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Review

Spatiality of The Balinese Legong Topeng Dance Ritual: A Thematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the spatiality of the Balinese Legong Topeng (Ratu Sang Hyang Widyadari) dance ritual through a thematic literature review, focusing on how sacred space is co-produced through ritual performance, cosmological alignment, and embodied movement. Rather than treating space as a passive backdrop, this study adopts a performative and phenomenological lens to examine how space in Balinese ritual is dynamically constructed through the interaction of spatial configuration, temporal rhythm, directional choreography, and communal engagement. The review draws on interdisciplinary literature spanning performance studies, spatial theory, and Balinese indigenous epistemologies, particularly the concepts of the Tri Mandala, the Tri Matra (Desa-Kala-Patra), and the dialectic between the sakala (material) and niskala (spiritual) realms. Using interpretive thematic analysis, the study identifies six key themes that underpin (1) spatial structure: hierarchy, orientation and ritual delineation, (2) movement as spatial activation and cosmological mapping, (3) temporal-spatial interweaving and ritual intensity, (4) embodied interactions and affective atmosphere, (5) dialectics of sakala and niskala: from structure to vibration, and (6) relevance and implication: spatiality as sacred praxis. Findings suggest that sacred space in the Legong Topeng ritual is not inherent or fixed, but instead emerges through patterned ritual interactions, alignment with divine directions (Dewata Nawa Sanggha), and the lived experiences of performers and worshippers. The dancer's body becomes a mediating axis (axis mundi), channelling cosmic forces and transforming the performance area into a site of heightened spiritual intensity. This study contributes to performance studies and spatial humanities by offering a culturally situated framework for understanding ritual spatiality grounded in Balinese knowledge systems. It also highlights the importance of future empirical research to explore further how sacred spatial practices are preserved, embodied, and transformed within the shifting landscape of contemporary Balinese ritual life.

Keywords: *Balinese cosmology, Legong Topeng, ritual embodiment, sacred space, spatiality*

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INTRODUCTION

Balinese ritual performance is deeply intertwined with spatial understanding. Balinese sacred dances, characterised by movements that attain spiritual dimensions (Dibia 2015), serve as offerings and help establish connections with the divine through spatial practices rooted in orientation, movement, and ritual alignment. The Legong Topeng dance ritual (Figure 1), performed at Pura (Balinese Hindu temple) Payogan Agung in Ketewel Village, is not merely a performative act but a sacred embodiment of spatial, temporal, and cosmological principles. It reflects how Balinese society perceives and engages with space as something lived, layered, and spiritually charged. Within this sacred space, movement, structure, sound, offerings, and timing intersect to produce an experience that transcends physicality. However, the spatial dimension of such ritual embodiment remains analytically undertheorised in current literature.



Figure 1 The Legong Topeng dance ritual at Pura Payogan Agung, Ketewel Village, Bali, is performed during Pagerwesi Day as part of the sacred offering (tari wali) sequence

Source: Author's collection

The origins of this ritual dance can be traced back to the 18th century and are attributed to Ida Dewa Agung Anom Karna, the second son of King Sukawati (Dibia and Ballinger 2023). This enduring ritual remains a religious celebration, conducted exclusively for sacred purposes and not for tourism. The Legong Topeng dance is regarded as the precursor to the contemporary Legong dance forms (Suarka 2015). The Dutch conquest of Bali in 1908 destroyed numerous *puri* (royal palaces). Consequently, the Legong Topeng dance, initially performed exclusively as a ritual within the *puri* environment, was subsequently staged in village temples (Prihartiningrum and Pamungkas 2014). This shift led to two distinct forms: the sacred ritual, locally known as the Ratu Sang Hyang Widyadari ritual, which remained confined to the temple, and a non-sacred derivative, the Legong dance.

Various Legong dance styles flourished in regions by the early 20th century, including Gianyar, Badung, Denpasar, and Tabanan. Some regions still preserve Legong dances with sacred functions, such as the Legong Kuntul in Denpasar and the Legong Leko in Tabanan. Elements of *Palegongan* (Legong dance drama) also appear in other sacred dances like the Sanghyang Dedari in Camenggon Village and the Sutri in Batuan Village (Dibia 2015). Some of these dances, such

as Legong Bremara and Legong Raja Cina, underwent reconstruction from 2011 to 2012 (Semadi 2015). Reconstruction efforts also occurred in Banjar Binoh, Ubung Kaja Village, and Denpasar (Sinti 2015). By 2015, a reconstruction based on archival documents revealed the evolution of the Legong dance into over 20 classical variations (Bandem 2015), one of which is the Legong Keraton dance. This particular dance, initially known as Legong Lasem, was once performed at the Solo Palace in Central Java as part of a cultural mission by the King of Karangasem in 1920 (Sinti 2015).

