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Review

Systematic Literature Review: The Seen and Unseen Symbols and Functions in the Barong Ket Mask

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ABSTRACT

The Barong Ket mask is a traditional mask from Bali, Indonesia. Its unique symbols and functions encompass elements of ritual, identity, visual aesthetics, culture, and power within Balinese society. It plays a significant role in religious rituals and performing arts, often regarded as a manifestation of protective forces against negative energies or malevolent spirits, such as Rangda. The Barong Ket mask embodies both visible and invisible symbols and functions. Traditional performances, such as the Barong Dance, depict the eternal struggle between good (dharma) and evil (adharma), making it a vital symbol in Balinese religious practices and socio-cultural life. This study employed a qualitative approach based on a systematic literature review, analysing 16 relevant documents. These documents were examined using specific keywords, such as "mask," "traditional," "ritual," "art," and "culture," to identify recurring themes related to the symbols and functions of traditional masks, particularly the Barong Ket. The collected data were categorised into visible and invisible symbols and functions. The findings reveal that the visible symbols of the Barong Ket mask include ritual, identity, and visual elements, while its invisible symbols encompass cultural and authoritative aspects. The visible functions include social, historical, and practical roles, whereas the invisible ones include ritual, economic, educational, and healing roles. This research significantly enriches the understanding of the symbolic and functional values of the Barong Ket mask within the context of Balinese culture. The literature-based approach also demonstrates its potential applicability to study other cultural artefacts. Furthermore, the study provides a foundation for further exploration of the visual elements of the Barong Ket mask, such as its shape, colour, and size. The findings serve as a reference for preserving cultural heritage and advancing studies on traditional Indonesian arts and culture.

Keywords: *symbol, function, mask, Barong Ket, the seen and unseen*

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INTRODUCTION

Symbols and functions are important elements in a cultural artefact, whether visible or invisible. An artefact or cultural product, such as a mask, embodies both function and symbolism. The symbols and functions of a cultural product from a region must have a strong tradition and culture from its origin. Consequently, traditional masks are closely associated with cultural traditions and are often linked to religious teachings or belief systems within a particular community. The Barong Ket mask, for instance, is an example of a cultural artefact that has evolved over hundreds of years, carrying rich symbolic meanings and functional roles. Across different countries, regions, and cultures, masks have been widely recognised and utilised in diverse forms, each encompassing distinct symbols and functions.

As a noun, a mask refers to a covering for the face. As a verb, to mask means to hide or disguise one's identity. Masks exist in many forms and types, each with different shapes and characteristics. Their symbols and functions can be interpreted in various ways, with some meanings overlapping and others diverging. These similarities and differences can be seen through lines, shapes, and colours used. The visual form of a traditional mask, therefore, represents not only its aesthetic appearance but also its symbolic meaning and cultural function in the lives of the people who create and use it.

Previous research on the symbols and functions of traditional masks is extensive (Gunnell 2024), with most studies emphasising ritual, identity, and social function. However, the visual form as a visible symbol, like its shape, structure, and visual elements, has rarely been discussed in a systematic manner.

This research is based on a review of the literature about symbols and functions of traditional masks. Through this review, similarities and differences between studies will be identified to reveal research gaps, either in terms of the object or the subject. This study focused on traditional masks related to rituals in culture and belief. The Barong Ket mask, in particular, is a significant traditional artefact embedded within the cultural and religious practices of Balinese Hindu communities.

This literature review employs a qualitative, non-hypothesis-based approach. This research aims to explore two issues: (1) how the symbols and functions of traditional masks have been understood in previous research, both in visible and invisible dimensions, and to what extent visual forms as visible symbols have been addressed; and (2) how these findings can be synthesised into an initial conceptual framework for interpreting the visible and invisible symbols and functions of the Barong Ket mask.

This literature review begins with a review of research on the symbols and functions of traditional masks to identify patterns and gaps. These insights are then used to develop a conceptual framework for interpreting both the visible and invisible dimensions of symbolism and function in the Barong Ket mask. The final section of this article discusses how the formulated conceptual framework can be used as an initial basis for interpreting the visible and invisible symbols and functions of the Barong Ket mask.

