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The revival of *Sang Hyang Dedari* dance: a phenomenological approach to social-ecological reconstruction in Bali

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**Abstract**

This research and community engagement investigates an ancient Balinese ritual known as *Sang Hyang Dedari*. The dance is interrelated to an agricultural aspect of the traditional Balinese living. As the Balinese struggle to maintain their values from the constant threat of modernization and industrialization, this dance reveals the powerful impact of creating an awareness of socio-ecological equilibrium. The effort made by the villagers of Geriana Kauh, Karangasem, displays how local community rebuilds its environment based on their traditional ecological value. Analyzing *Sang Hyang Dedari* dance through phenomenological approach, thus, it can be discovered how the ritual sustains the social relations. The bodies of the dancers are the center of an elaborate nexus between people, nature and god. To understand how the dualism of sacred and profane bodies, this research utilizes the body theory by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The importance of phenomenology as a theory relates to the understanding on how the ritual works as an event in its totality. Understanding the unity between the presence of the divine, nature and human. The output of this research and community engagement is a museum built in cooperation between University of Indonesia with the villagers of Geriana Kauh, Karangasem. As the performance and knowledge about Sang Hyang Dedari appeared to be scarce, this museum is a form of collaboration to retrace the history of Sang Hyang Dedari ritual, in an attempt to conserve the ancient knowledge.

**Keywords:** *Sang Hyang Dedari, Agriculture, Phenomenology, Body, Trance.*

**1. Introduction**

The dance of *Sang Hyang Dedari* is a sacred Balinese ritual, closely intertwined with the Balinese rice culture. The ritual is a form of veneration to the goddesses for a bountiful harvest. It was once a common ritual performed in villages all around Bali, now has become rare and nearly extinct. The disappearance of *Sang Hyang Dedari* ritual is a direct impact to the massive modernization happening in Bali. Vast scale of unsustainable tourism infrastructures has strained the delicate balance of Balinese living. One of the last remaining *Sang Hyang Dedari* rituals survives in the quiet village of North Duda, Karangasem Regency. This rare tradition has become the symbol of indigenous wisdom struggling to maintain harmony between man and nature.

![Fig. 1. The picturesque view of Geriana Kauh village, located on the foothill of Mt. Agung](image)

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With the massive modernization and industrialization occurring in Bali, changes have become inevitable. These changes threaten the core of ecological and cosmological harmony of the traditional Balinese living. Bali was once renowned for its green emerald-like countryside, rice fields stretching as far as the eyes could see, with its famous plateaus. This romantic picturesque nature of Bali has been fading significantly, with rice fields depleting, and people shifting their traditional way of living. Ecological degradations are causing immediate changes to the Balinese, both culturally and spiritually. *Sang Hyang Dedari* for example, is the evidence on how extreme shift in the environment directly impacts the societal structure.

*Sang Hyang Dedari* as a rite can be traced back to ancient times Balinese, where rice was considered sacred. Most literature emphasized the function of the dance as a rite to repel illness and other maladies. But recent findings exhibit the strong relation between *Sang Hyang Dedari* dance and agriculture in Bali. The dance is a form of gratitude to the gods and goddesses, but it is also a prayer for a successful crop, healthy crops, protection from rice pests and other kinds of problems.

This article aims to show the readers a short history of *Sang Hyang Dedari* dance, within its correlation to the rice culture. But beyond a historical description of the dance, more importantly, is an understanding of why the ritual has become nearly extinct and what causes it. Upon its extinction, Balinese are struggling to resurrect *Sang Hyang* dances. The recent discovery of *Sang Hyang Dedari* dance in Karangasem is also an interesting phenomenon. What prompts the villagers to revive *The Sang Hyang* dances? What is the ecological, or even existential effect of reviving the *Sang Hyang Dedari* dance? Answering these questions is essential to the mission of community engagement made by University of Indonesia. In order to sustain an already dying local wisdom, the academic society bears the obligation to preserve this unique tradition.

This research utilizes a phenomenological approach, by applying phenomenology to the subject matter. Thus, it can be revealed how The *Sang Hyang Dedari* ritual sustains and preserves the social, and ecological structure of the indigenous community. The purpose of using phenomenology is to investigate the subtle relations between the subject and its world, through a lived experience (*Erlebnis*), (Vagle, 2014). *Sang Hyang Dedari* ritual functions as a connector among individuals in the society. This indicates that *Sang Hyang Dedari* possesses a social function, beyond its devotional purpose to the gods and goddesses.

### 2. Theoretical Background

There is a paradoxical epistemology in understanding the body in *Sang Hyang Dedari* ceremony. Human body, in its mortal form, is a profane body far from perfection and subject to basic human needs and flaws. However, when the ceremony takes place, all religious preparations have been followed, the body of the dancers no longer belong to their human limitations. They are revered as sacred bodies, able to do extraordinary works, impervious to danger and other human weaknesses. They perform miracles by healing not only physical illness but also social illness in the village.