The Legong Topeng dance ritual is performed during the temple's ceremonial event (*piodalan*) on Pagerwesi Day at Pura Payogan Agung. The Ketewel Villagers believe that this ritual is witnessed by the spirits of gods and goddesses, providing protection and safety to the community (Agus 2006). In this context, the temple serves as a religious site and a spatial field imbued with cosmological significance. The temple architecture reflects the *Tri Mandala* division—*Utama Mandala*, *Madya Mandala*, and *Nistura Mandala*—which map levels of sacredness and direct ritual movements. The dancer's presence, the temple's layout, and the timing of the ritual are all interdependent in co-creating a meaningful sacred environment. Ritual movements are choreographed in alignment with cosmic directions that reflect the Balinese cosmology known as *Dewata Nawa Sanggha*, creating a physical choreography and cosmological order. While Legong is widely studied as a classical dance with aesthetic and historical significance, much of the literature has focused on its choreographic form, its adaptation for tourism, and its socio-cultural transformation. Studies such as Bandem and deBoer (1995) and Picard (1996) have contextualised Legong within the framework of modernity and tourism. Others, such as Geertz (1973) and Ramseyer (2002), have analysed the symbolic function of ritual in Balinese society. More recent works by Widana, Julianingsih, and Wirawan (2023), as well as Paramadhyaksa and Dwijendra (2021), examine spatial orientation in Balinese settlements and religious practices. Yet, a gap remains: spatiality is often treated descriptively, rather than analytically. Most studies do not sufficiently address how spatial elements interact to create experiential sacredness in the performance. The review draws upon interdisciplinary literature across performance studies, spatial theory, Balinese ritual texts, and phenomenology to address this gap. Through a thematic analysis of selected sources, the article broadly identifies how spatiality is conceptualised, described, and experienced in Legong Topeng dance ritual practice. This article does not present new ethnographic data but synthesises existing literature on Balinese sacred dance and spatiality, employing a thematic review method. It identifies key conceptual and thematic patterns in prior studies to offer a spatial reading of the Legong Topeng dance ritual. This understanding follows the Balinese epistemological triad of *desa* (place), *kala* (time and space), and patra (circumstance, context), which frames sacredness as contextually emergent.

Research Gap and Purpose

This article addresses the need for a spatial analysis of Balinese ritual performance that integrates local epistemologies and spatial theory. Despite the wealth of scholarship on Balinese cosmology and performance, few studies have critically analysed the spatial construction of sacredness within ritual practice. The Legong Topeng ritual is particularly underrepresented in this regard. Most existing discussions focus on movement aesthetics or cultural symbolism without interrogating the spatial processes through which sacred experience emerges. The analytical tools offered by spatial theory, phenomenology, and indigenous concepts of space have yet to be fully synthesised in studies of this ritual.

This thematic literature review seeks to understand spatiality not as a backdrop for performance but as a dynamic, relational process. It proposes that spatial value in Balinese ritual is produced through the interaction of physical structures, embodied movement, ritual timing, symbolic elements, and communal presence. In the context of Legong Topeng, these spatial interactions

produce a form of lived sacredness that connects the human with the divine and the body with the cosmos. Sacred space, in this sense, is co-produced through attention, gesture, direction, and collective intention. The need for a spatial perspective in ritual studies is increasingly relevant as traditional performance spaces transform due to modernisation, secularisation, and tourism. Understanding the spatial logic that underpins sacred rituals such as Legong Topeng is crucial to preserving their ontological essence. Without this perspective, efforts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage risk overlooking the experiential and cosmological dimensions that constitute their core meaning.

Scope and Method of Review

This study adopts a qualitative approach through a thematic literature review, enabling an interpretive synthesis of academic works on Balinese ritual performance, spatial theory, and local cosmology. In contrast to a systematic literature review that follows rigid inclusion and exclusion criteria, the thematic review enables conceptual exploration and interpretive engagement. This approach is appropriate for the current research, which explores how sacred space is produced, experienced, and embodied within the Legong Topeng dance ritual in Bali.

The scope of the review encompasses global theoretical frameworks and local Balinese ontologies. It draws upon spatial theory, including Lefebvre's (1991) notion of the social production of space, Turner's (1982) concept of ritual and liminality, and Merleau-Ponty's (2002) phenomenology of embodied space, as well as Balinese indigenous knowledge systems such as *Tri Mandala*, *Tri Matra*, the dialectic of *sakala* (material/tangible) and *niskala* (spiritual/intangible) realms and other Balinese cosmology concept. This hybrid framework allows the study to analyse sacred space not only as a conceptual construct but also as a lived and culturally embodied reality. The review process was conducted in six stages.

Formulation of Research Focus

The study began by identifying a conceptual gap in the academic literature concerning the spatial dimensions of Balinese ritual performance. The Legong Topeng dance ritual was selected as the focus due to its historical continuity since the 18th century and its enduring role in community religious life. This ritual provides a rich context for examining the dialectic between sakala and niskala dimensions of space in Balinese performative practice.

Identification of Keywords and Thematic Focus

Relevant academic literature was identified through keyword searches in four databases: JSTOR, Project MUSE, Scopus, and Google Scholar. JSTOR and Project MUSE were chosen for humanities and cultural studies, Scopus for peer-reviewed academic breadth, and Google Scholar for access to grey literature. The selected keywords were "Balinese dance," "ritual performance," "spatiality," "Legong Topeng," and "sacred space." The search revealed a notable absence of scholarly attention to Legong Topeng in the indexed literature; most notably, the term "Legong Topeng" yielded zero results across all databases, thereby affirming the originality and necessity of the present study.

Screening and Selection of Sources

Sources were screened based on their academic relevance, credibility, and contribution to the understanding of performance, space, ritual, and Balinese culture. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, while select grey literature and ethnographic accounts were included

for contextual depth.

Thematic Coding and Synthesis

Selected texts were coded thematically, focusing on key categories such as: (1) spatial structure––hierarchy, orientation and ritual delineation; (2) movement as spatial activation and cosmological mapping; (3) temporal-spatial interweaving and ritual intensity; (4) embodied interactions and affective atmosphere; (5) dialectics of *sakala* and *niskala*; and (6) spatiality as sacred praxis. These categories informed both the review structure and the analytical lens applied to the Legong Topeng context.

Integration with Theoretical Frameworks

The thematic insights were interpreted through theoretical perspectives drawn from Lefebvre (1991), Turner (1982), Fischer-Lichte (2008), Merleau-Ponty (2002), and Balinese cosmological principles. This integration produced an analytical framework grounded in both universal theory and local ontology.