The main contribution of this article lies in the formulation of an initial conceptual framework for interpreting mask symbolism and function across both visible and invisible dimensions. It highlights the role of forms as visible symbols, a topic that has so far been relatively rarely discussed systematically in traditional mask studies, particularly in the case of the Barong Ket mask.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional Masks and Barong Ket Masks

Masks are cultural artefacts that express identity, status, and values. They are central in costumes and performances, serving as reflections of both aesthetic and spiritual traditions shaped by culture. This study considers how, in Indonesia and worldwide, masks differ in name and form, serving as symbols with various functions and meanings.

The Barong Ket mask, a four-legged animal figure, is a protector in Balinese cosmology. Also called Barong Ket, Barong Ketket, or Barong Rentet, it combines features of Boma, lion, and ox (Setem 2021; Bandem 2014; Titib 2003). Two dancers perform Barong Ket in rituals and performances. Its unique character makes it both an object of aesthetic appreciation and a symbol of sacred and social ties (Bandem 2014; Dibia 2018; Triguna et al. 1993).

According to legend, the origin of the Barong figure can be traced to Cokorda Api, who was instructed to create a sacred object (*sungsungan*, a ritual object believed to be imbued with spiritual presence). He visualised and sketched the image on the ground, which later became the basis for the creation of the Barong Punggalan (the canonical or originating form of the Barong), a form that continues to be followed to this day (Bandem 2014).



Figure 1 Barong Ket mask from Singapadu Village, taken in 2022.

Source: Photographed by the author.

Symbols and Functions of Masks

Symbols and functions are key to the cultural role of masks. Symbols convey meaning and belief systems, while function refers to the purposes a mask serves—whether practical, social, or symbolic. In many traditions, masks appear in religious rituals, with meanings rooted in characters, myths, and performances.

Existing research identifies several mask functions: aesthetic, symbolic, religious, and social. Most studies focus on symbolic and socio-ritual aspects. Few examine how masks' visual forms support their aesthetic value and meaning, especially in the case of the Barong Ket mask. This study addresses this gap by focusing on how visual dimensions drive meaning-making for the Barong Ket mask.

This study proposes a framework for interpreting symbols and functions of the Barong Ket mask, both visible and invisible. It emphasises the role of visual forms in shaping cultural meaning—an aspect that has been underexplored in previous research.

METHODS

This literature review followed a Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) informed screening and selection process to ensure transparency and methodological rigour in identifying relevant studies (Page et al. 2021). Although this review does not aim to be a meta-analysis, PRISMA principles were applied to document the identification, screening, and inclusion of sources.

Identification

A systematic literature search was conducted using the Scopus database. Two keyword groups were applied. The first group included the terms "mask," "traditional," "ritual art," and "culture." The initial search resulted in a total of 33 documents.

The second group refined the search using contextual and cultural terms, namely "Hindu," "Bali," and "Barong." The initial search resulted in a total of three documents.

Screening

The search results were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles within the Arts and Humanities subject area and restricted to English-language publications. Duplicate records were removed before screening.

Titles and abstracts were subsequently screened to assess their relevance to the study's focus on mask-related cultural functions, symbolic meanings, and ritual or artistic practices. Publications that focused solely on performance techniques, tourism promotion, or non-cultural design applications were excluded at this stage. Full-text articles were assessed based on the following criteria:

1. Explicit discussion of masks within traditional, ritual, or cultural contexts
2. Analytical engagement with symbolic meaning, function, or socio-cultural significance
3. Relevance to visible and invisible dimensions (material form, ritual role, belief systems, or social function)

Following the screening process, 20 articles were identified as relevant. After assessing full-text availability, 16 articles remained for further analysis.

Inclusion

Following full-text assessment, 16 articles (n = 16) were included in the final analysis. Of these, 14 articles were derived from the first keyword group, while two articles originated from the second keyword group, which specifically addressed Hindu, Balinese, and Barong-related contexts.