Social functions of the dance is an important part of the whole ritual. In order to comprehend the Balinese cosmology, this ritual allows us to see the bond among the individuals, society, nature and the divine. The body as a symbol represents what Balinese commonly calls *Niskala* and *Sekala*. *Niskala* is the unseen part of the world, whereas *Sekala* is the perceived world. The constant tension between Sekala and *Niskala* is what life is made of for Balinese. Similar to how the body is perceived, in a way it is ordinary and has quantifiable properties. However, apart from this fact, the body is also an instrument to feel the unseen world.
Balinese are artists in living their lives, they never separate art with their idea of worship. This is also the case in Sang Hyang Dedari; it is a majestic performance, a sacred theatrical performance, full of colorful, complicated, and beautiful rites. In the center of the elaborate dance is the concept of a body as an expression. Through the swaying, and wild dances of the little girls, we can interpret those trance experiences as collective movements of the bodies to reach unity with nature. Using phenomenology, specifically theories by Maurice Merleau Ponty we can construct a more philosophical framework of the body as a existential expression. Merleau-Ponty reiterates how using our body we can rediscover our existence in the world,

"The theory of the body schema is, implicitly, a theory of perception. We have relearned to feel our body; we have found underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body that other knowledge which we have of it in virtue of its always being with us and of the fact that we are our body. In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceived the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self, and as it were, the subject of perception." (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 239)

Knowledge for the Balinese is transmitted through traditions (songs, dances, music and others). Sang Hyang Dedari, for instance, is a communal event, where people's participation is the essence of the dance, as social glue among individuals. Social conflicts are also cured by the presence of the goddesses. Any social distortion and imbalance would be healed. The ritual becomes a space for the individuals attending the ceremony to surrender their problems, their conflicts are purged by the dancers. The state of possession (kerawuhan) indicates the catharsis of social hysteria. Once it is released, then the collective emotional instabilities are restored into neutral.

The pursuit of phenomenological investigation is to unveil the relations between subject with other bodies, and also with the world. It has already been stated about the concept of body, and also how Sang Hyang Dedari maintain the order of social structure. Merleau-Ponty argues that the essence of reality is hidden, when the individual experience the world through her body, intentionally, she is re-experiencing her subjectivity. Likewise, in the dance of Sang Hyang Dedari, the spectators are not ordinary people experiencing mere entertainment, they are experiencing an overpowering event, represented by the possessed holy dancers. They are revealing their totality with nature as a whole. They see themselves becoming an integral part of the universe (Jagat).

According to Merleau-Ponty, there is no pure subjectivity, or consciousness as absolutely solitary,

"We have the experience of an I not in the sense of an absolute subjectivity, but indivisibly demolished and remade by the course of time. The unity of either the subject or the object is not a real unity, but a presumptive unity on the horizon of experience. We must rediscover, as anterior to the ideas of subject and object, the fact of my subjectivity and the nascent of object, that primordial layer at which both things and ideas come into being." (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 : 256)

Phenomenologically, Sang Hyang Dedari ritual functions itself as if it is an axis, a nucleus where all relations revolve around it. It brings to light concealed relationship between
individuals with their deep consciousness, individuals with their society, and most importantly individuals and their bond with nature. Merleau-Ponty (1968) elaborates the intersection between what is visible and invisible in the world. The idea strikes a resemblance to Balinese concept of Niskala and Sekala, between the perceivable and non-perceivable dimensions of nature. The worship using the bodies of the dancers are taken as a method to attain knowledge regarding the unseen dimension of nature.

![The dancers of Sang Hyang Dedari](image)

“To understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance—and the body is our anchorage in a world.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 167). To delve into the matter of transitioning from profane to sacred, Mircea Eliade explains this transformation as Hierophany. (Eliade, 1987.) It is a crucial part of the ritual, a shifting of meaning from ordinary, mundane objects into sacred and revered entity. We can observe this stage as an attempt of setting apart between the mundane and the divine. But what is particularly unique, is that the distinction between mortal and the divine is determined through certain attributes. The invoking Sang Hyang Dedari, for instance, can only be done during auspicious dates inside the holy ground, accompanied by chanted mantra and incense. “By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu.” (Eliade, 1987: 12). Eliade continues to explain that for the spiritual man, space is not singular. Space is full of slivers of realms, between the empirical world, and the other mystical realm. Based on the believers these worlds are constantly colliding. “It must be said at once that the religious experience of the non-homogeneity of space is a primordial experience, homologizable to a founding of the world. It is not a matter of theoretical speculation, but of a primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world” (Eliade, 1987: 20-21).

3. Methods

The research on *The Sang Hyang Dedari* started back in 2014. The initial research was focusing on the investigation into aspects of sacred and magic in *The Sang Hyang Dedari* dance. The three main research questions were: (1) why is the dance considered sacred? (2) What can be understood about the embodiment of the divine into the bodies of young girls? and (3) how the dance serves a deeper context of Bali’s social structure? These questions were not the ordinary single discipline type of research. By applying phenomenology, the research was able to develop into intricate questions; how does the dance work as a social
tool? How does the dance exist as an artistic expression, and how the dance being practiced as a spiritual encounter with the divine?