Reflexivity and Limitation

As a literature-based inquiry, this study uses fieldwork or direct engagement with ritual practitioners as secondary data and the literature as the primary data. However, the findings provide a conceptual foundation for future empirical research using qualitative methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews to deepen insights into lived spatial experience.

By thematically organising and interpreting relevant scholarship, this review positions Legong Topeng as a culturally significant yet critically overlooked ritual tradition. The study aims to contribute to broader scholarly conversations in performance studies, spatial theory, and Southeast Asian ritual culture.

Review Objectives

This article aims to synthesise and interpret existing scholarship to better understand how spatial values are formed through the interaction of spatial elements in the Legong Topeng dance ritual. Specifically, it asks:

1. How is spatiality conceptualised and represented in studies of the Legong Topeng dance ritual?
2. What spatial elements are thematically emphasised in shaping sacred presence?
3. How do these spatial themes contribute to the continuity of cultural and religious life in Ketewel Village?

Significance and Contribution

This article contributes to ongoing discussions in performance studies, ritual theory, and spatial humanities by offering a thematic synthesis of the literature on Balinese ritual performance. Positioning spatiality as an active agent in ritual practice reveals the analytical potential of integrating indigenous knowledge systems with spatial theory.

The study's significance lies in its capacity to bridge global theory and local tradition, suggesting

that Balinese spatial thought offers unique insights into the phenomenology of ritual space. It also provides a foundation for future ethnographic and practice-based research that engages with space not merely as an object of study but as a co-creator of meaning in ritual and performance. The integration of spatial theory with Balinese ritual practice serves as a methodological model for similar inquiries into other indigenous performances.

By re-centring spatiality in the analysis of Legong Topeng dance, this article challenges static conceptions of ritual setting. It foregrounds the lived experience of space as both medium and message. It argues that sacred space in Balinese ritual is not pre-existing but emergent, arising from patterned interactions among architecture, movement, community, and cosmological alignment. It provides a localised lens through which scholars may re-examine assumptions in spatial theory while also affirming the value of experiential knowledge held by ritual practitioners. In doing so, the article contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage and the intellectual validation of indigenous spatial epistemologies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legong and Sacred Performance in Balinese Ritual Context

Legong dance has been extensively explored as a classical Balinese performance, often situated at the intersection of artistic expression and religious function. Balinese ritual dance serves not only as a spiritual offering but also as a reflection of the socio-religious order. Drawing from anthropological frameworks, Handayani and Alfin (2020) argue that traditional Balinese dances function as embodied expressions of religious and legal norms. The spatial choreography of sacred dances thus enacts both metaphysical beliefs and socio-legal boundaries. Rusman et al. (2024) further support this view, showing that sacred performance space in Bali is shaped by shared humanitarian values and community-driven rituals that sustain harmony among the divine, human, and natural realms.

Bandem and deBoer (1995) offer a foundational examination of Legong's stylistic intricacies and its transformation through cultural diplomacy. Picard (1996) emphasises the socio-cultural shifts shaping Legong's dual identity as sacred and touristic performances. However, within these studies, spatial concerns often appear as descriptive background rather than analytical focus. The Legong Topeng variation, with its origins directly tied to a sacred ceremony at Pura Payogan Agung, demands more attention as a site where space is structured and ritually constituted.

Geertz's (1973) semiotic approach underscores the importance of symbols in Balinese religion, including performance as a cultural text. Ramseyer (2002) adds that Balinese dance serves as a medium for maintaining cosmic balance. More recent studies by Sudewi (2011, 2017) and Suarka (2015) investigate the structural and pedagogical elements of Legong. These works are valuable but tend to privilege movement aesthetics and transmission over the interplay between choreography and sacred space. Yet again, spatial configurations and embodied spatial logic are underexplored.

The dynamic continuum between sacred and profane space in Balinese dance is closely tied to processes of secularisation and commodification. Triguna, Inten Mayuni, and Made Putra Arsana (2023) critically reflect on how sacred art forms are reframed under cultural policy, reshaping their spatial and ritual significance. The case of Kecak at Uluwatu Temple, as analysed by Hidajat et al. (2023), demonstrates how sacred settings become secularised performance venues, influencing audience perception and dancer embodiment. Similarly, Suharta (2022) highlights the commodification of the Selonding gamelan in Tenganan Village, showing how

sacred instruments and associated performance spaces are transformed for broader cultural consumption. Suprihatin and Pratamawati (2019) emphasise that the preservation of traditional dance forms depends on the training of younger generations, adherence to ritual formats, and collaborations with educational and governmental institutions. Conservation of sacred performance spaces requires strategic intergenerational transmission and institutional support. These elements also apply to Legong Topeng dance, where preserving the spatial choreography and ritual sequence is essential for maintaining ontological integrity in the face of modernisation. Thus, the spatial production of sacredness in Legong Topeng remains insufficiently theorised.

Spatial Orientation and Balinese Cosmology

The Legong Topeng dance ritual is performed by two pre-pubescent girls aged 8 to 12, selected by the temple Priest (the *pemangku*) from 15 *banjar adat* (Balinese traditional village councils) in Ketewel Village. This ritual also involves penabuh, the musicians who accompany the Semarapagulingan gamelan (a set of traditional Balinese instruments), and penyungsung (worshippers). The *penabuh*, gamelan, *pemangku*, *penyungsung*, and the temple's architecture form the kalangan (dancing area) according to Balinese cosmological principles, creating a spatial hierarchy that guides the dancers' movements throughout the ritual. The dancer's movement, along with the positioning and orientation of other ritual actors, such as the pemangku, penabuh, and penyungsung, contributes to the creation of space. This movement aligns with the theory that human bodies shape space through their positions, orientations, and movements (Franck 2007). Orientation is always relative to a central reference point. According to Patočka (as cited in Duvisac 2014), the moving body itself serves as the zero point of orientation in the world.