Figure 2 shows the method flowchart of the literature review that includes the steps explained earlier. These articles provided data on the symbols and functions of traditional masks and the Barong Ket mask. Next, relevant information, including title, author, year, objectives, and research summary, was extracted for both keyword groups, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. The analysis appears in the results and findings section, followed by conclusions.

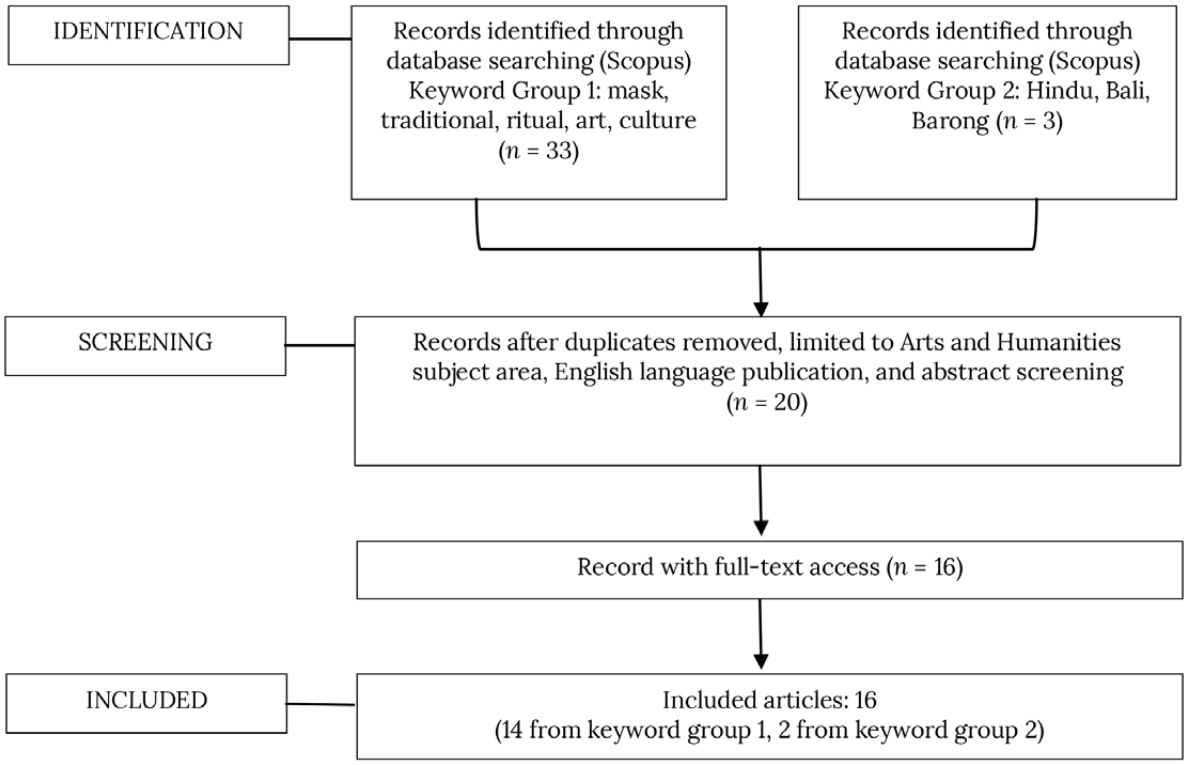


Figure 2 Method flowchart based on the PRISMA framework.

Table 1 Summary of data with keywords: mask, traditional, ritual, art and culture.

No	Author (year)	Title	Research purposes
1.	Wibowo (2019)	Malang mask puppet in the era of globalisation: social and cultural impact	Discussing the social and cultural impacts originating from the commercialisation of Malang masked puppets in the era of globalisation.
2.	Coldiron et al. (2015).	Women in Balinese mask: voices, reflections, and interactions	Finding out if there was anything in common between the three of them in their experiences with masks.
3.	Averett (2020)	Blurred boundaries: zoomorphic masking rituals and the human-animal relationship in ancient Cyprus	Discusses a deeper analysis of the human-animal relationship by looking at the relationship and integration, which is an expression of Cypriot religion through the attributes and rituals of zoomorphic masks.
4.	Orsingher (2020)	Disease, demons, and masks in the Iron Age Mediterranean	Discusses the definition of the ancient mask, explores mask culture in the Iron Age Mediterranean, and emphasises the role played by Carthage in maintaining and renewing Levantine veiled traditions.

