetus inside a mother’s womb. In Balinese thought it is an imagination of the fetus as “*manik ring cucupu*” which literally means ‘the point of value in the bowl /sacred receptacle and is interpreted as the seed of life inside the mother’s womb (Figure 3) (Also note that *manik ring cucupu* means a state of balanced cosmology in Balinese traditional architecture). The mother’s womb is a place providing life, protection and growth for the fetus. In the womb, the fetus is prepared in order to be ready to go out to the earth as a place where humans live, grow and find shelter. Further, as a common universal value



Figure 3. *Manik Ring Cucupu* and pupa having different meaning; the desire is missed and not missed
Modified by: Oka Saraswati

phenomenon, a child surely misses his or her mother as the owner of the womb which he or she once occupied. The mother, as the owner of the womb and whose body is always faced when found by her child, will certainly welcome the child who comes to meet her, the child she loves and who was formerly in her womb for nine months, which in itself is also a dual emotional experience of being not physically easy but one that beautifies into a human life and brings pleasure. To further enhance the imagination, *manik ring cucupu* can be compared with the concept of a butterfly. A butterfly (Figure 3), struggles to be out from its cocoon, passing through the hole of the pupa (in the cocoon) which forces the liquid from its body flowing into its wings, so the wings are strong to fly. The physical challenge makes it strong and able to stand in the natural world outside its pupa. However the butterfly does not miss its pupa. But unlike the butterfly which does not miss its mother, what the imagination of *manik ring cucupu* conveys about the longing between mother and her child is that if “the child misses his mother”, then the child’s journey will be toward his mother. Further the meeting (when they face one another and embrace) will have a quality of happiness and relief, one of overcoming the pain and fear of being lost. A similar circumstance occurs in the movement of *place* m bodied in its accessories during the sacred ritual event of *medal lungakasetralan medal lungakasegara* (cemetery and seaside) which finally moves toward the place of departure to face the gate, the *pamesuan* or *pamedalan*.

As well as the place accessories travelling in the ritual circuit to Badung Cemetery and Sanur Beach, the symbols of the deceased accompany the participants in this imagination. The deceased is imagined as ‘the child’ moving outward to the cemetery (*setra*) for the cremation event for purification of the soul. In the “going for purification”, the place of the deceased’s home (in this case named PuriGerenceng) and its gate, is associated with the place accessories and the corpse as well as the soul of the deceased all being collectively imagined and synthesized as the ‘child’ moving outward together with the existence of the home. At the graveyard of Setra Badung, the corpse is cremated and then the ash residue of the corpse with the embedded soul of the deceased is shaped into a form known as *Puspalingga*. This is then ritually carried together with the sense of *place* as manifested in the original place accessories, to Sanur Beach, where the ash *Puspalingga* is placed in the saltwater from where it floats and dissipates into the sea of Segara Sanur.

Three days after this event, the deceased’s family and supporting community of PuriGerenceng come back to Sanur Beach. On this occasion which is being recollected by the principal author (Saraswati), the child was represented as a specially manufactured form, the *Daksina*, which is the symbol and receptacle of the soul of the deceased. The *Daksina* was then moved, complete once again with all of the original place accessories (umbrella, the strains of gambelan and fragrance of incense), toward PuriGerenceng, in Denpasar. In the Balinese belief system, the deceased has left his place of birth, then purified himself through the process of cremation and entering the sea and has finally moved toward the place of departure. When arriving at the outer courtyard, in front of the *pamesuan* or *pamedalan* (the gate) of Puri Gerenceng, a form of offering went out from *pamesuan* or *pamedalan* in the form of *bantenpamendak* (welcoming offerings). This welcoming event which took place in front of *pamesuan* or *pamedalan*, reflected the pleasure received by the ‘child’ from the welcomers. In this case, we may well ask, who performed the welcome? Of course, it was the ‘mother’ who welcomed the ‘child’. The movement of place of the sacred ritual event outward as associated with the place accessories ended facing towards the place imagined as the ‘mother’. How does one understand the nature of this movement?

The movement of place which always ends toward the 'mother' presents the idea that the childhood 'longing to mother', stored in the memory and manifesting in the soul of the deceased has directed the ritual movement. It is both a movement of this place (through the accessories) and to this place. In addition, the end of this place movement also shows that the welcoming in front of the gate, the *pamesuan* or *pamedalan*. The welcoming event presents the pleasure of happiness which is intensified by the longing to enjoy this final state after the place movement of the sacred ritual event that moves outwards and which originates from the *pamesuan* or *pamedalan*.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that the place complete with the accessories of place in the sacred ritual event, remained in the senses (sight, hearing, and smell), presenting the place expression in the 'child' who misses its mother as a stimulating pleasure, and thereby exciting the spirit of place, so that the place keeps recurring. Therefore, the sacred ritual event provides spirit to the place ('the genius loci').

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