Recent scholarship has more explicitly engaged with spatial orientation in Balinese ritual and architecture. Widana, Julianingsih, and Wirawan (2023) investigate spatial division among religious communities in Cakranegara, showing how Hindu-Balinese and Islamic cosmologies manifest through territorial organisation. Paramadhyaksa and Dwijendra (2021) explore variations in sacred–profane orientation across Balinese villages, illustrating that spatial alignment is not monolithic but responsive to local cosmology and environmental context.

Balinese cosmological concepts form a vital framework for understanding how sacred space is ordered, inhabited, and transformed. These systems articulate spatial principles rooted in cosmology and daily ritual practice, often expressed through temple layout, shrine orientation, and processional movement. Putra, Wirawibawa, and Satria (2020), along with Nilasari, Sitindjak, and Wardani (2019), further explain how these spatial logics are embedded in settlements and ritual structures. However, few studies extend these insights into the performative and kinetic production of space, particularly how movement, rhythm, and gesture animate these cosmological orders in performance settings.

Performance, Embodiment, and Ritual Space

Balinese dance is inherently dynamic, continuously evolving while retaining its ritual essence. Ruastiti, Indrawan, and Sariada (2021) illustrate how ceremonial dances, such as the Renteng dance, inspire the creation of new ritual forms, ensuring the continuity of tradition. Similarly, Harnish (2021) observes how ritual dance sustains communal spiritual identity even amid shifting religious and political terrains. Legong Topeng, while historically rooted, participates in this adaptive continuum by preserving sacred structures while engaging with

contemporary pressures.

Theoretical frameworks from performance studies offer tools for interpreting ritual space beyond symbolic description. Lefebvre's (1991) triadic model of space, spatial practice (perceived), representations of space (conceived), and representational space (lived), allows for multilayered analysis. In a Balinese context, this aligns with how sacred space is choreographed through ritual action, conceived via cosmological diagrams, and lived through sensorial and emotional experiences.

Turner's (1982) concept of liminality provides a model for understanding temple rituals as transitional zones where normative boundaries are suspended. The Legong Topeng dancer becomes a liminal figure navigating between human and divine realms. Fischer-Lichte's (2008) aesthetics of the performative further articulates how performers and audience co-produce space through presence, attention, and embodied resonance, a feedback system that enlivens ritual space.

Merleau-Ponty's (2002) phenomenology of the body underscores that movement is not merely spatial displacement but a form of perception and spatial revelation. In this light, the Legong dancer does not simply move through space but co-creates it through intentional orientation and rhythmic embodiment. These theoretical perspectives resonate with Balinese concepts such as the dialectics of *sakala* and *niskala*, where sacred space is understood as co-produced by bodily intentionality and cosmological forces. Yet, despite these conceptual affinities, there remains a lack of critical synthesis between spatial theory and the lived experience of Balinese dance rituals.

Synthesis and Research Gap

This review demonstrates that while Balinese ritual, dance, and cosmology have been widely studied, they are often treated in isolation, symbolically, aesthetically, or architecturally. Few works have brought together embodiment, space, and sacred temporality into an integrated spatial analysis of ritual. Legong Topeng dance ritual, in particular, has been underrepresented in ethnographic and spatial literature despite its deep ritual lineage and continued practice. Drawing from Balinese spatial epistemology and performance theory, this thematic review seeks to articulate sacred space not as fixed or inherited but as dynamically generated through spatial choreography, ritual timing, and communal interaction.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Spatial Structure: Hierarchy, Orientation, and Ritual Delineation

Complex cosmological principles govern spatial orientation in Balinese performance. Widana, Julianingsih, and Wirawan (2023), together with Paramadhyaksa and Dwijendra (2021), explain how traditional architecture and village layouts reflect the *Kaja–Kelod* (upper zone–lower zone axis) and *Kangin–Kauh/Urip-Pati* (sunrise-sunset/life-death) axes, which inform the directional flow of ritual movement. This spatial logic aligns with the choreography of the Legong Topeng dance ritual, in which dancer entrances and orientations correspond to sacred polarities. The *Tri Hita Karana* philosophy, as noted by Linggih and Sudarsana (2020), underpins this alignment

by promoting balance among the human, spiritual, and environmental domains.

The Legong Topeng dance ritual unfolds within a spatial architecture governed by the *Tri Mandala* concept, which divides temple space into three zones: *Nistura Mandala* (outer), *Madya Mandala* (middle), and *Utama Mandala* (inner) (Figure 2). Each of these zones is more than a mere physical designation; they represent symbolic gradations of purity and access. Sacredness intensifies as one moves inward, and each zone prescribes specific roles and thresholds for ritual participants. In this context, the placement of dancers, musicians, priests, and worshippers is not arbitrary, but cosmologically determined. This cosmological alignment is not only architectural but also spiritually embodied. As one senior dancer shared, "*Sesuhunan datang dari arah suci, dari Gedong Agung*," underscoring the lived belief that sacred presence descends from specific cosmological directions. The dancer's entry thus reenacts a metaphysical journey, reinforcing the temple's spatial sanctity.