(continued on next page)

Table 1 *(continued)*

No	Author (year)	Title	Research purposes
5.	Handapangoda et al. (2019)	Exploring tradition in heritage tourism: the experience of Sri Lanka's traditional mask art	Discusses the exploration of the interface and interaction between authentic and inauthentic cultural heritage and tourism, as well as a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural heritage and tourism work as powerful social phenomena that demonstrate the interaction and engagement of present-day society with the past.
6.	Ododo (2008)	FACEKUERADE: The transformational duality in Ebira-Ekuechi festival performance	Discusses the practice of Ebira masking in Central Nigeria. The focus is on identifying general and conceptual differences between masks and the character of the unmasked mask.
7.	Mossolova (2020)	Innovation and healing in contemporary Yup'ik mask making	An ethnographic study of the oldest art forms in Southwest Alaska with seven Yup'ik carvers.
8.	Ugwuanyi et al. (2020)	Masking and oral tradition in the re-enactment of village-based hierarchy among the acephalous, Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria	Discusses ways of applying masks and oral traditions to promote lineage and village sequences in the Igbo Society in Southeastern Nigeria, using ethnographic methods.
9.	Kang (2022)	Tradition as a field of people: the mobilisation of folkloric practices by art collective Turŏng	This article focuses on the physical expression of the Korean Bongsan mask dance.
10.	Gunnell (2024)	The meaning of the Mamuthones: tradition meets heritage in the highlands of Sardinia	This article is an ethnographic research article that tells from beginning to end how this tradition has never been scientifically explained.
11.	Guntur (2021)	The artistry and creative process in the making of Malang masks in East Java	Discussing the qualitative description of Malang mask art, through the formation of the Panji story.
12.	Shmagalo and Xian (2024)	The art of the mask and make-up in the traditions of the East and West: Artistic features, stylistics, interrelationship	The aim of this research is to present data regarding the evolution of theatrical mask art in European, Chinese and Japanese cultures.
13.	Furniss (2015)	Viewing Sub-Saharan African art with Western eyes: a question of aesthetics in the context of another culture and time	Emphasises the study of the role of the sculptor and the dichotomy of past traditional art and contemporary modern art.
14.	Mossolova and Michael (2020)	Yup'ik masks in the precontact past and the contested present	Tells about the mask tradition that is part of the Yup'ik people in the Alaska region, especially at the Nunalleq site.

Table 2 Summary of data with keywords: Hindu, Bali and Barong

No	Author (year)	Title	Research purposes
1.	Wirawan et al. (2024)	Strengthening socio-cultural ties of the Bali Hindu community through Ngelungang Barong Sinarengan tradition	Conducting a study on strengthening the socio-cultural ties of the Balinese Hindu community through dance. Ngelungang Barong performed by the Hindu community in Sebatu Village, Gianyar Regency.
2.	Sunarya (2020)	The concept of Rwa Bhineda Kriya on the island of Bali towards Jagadhita	The explanation of Kriya in religious life in Bali that is able to lead this religious life towards Jagadhita. This explanation is so that kriya can be understood by the next generation so that it is not lost.

This research employed a comprehensive literature review methodology; however, several important limitations remain. First, the literature reviewed was restricted to English-language journal articles indexed in Scopus, thereby excluding alternative sources such as palm-leaf manuscripts, ethnographic reports, popular publications, and community records. As a result, the diversity of perspectives (particularly those relating to the orally transmitted cosmological attributes of the Barong Ket) is limited. Second, employing specific search terms may have introduced confirmation bias, favouring publications aligned with the original research framework while overlooking divergent or contradictory perspectives. Acknowledging these limitations is essential for clearly delineating the scope of the research conclusions and for encouraging further inquiry.