This spatial division also intersects with the directional orientation systems of *Kaja–Kelod* and *Kangin–Kauh*, forming a ritual grid rooted in the *Dewata Nawa Sanggha* system, the nine guardian deities of the cardinal directions (Karja 2020). Within the Balinese cosmological framework known as *Pangider Bhuwana*, the *Kaja* direction corresponds to the upward direction, the divine realm (*Kahyangan*). At the same time, *Kelod* refers to the downward direction, associated with the earthly realm, where humans live and dwell below the divine. In practical terms, *Kaja* is often interpreted as the direction toward Mount Agung, Bali's highest and most sacred mountain. In contrast, *Kelod* is associated with the sea as a place of purification.

The ritual choreography aligns with these directional principles. For instance, dancer entrances from the *Kaja* and *Kangin* axes symbolise a metaphysical descent from the divine realm into the ritual world. This orientation imbues movement with spiritual intentionality, transforming the stage into a ritual cosmogram where actions are mapped onto divine coordinates. Thus, sacred space is produced through relational positioning, reflecting a Balinese cosmology in which space



Figure 2 Spatial layout of Pura Payogan Agung based on the *Tri Mandala* concept and sacred orientation (*Kaja–Kelod*, *Kangin–Kauh*): A) *Nistura Mandala – Jaba Sisi* (outer area/the most "profane"); B) *Madya Mandala – Jaba Tengah* (middle area); D) *Utama Mandala – Jeroan Dalem* (inner area/the most sacred); the blue zone represents the ritual dance area

Source: Illustrated by author

is not static, but directionally alive.

Movement as Spatial Activation and Cosmological Mapping

Movement in the Legong Topeng dance ritual serves a dual function: aesthetic performance and ritual cartography. Dancers' gestures, pathways, and choreographic formations enact what Lefebvre (1991) calls "spatial practice," the translation of abstract space (conceptual cosmology) into lived spatial experience. The circular, linear, and diagonal transitions mirror aesthetic conventions and metaphysical order. For example, clockwise and counterclockwise rotations resonate with Balinese ritual circumambulation, reflecting a choreography of balance and purification. This spatial sanctification is ritual-specific. As noted by the *pemangku*, "*Tari ini hanya dilakukan di bagian jeroan dalem pura, sebagai area paling suci, ketika saat piodalan pura*," reinforcing that the sacredness of movement is inherently tied to its spatial and calendrical

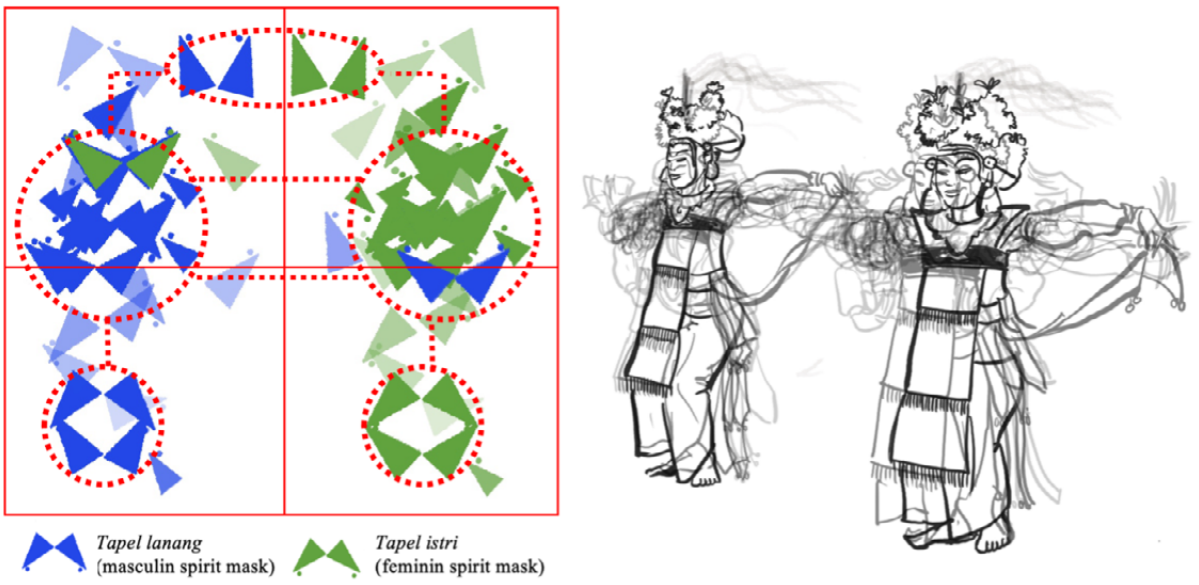


Figure 3 Choreographic trajectory mapped over the ritual area in the Legong Topeng dance ritual, where the left image shows the *Pengawak* (beginning) part in the dancer's orientation and spatial rhythm, and the right image overlays the most frequently used movement paths in the *Pengawak* part

Source: Illustrated by author

context. The performance site is thus not interchangeable; it must correspond to the temple's highest spiritual zone during a ritually potent time.

Sacred space is not merely given but dynamically constructed through choreographic intention. Ruspawati (2023) describes how spatial reconfiguration in the Ngerebeg dance ritual transforms temple architecture into a site-specific performative field. Similar spatial transformations occur in the Legong Topeng dance ritual, where movement aligns with cosmological principles. Studies on sacred dances across cultures, such as Kathak dance (Stoltenberg 2019) and Cham dance (Khanna and Reddy 2020), emphasise the creation of liminal space through embodied ritual, highlighting a universal pattern of sacred spatial enactment. These parallels underscore the dancer's body as a mediator between earthly and divine realms.