To clarify the relationship between the research questions, methods, and findings, a mapping was developed for this study, connecting the research questions to the data sources, analytical approaches, and key findings. This mapping explicitly demonstrates how each research question is addressed through the qualitative analysis steps, as this study does not aim to test hypotheses but rather to formulate a conceptual synthesis based on a literature review.

Table 3 Mapping of research questions, methods, and findings.

Research questions	Data source	Stages of analysis in literature studies	Key results
RQ1	16 international journal articles related to traditional masks, rituals, and Barong	Literature selection, data extraction (title, purpose, summary), grouping of symbols and functions in visible–invisible dimensions	Previous studies have predominantly emphasised aspects of ritual, identity, and social function, while visual forms as symbols have been relatively rarely discussed systematically
RQ2	Synthesis of the results of RQ 1 and the literature specifically on Barong Ket	Comparison of findings, conceptual synthesis, and formulation of an initial framework for reading the symbols and functions of the Barong Ket mask	The initial conceptual framework for reading visible–invisible symbols and functions in the Barong Ket mask is formulated with an emphasis on the position of the visual form

DISCUSSION

The data summary in Table 1 shows that masks serve functions beyond mere aesthetics. Religious and spiritual functions appear as the most dominant. For example, Averett (2020) utilises Cypriot zoomorphic symbolism to highlight the connection between humans and animals in cosmological rituals. Yup'ik masks are also interpreted as a layered and animated miniature cosmos (Mossolova and Michael 2020). In this context, masks are seen not only as visual objects but as cosmological symbols. Religious and spiritual functions often occur alongside social and ideological roles. Nigerian Igbo masks reinforce social hierarchy through oral tradition (Ugwuanyi et al. 2020). Coldiron et al. (2015) argue that women's involvement in Balinese masks confirms their ritual function. Economic and tourism functions also appear in the Sri Lankan mask tradition, where masks have been commodified by the tourism industry (Handapangoda et al. 2019). Similarly, Malang mask art has experienced revitalisation and commercialisation in the era of globalisation (Wibowo 2019; Guntur 2021). Masks, therefore, occupy an ambivalent position: they function both as sacred heritage and market commodities. At the same time, masks serve as a medium of collective expression. Mask art evolves within its cultural context, and its symbolic functions shift over time. This is evident in the transformation of African art aesthetics through Western influence (Furniss 2015), as well as in the stylistic differences among European, Chinese, and Japanese traditions (Shmagalo and Xian 2024). The Korean Bongsan dance (Kang 2022), the Ebira festival in Nigeria (Ododo 2008), and the Mamuthones tradition in Sardinia (Gunnell 2024) demonstrate similar dynamics.

This synthesis demonstrates that masks from various cultures have multifaceted functions—religious, economic, and aesthetic—that are continually being negotiated. The key similarity lies in the interplay of meaning between the sacred and the profane, as well as between tradition and modernity, as evident in their symbols. The primary difference lies in their cultural focus: some emphasise cosmology and spirituality, while others focus on commodification and modern transformation. A major gap is the lack of studies that connect how the tension between sacred and economic functions influences the continuity of the mask's symbolic meaning.

The data summary in Table 2 shows that Barong in Bali emphasises sacred and cosmological dimensions. Wirawan et al. (2024) demonstrated that the Ngelungang Barong Sinarengan tradition symbolises Lord Shiva's power. This ritual neutralises the negative energy of Bhuta Kala and strengthens social bonds between residents—one of its social functions. Sunarya (2020) discusses the Rwa Bhineda philosophy in the context of craft practice. This principle harmonises differences (Jagadhita). Craft art, including masks, serves as an aesthetic medium and a way to internalise Balinese Hindu cosmological teachings in daily life. Balinese literature places a greater emphasis on spiritual and cosmological symbols and socio-harmonious functions than on economic or commercial dimensions. These latter aspects are more common in international studies. The gap is the lack of exploration into how sacred symbols and spiritual functions are negotiated in modern contexts. Tourism and the commodification of art are often overlooked, despite their prevalence in international literature.