The dancer's path becomes a dynamic map of cosmic enactment when traced throughout the ritual. As illustrated in Figure 3, one dancer described a moment of spiritual transformation during the performance. As she stood facing the *meja pelangkan* (ritual altar) while donning the mask, she felt as though something had shifted. "When I turned around," she recalled, "I

was no longer myself; I had become the *dedari* (celestial being)." This experience highlights how orientation, gesture, and sacred objects coalesce to enable an embodied shift from the human to the divine within ritual space. The body's movement through the temple zones forms a processional rhythm that connects zones of varying sacralities, effectively stitching together the temple's physical and metaphysical geographies. Thus, movement occurs not only in space but also constitutes space as sacred.

Temporal-Spatial Interweaving and Ritual Intensity

The spatial unfolding of the Legong Topeng dance ritual is inextricably linked to its temporal context. Performed on Pagerwesi, a day consecrated to spiritual fortification and inner strength in the Balinese calendar, the ritual does not merely occupy space; it infuses it with heightened ontological resonance. The ritual gains temporal sacrality, intensifying the spatial experience and evoking a state of heightened awareness and spiritual presence. This synergy exemplifies the Balinese philosophical triad of *Tri Matra* (*Desa-Kala-Patra*), which governs the appropriateness and sanctity of actions within specific spatial-temporal coordinates.

Within this framework, sacredness is not an inherent or permanent attribute of space; instead, it emerges from the harmonious alignment between where (*desa*), when (*kala*), and how (*patra*) ritual activity is performed. The Legong Topeng dance ritual, when performed at Pura Payogan Agung during the *piodalan* ritual and on a spiritually potent day like Pagerwesi, is categorised as a *tari wali*, a sacred offering dance (Figure 4). Its choreography, costumes, and orientation are consecrated, embedded within the temple's ritual order, and aligned cosmologically with divine

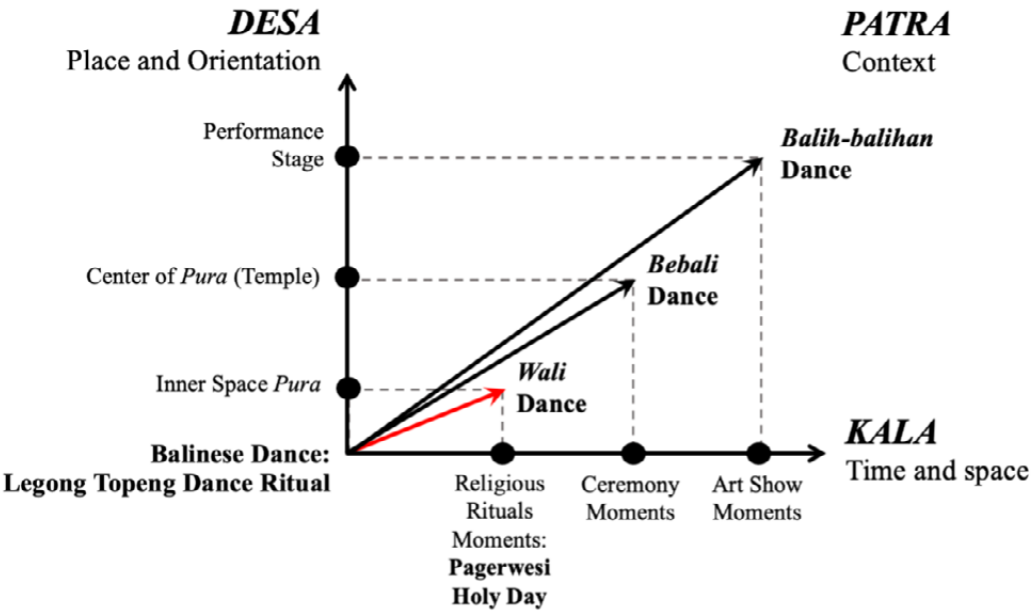


Figure 4 Visualisation of the *Tri Matra* (*Desa-Kala-Patra*) triadic principle in Balinese dance epistemology, where the Legong Topeng dance is situated as a wali (sacred) dance due to its alignment with sacred time (*kala*), sacred place (*desa*), and appropriate ritual context (*patra*)

Source: Illustrated by author

directions. The dance is not a performance about the sacred; it generates the sacred.

However, this sacred status is not absolute. When removed from its ritually sanctioned setting, performed in a different place (*desa*), outside ritual time (*kala*), or in altered circumstances (*patra*), the Legong Topeng dance ritual may undergo desacralisation and be recontextualised as *tari bebali* (semi-sacred) or even *tari balih-balihan* (entertainment). This shift underscores the conditional nature of sacredness in Balinese ontology: it is situational, negotiated, and fluid, dependent on cosmological, temporal, and spatial alignment.

The ritual timeline marks a crescendo of sacred spatial activation from prelude (purification, preparation) through the climactic dance performance to closure (desacralisation and disassembly). Spatial zones were initially accessible for secular activity but became progressively sacralised as the ritual advanced. This sacrality reaches its peak in the *Utama Mandala* when the dancer embodies taksu (spiritual charisma) and becomes a conduit for metaphysical forces.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, especially his view that perception arises from the embodied experience of temporal flow, complements this Balinese understanding. The temple becomes a palimpsest of intensities, where sacredness pulses through space according to the rhythm of the ritual. It is not the physical boundaries of the mandala zones that determine sacredness but their activation through temporally structured acts of devotion, movement, and collective focus.

Thus, sacred space in the Legong Topeng dance ritual is emergent, contingent, and temporal. It is experienced not as a fixed entity but as a living condition co-created through the choreography of time, the alignment of cosmological coordinates, and the embeddedness of the dancer's body within the *Tri Matra* concept. This perspective not only affirms the ritual efficacy of the dance but also highlights the fragile, negotiated nature of sacred space in contemporary Balinese culture, especially as it traverses ritual boundaries into secular contexts.

Embodied Interactions and Affective Atmosphere

The co-presence of dancers, musicians, priests, worshippers, and the temple's surroundings fosters an interaffective field in which a sacred atmosphere emerges collectively. Fischer-Lichte's (2008) concept of the autopoietic feedback loop is visible here: dancers feed on the audience's attentiveness, while the audience becomes spiritually implicated through embodied witnessing (Figure 5).

Importantly, sacred space in the Legong Topeng dance ritual is symbolic, affective, and sensorial. The scent of incense, the rhythm of gamelan, and the vibration of footwork on the *kalangan* all contribute to a multisensory spatial experience. Environmental elements, including lighting, further accentuate this multisensory engagement. A worshipper reflected, "*Bedanya zaman dulu sama sekarang adalah dulu penerangan cuma dari lampu minyak, tapi justru itu yang membuat saya bisa lebih khidmat mengikuti ritual. Sekarang sudah pakai lampu, memang agak beda rasanya walaupun saya tetap ibadah dengan khusyu.*" This statement reveals how atmospheric conditions, such as firelight versus electric light, shape the affective dimension of sacred space, altering how presence and reverence are felt during the ritual. These affective cues activate what Balinese culture calls *taksu*, further blurring the line between the seen (*sakala*) and the

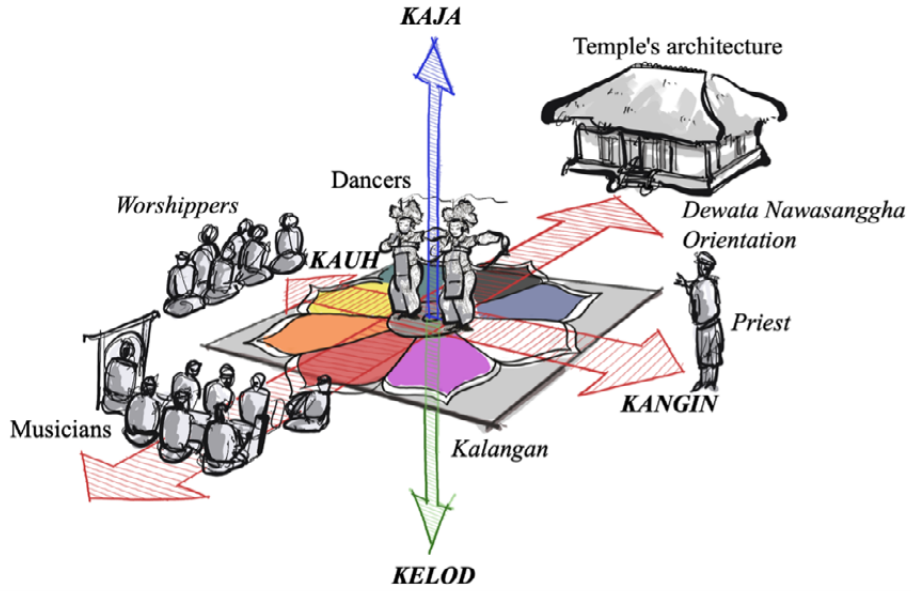


Figure 5 Spatial formation in the Legong Topeng dance ritual, showing the interaction between cosmological orientation (*Dewata Nawa Sanggha*), ritual actors, and movement patterns that constitute sacred space

Source: Illustrated by author

unseen (*niskala*) realms. Thus, space is not merely observed but felt, inhabited, and transformed.

The interaction between ritual actors and spatial elements constructs the spatiality of the Legong Topeng dance ritual. This spatiality emerges due to the dynamic relationship between physical and non-physical spatial elements within the cultural and religious context of Ketewel's village community. The physical elements have empirical, measurable boundaries, focusing on the location and relationships among objects in geographic space. In contrast, non-physical elements lack physical boundaries but are defined by intangible values (Darmawan 2011). These elements are closely linked with the place and orientation aspects, or *desa*, from the *Tri Matra* concept. This concept is fundamental to understanding spatiality in the Legong Topeng dance ritual, as it treats it as a physical phenomenon.

Dialectics of *Sakala* and *Niskala*: From Structure to Vibration

At its core, the Legong Topeng dance ritual exemplifies a dialectical spatiality grounded in the dynamic interplay between *sakala* and *niskala*. The temple architecture, the choreographic structures (*pengawit* [preparation], *pengawak* [opening], *pengecet* [climax]), and the measured progression of ritual phases constitute the sakala layer, ordered, material, and observable. However, these physical elements are not autonomous; they function as conduits through which *niskala* forces are summoned, embodied, and vibrationally expressed. Figure 6 visually articulates this dialectic through multiple synchronised layers:

1. The sacredness gradient (top row) shows the transformation of spatial-temporal experience from sacralisation to building sacredness, reaching the most sacred, and returning to desacralisation.

2. Music intensity (red line) fluctuates in correlation with the sacredness of each cycle. Musical crescendos mark the rise of *niskala* intensities, aligning sonically with ritual climax (apex).

3. The dance structure reinforces sakala order through the traditional sequencing of *pengawit*, *pengawak*, and *pengecet*, but these sequences are also stages of spiritual intensification and increased trance susceptibility.

4. The main ritual activity timeline demarcates the phases of the ritual: prelude, four performance cycles, and closing. The apex marks the culmination of *niskala* manifestation, where the dancer's *taksu* peaks and the space is most spiritually charged.