The synthesis of Tables 1 and 2 reveals significant similarities and differences. Both agree that masks are cosmological symbols that foster social integration, fulfilling roles that are both religious and social, as well as economic and aesthetic. Table 1 places greater emphasis on economic, political, and commodification aspects, whereas Table 2 gives prominence to sacred functions and the social harmony rooted in Balinese Hindu philosophy. The key contrast lies in their focus: Table 1 foregrounds material and socio-political roles, while Table 2 prioritises spiritual and communal values. This reveals a gap regarding the economic and commodification dimensions of Barong Ket as an intangible cultural heritage topic seldom explored in local literature, yet increasingly significant as tourism develops in Bali. This research addresses

that gap, enabling a comprehensive review of Barong Ket's dynamics through a conceptual framework that integrates both visible socio-economic functions and the underlying spiritual and cosmological values within contemporary cultural practices.

The analysis of the 16 selected documents is divided into two parts. The first examines visible and invisible symbols and functions. The findings are presented in comparative tables (Tables 4–6), which categorise symbols and functions across masks in general and the Barong Ket in particular. The extracted data were subsequently synthesised into categories of visible and invisible symbols and functions, as summarised in Table 4.

Table 4 Data extraction regarding the symbols and functions of masks in general, visible and invisible.

No	Symbol		Function	
	Seen	**Not visible**	**Seen**	**Not visible**
1.	Worship	Protection	Solidarity bond	Sacred procession
2.	Bull form	Gods of Cyprus	Entertainment media	Seeking profit (transactional)
3.	Representing various characters and emotions	Religious	Communicating transition and mediation	Teaching good character
4.	Limiting artefact	The liaison between humans and spirits	Representing a certain historical era	Healing
5.	Hiding one's identity	Taking someone else's identity	Ceremonial equipment	Regeneration
6.	Representing various mythological images	Power, masculinity, war	-	-
7.	Cultural identity	Goodness, fertility		-
8.	Artistic	-	-	-

Table 4 shows the symbols and functions that have been narrowed down. The results of the data extraction show that the visible symbols have eight points that can be divided into three major categories, namely ritual symbols (no. 1), identity symbols (no. 3–7), and visual symbols (no. 2 and 8). Invisible symbols have seven points that can be divided into two major categories: cultural symbols (no. 2–4) and symbols of power (no. 1, 5–7).

Meanwhile, the visible function has five points that can be divided into three major categories, namely social functions (no. 1 and 3), historical functions (no. 4), and practical functions (no. 2 and 5). Invisible functions have five points that can be divided into four major categories, namely ritual functions (no. 1), economic functions (no. 2), educational functions (no. 3 and 5), and healing functions (no. 4). This narrowing of symbols and functions will be used as a reference to see how the symbols and functions of Barong Ket are visible and invisible.

Table 5 Symbols and functions of Barong Ket in general: visible and invisible.

No	Barong Ket symbol		Function of Barong Ket	
	Seen	**Not visible**	**Seen**	**Not visible**
1.	Worship—as worship from part Balinese Hindu community ceremony	Protection—for communities and villages	Binder solidarity—togetherness Balinese Hindu society	Procession sacred—medium of communication
2.	Lion, tiger, ox, and Boma form	God Shiva	Entertainment media—for tourists	Look for profit (transactional)—needs economy
3.	Represent various characters and emotions—tough, authoritative, haunted, sweet	Religious—representing gods in Balinese Hinduism	Representing a certain historical era—changes from time to time	Teaching good character—religious teachings
4.	Artefact limiter—proxy/description from the god believed in as a medium	The link between humans and spirits—a communication medium	Equipment ceremony—one of the objects sacred required for the ceremony	Healing—believed can cure
5.	Represent various mythological images—*Banaspati Raja*	Power, masculinity, war—the power of the king of the jungle	-	Regeneration—science knowledge that comes down hereditary
6.	Identity culture—Bali	-	-	-
7.	Artistic—as entertainment for tourists and for race	-	-	-

The mapping results from Table 5, using references from Table 4, show that there are points not found in Barong Ket, both in symbols and functions. The mapping results narrow down the categories of symbols and functions. These categories include both visible and invisible forms. Visible symbols comprise ritual, identity, and social symbols. Invisible symbols are cultural symbols and symbols of power. Visible functions include social, historical, and practical roles. In contrast, invisible functions include ritual, economic, educational, and healing roles.

The visible symbols of the Barong Ket consist of seven elements, which can be grouped into three main categories: ritual symbols (no. 1), identity symbols (no. 3, 4, and 6), and visual symbols (no. 2, 5, and 7). The invisible symbols of the Barong Ket comprise five elements, which can be divided into two primary categories: cultural symbols (no. 2–4) and symbols of power (no. 1 and 5). In terms of function, the visible functions of the Barong Ket consist of four elements, which can be categorised into three main types: social function (no. 1), historical function (no. 4), and practical function (no. 2 and 3). The invisible functions of the Barong Ket include five elements, which can be grouped into four categories: ritual function (no. 1), economic function (no. 2), educational function (no. 3 and 5), and healing function (no. 4).

Table 6 Comparison between visible and invisible symbols and functions on masks in general and Barong Ket.

Symbol				Function			
Masks in general		**Barong Ket**		**Masks in general**		**Barong Ket**	
Seen	**Not visible**	**Seen**	**Not visible**	**Seen**	**Not visible**	**Seen**	**Not visible**
Ritual symbols (1)		Ritual symbols (1)		Social function (2)		Social function (1)	
Identity symbols (5)		Identity symbol (3)		Function of history (1)		Function of history (1)	
Visual symbols (2)		Visual symbols (3)		Practical functions (2)		Practical functions (2)	
	Cultural symbols (3)		Cultural symbols (3)		Ritual function (1)		Ritual function (1)
	Symbol of power (4)		Symbol of power (2)		Economic function (1)		Economic function (1)
					Educational function (2)		Educational function (2)
					Healing function (1)		Healing function (1)

The mapping in Table 6 illustrates the similarities and differences between masks in general and those of Barong Ket. Both carry ritual symbols, identity, and social and ritual functions. However, Barong Ket emphasises sacred and cosmological aspects, whereas masks in general tend to be more varied, encompassing both entertainment and commodification functions.

The educational function of Barong Ket is an activity that passes on cultural values and religious teachings, as seen in Wirawan et al.'s (2024) research on Ngelungang Barong, which strengthens social ties and facilitates the transmission of Balinese Hindu teachings. This educational aspect becomes clear through activities in art studios, as well as the involvement of children and young adults in sacred ceremonial activities and in learning to create or dance the Barong Ket. Through these processes, Barong Ket serves as a medium for learning Balinese Hindu values, such as the concepts of Rwa Bhineda (duality) and *Tri Hita Karana* (three harmonies). In addition to its educational role, Barong Ket also serves an economic function, as evident in its daily performances in Batubulan, a phenomenon similar to the commodification of Sri Lankan mask art in tourism (Handapangoda et al. 2019) and the revitalisation of Malang masks (Wibowo 2019). At the same time, Barong Ket further serves as a symbol of Balinese identity, as noted by Bandem (2014), who describes Barong as an icon of contemporary Balinese performing arts.

Barong Ket fulfils critical, yet unseen, functions that shape contemporary Balinese socio-cultural trends. As tourism grows, traditional arts become a pillar of the local economy. Additionally, the process of creating Barong serves as cross-generational cultural education in traditional Balinese environments. Furthermore, local literature emphasises the preservation of cosmological values, such as Rwa Bhineda in crafts (Sunarya 2020), to prevent performances from being reduced to mere commodities. Therefore, the economic, educational, and identity functions of Barong Ket are tied to the socio-cultural dynamics of contemporary Bali. While economic growth in tourism encourages commodification, art studios also play a role in cultural education. As a result, Barong Ket represents Balinese identity to the world. This demonstrates that Barong Ket is not only a sacred entity but also a multifaceted social, economic, and cultural agent whose role is continually negotiated.