Through this temporal layering, the ritual not only unfolds in time but also intensifies space. What begins as a structured performance of form (*sakala*) gradually becomes suffused with spiritual vibration (*niskala*), reaching its zenith during the apex moments. The temporal layering

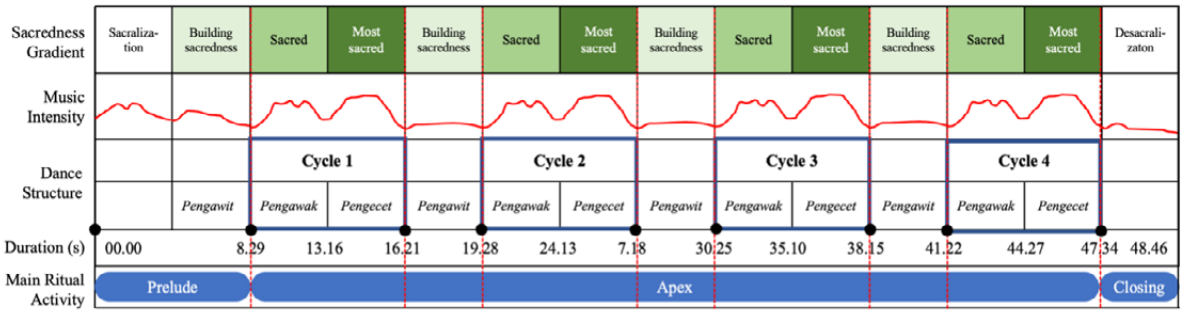


Figure 6 The diagram illustrates sacred space as an emergent phenomenon in the Legong Topeng dance ritual, with visual layers including the sacredness gradient (top row), the music intensity curve (red), the dance structure, and the main ritual activity phases, collectively showing how *sakala–niskala* dynamics evolve across ritual cycles

Source: Illustrated by author

corresponds to Turner's (1982) theory of liminality, in which ritual space becomes a threshold that suspends normative reality and allows for transformation. In Balinese terms, the ritual transforms *sakala*, the visible space, into *niskala*, the invisible, spiritually resonant space.

The dancer occupies the role of cosmic mediator, channelling unseen forces. Her body is the point of intersection where choreography (structure) becomes vibration (spirit). The *pengawak* stage, in particular, often coincides with the amplification of musical and spiritual energy, suggesting that during this phase, the dancer's embodiment of *taksu* reaches full expression. This culmination of *taksu* often leads to altered states of consciousness. One dancer recounted, "*Saya pernah merasa seperti tertidur ketika menari; ternyata, kata yang melihat, saya tetap menari dan gerakannya bener, tidak salah*," suggesting that in moments of deep embodiment, the dancer enters a liminal state where the boundary between conscious control and spiritual possession becomes fluid. This situation aligns with the notion of niskala manifesting through embodied trance. Figure 6 is not simply a map of choreography or sound but a ritual cartography. It charts how embodied movement, spatial arrangement, and sonic texture transform mundane space into sacred presence. It also illustrates how the *Tri Matra* principle governs the rhythm of sacrality, dictating the shifting thresholds between *sakala* and *niskala* as the ritual unfolds.

The Legong Topeng dance ritual affirms that sacred space is not given; it is generated through embodied intensification. Figure 6 serves as both evidence and visualisation of this emergent sacredness, demonstrating that ritual is an act of devotion and spatial-temporal creation.

Relevance and Implication: Spatiality as Sacred Praxis

Phenomenological perspectives reinforce the centrality of the dancer's body in co-producing sacred space. According to De Andrade (2024) and Foultier (2021), the body is not a passive object but a site of perception, acting through motor intentionality and body schema. In the Legong Topeng dance ritual, the dancer's movement is a display and a spatial expression of embodied knowledge. Buttingsrud (2021) and Blanariu (2021) emphasise that skilled performance arises through the integration of gesture, rhythm, and perception, enabling the dancer to become a living conduit of sacred vibration.

This spatial analysis foregrounds sacred space not as a fixed container but as an emergent phenomenon, produced through orientation, choreography, embodiment, and ritual timing. It confirms Lefebvre's (1991) thesis that space is produced socially (and ritually). Moreover, it aligns with Balinese epistemology, which conceives reality as a harmonic interplay between *desa*, *kala*, and *patra*.

The Legong Topeng dance ritual does not simply unfold in sacred space; it enacts and reifies it. Such insight enriches discussions in performance studies, heritage preservation, and cultural spatiality, emphasising how tradition is sustained through transmission and ritualised spatial activation.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the spatiality of the Balinese Legong Topeng dance ritual by synthesising literature across performance studies, spatial theory, and Balinese indigenous epistemologies. A thematic literature review articulates how sacred space is produced through the intersection of spatial configuration, ritual timing, embodied movement, and cosmological alignment. Rather than viewing space as a passive container, the article conceptualises space as dynamic, relational, and emergent, animated by spiritual intention and ritual choreography.

The findings highlight the central role of the *Tri Matra* concept in modulating the ritual's sacredness, showing that spatiality in Legong Topeng is not static but negotiated and contingent. *Tri Mandala* zoning, directional choreography based on *Dewata Nawa Sanggha*, and the embodiment of *taksu* all contribute to the sacralisation of temple space during the performance. Moreover, the dialectical interplay of *sakala* and *niskala* space foregrounds the importance of lived and sensed experiences in understanding Balinese ritual spatiality.

The study bridges global and local frameworks, offering a culturally grounded lens for analysing sacred space. Methodologically, it demonstrates the potential of thematic review to develop nuanced, interpretive understandings of underexplored ritual phenomena.

Future research should incorporate empirical data, particularly ethnographic observation and more interviews with ritual practitioners, to further explore how spatiality is embodied and transmitted. Such an inquiry could also investigate how the ritual adapts to shifting conditions of secularisation and cultural commodification. Understanding how sacred space is enacted in performance is vital for preserving intangible heritage and advancing spatial theory through indigenous knowledge systems.

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