These findings reveal clear tensions in interpreting the function of the Barong Ket mask. On the one hand, masks are positioned as sacred media integral to spiritual practices; on the other, they are utilised for entertainment and economic purposes, particularly within the contexts of tourism and commodification. The coexistence of these seemingly opposing functions (sacred versus profane) calls for a more nuanced conceptual framework to interpret the dynamics between these roles, as well as the interplay between tradition and modernity and between local and global influences on the Barong Ket.

The central contradiction within this synthesis arises from differing interpretations of mask functions. Some studies, such as those examining Sri Lankan mask traditions sustained through tourism (Handapangoda et al. 2019) and Malang masks in the context of commercialisation (Wibowo 2019), view commodification as a strategy for preservation or revitalisation, thereby emphasising the economic and profane roles of masks. In contrast, local studies prioritise the sacred nature of masks. For instance, Sunarya (2020) underscores the principles of Rwa Bhineda and the pursuit of Jagadhita within craft practices. These divergent perspectives generate a fundamental tension between economic and sacred functions, which lies at the core of sustainability discourse surrounding the Barong Ket.

Based on this synthesis, the conceptual framework proposed in this research consists of three dimensions. The first dimension, "seen," encompasses visual and material aspects, such as *tapel* (mask form), colour, ornamentation, and performative elements, as visible symbolic forms. The second dimension, "unseen," emphasises spiritual, cosmological, and symbolic aspects of identity. The third dimension comprises intersectional aspects, including economic, educational, political, and cultural functions. This framework positions the Barong Ket as a dynamic entity, a cultural symbol that is continuously negotiated within shifting social, cultural, and economic contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study sets out to address two primary research questions: first, to describe the visible and invisible symbols and functions of traditional masks; and second, to analyse how these insights can be applied to understand the symbols and functions inherent in the Barong Ket mask. Through a systematic literature review, this research demonstrates that masks across cultures are more than visual or performative objects; rather, they are multilayered cultural symbols that operate between the realms of the sacred and the profane, the material and the spiritual, and the traditional and the modern.

Traditional masks generally embody dual meanings that correspond to their visible and invisible dimensions. The visible aspects are material and formal; they can be seen through lines, shapes, colours, and performances, while the invisible aspects are symbolic, spiritual, and cosmological, reflecting belief systems and communal values. Functionally, masks serve social, historical, and performative purposes, but they also play deeper roles as ritual instruments, educational tools, and healing media. These dual positions make masks dynamic cultural agents, continually adapting to the social, religious, and economic transformations within their communities.

Within this broader framework, the Barong Ket mask represents a distinctive synthesis of these symbolic and functional layers. The visible form of the Barong Ket shows a combination of lion, tiger, ox, and Boma features, along with elaborate costumes and decorative elements. Its invisible dimension, however, embodies profound spiritual meanings rooted in Balinese Hindu cosmology, particularly the principles of Rwa Bhineda (duality) and Jagadhita (collective

harmony). The Barong Ket functions as both a sacred and social medium: it reinforces community bonds, transmits cultural and religious teachings, and, in contemporary contexts, contributes to the local economy through tourism and performance. Thus, the Barong Ket stands as a living symbol that bridges tradition and modernity, spirituality and commerce.

The findings reveal a crucial tension between the sacred and economic functions of the Barong Ket mask, as traditional arts increasingly intersect with tourism and creative industries. While commodification offers opportunities for preservation and revitalisation, it also risks diminishing spiritual meaning. This study proposes a three-dimensional framework to interpret this dynamic: the seen (visible, material, and performative aspects such as *tapel*, colour, and dance), the unseen (spiritual, cosmological, and identity meanings), and the intersectional (educational, economic, and social roles that connect both realms). As a central symbol of Balinese identity, the Barong Ket embodies artistic craftsmanship, cultural memory, and moral philosophy, reinforcing its role as a bridge between tradition and modernity. Understanding its symbolism and function deepens awareness of the need to preserve this intangible cultural heritage, while future research on its visual form and colour symbolism may further reveal how design communicates spirituality. Ultimately, both traditional masks and the Barong Ket demonstrate how cultural artefacts continuously adapt, negotiate, and sustain meaning across changing social and historical contexts, embodying the ongoing dialogue between the sacred and the world.

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