The search was extensive for Sang Hyang Dedari dance, putting into consideration various rumors about where the dance would still took place. The field investigation concentrated on two sources for clues of the Sang Hyang Dedari’s origin; Professor Nyoman Sedana and Professor Made Bandem books, where both literatures pointed out to Gianyar as the origin of the Sang Hyang Dedari. Interview took place in Bona Village, information was gathered from Made Sija (90 years old) a patron (penglingsir) about the dance. He gave a testimony that the dance has not been performed in the south of Bali for quite some time. He told stories about how the dance was performed to neutralized plague and sickness in the village. He was a child during that time.

The formidable task of finding Sang Hyang Dedari in Bali stresses the urgency to protect the remaining villagers who still perform the sacred dance. Geriana Kauh Village is an exceptional community that strive to maintain the sacred dance despite their hardships. It is not until another year that this village was discovered, alongside the ritual’s connection to the complexity of archaic agricultural tradition. The process of collecting data for the past years has been arduous; multiple interviews, deciphering linguistic trace of the song (gendingan), and filming and photographing the Sang Hyang Dedari dance.

Based on field and literary research, dance performances in Bali can be divided into three categories: sacred (Wali), semi sacred (Bebali) and Entertainment (Bebalih-Balihan). Sang Hyang Dedari is a sacred performance, the ritual is executed inside the sacred grounds of the temple. It involves trance performance by the young dancers, using holy incenses and incantation by the priest and audience. Sang Hyang Dedari can be categorized as one of the Sang Hyang Dances, among other Sang Hyang dances such as Sang Hyang Jaran, Sang Hyang Dongkang, Sang Hyang Sampad, Sang Hyang Perahu, etc. These dances are traces of animistic and dynamistic practices. By origins, they are even argued as pre-Hindu ceremonial dances (Rubin & Sedana, 2007 : 51)

Sang Hyang can be translated as The Sacred Spirit. Depending on the types of Sang Hyang Dances, the spirits possessing the dancers are different in their performances. In Sang Hyang Dedari, the dancers are believed to be possessed by the goddesses of Tunjung Biru and Supraba. While ini Sang Hyang Jaran—(Jaran is the Balinese word for horse), the dancer is possessed by the great horse spirit. Sang Hyang Jaran dancers would mimic the movements of a horse, galloping, and neighing. These dancers appear to be in a possessed consciousness, relinquishing their mortal identity and surrendering their bodies to the spirits.

Sang Hyang Dedari dance is a ritual which includes young girls who have not reached their puberty, ranging from age 7-12 years old. They are considered as the personification of purity. During the ritual, these girls are believed to have temporary divine powers. Being the embodiment of goddesses (Dedari), they act playfully; dancing, playing and even performing dangerous acts, such as walking through fire, climbing to 4 meters high bamboos fearlessly and unhurt. After finishing the ritual, the dancers are left without any recollections about the acts they have performed.
Sang Hyang Dedari ritual generally can be divided into several stages: preparation, main ceremony, and final closing ceremony. Preparation takes place inside the holy ground, with the incenses burning, and smoke being waved onto the dancers. The intense smoke is a way to invoke the spirits to enter the body of the dancers. In total darkness, the dancers would lose their consciousness, and later being woken up as goddesses. As the main ceremony progresses, the possessed little girls would dance with their eyes closed, dancing carelessly, moving energetically. The duration of the main ceremony is tentative, depending on the presence of the goddesses. Alongside the dancing of Dedari, selected audiences would accompany them with chanting and songs (Gending). Toward the end of the ceremony, the dancers are being sprinkled with holy waters by the priest. They are revived and once again regain their consciousness as little girls.

The presence of the Dedari (goddesses) is a form of blessing to the villagers. Walter Spies writes,

“When there is an epidemic in the village the Sanghyang is carried through the streets to drive away evil spirits, attended by all the village; otherwise she is carried to another temple court or open space, and there dances.” (Spies, 2002 : 71)

The dancers of Sang Hyang are considered as special individuals chosen by the priests or village elders. Sometimes the inspiration of choosing an individual comes in form of dreams. The little girls chosen as the medium of the goddesses must live a chaste life. Nevertheless, despite their unique duties in the ceremony, these little girls remain ordinary children. They attend elementary school, and play with other children in the village. This dual psychology is peculiar indeed, in a sacred event these girls are transformed into deities, but then simultaneously, they are inherently ordinary children.
4. Result and Discussion

In attempt to protect ancient traditional dance, United Nations through UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has inducted Sang Hyang Dedari dance as one of the World’s Heritage (2nd December 2015). This recognition is an important effort to preserve the history of Sang Hyang Dedari dance. However, apart from UNESCO’s recognition, this tradition has become rare in Bali. Preserving the dance needs a wider perspective, a viewpoint that sees the dance not only as a performance art, but more than that, Sang Hyang Dedari dance as a ritual rooted to the people, and their traditional lifestyle.

The last Sang Hyang Dedari still being performed consistently is in North Duda, Geriana Kauh Village, in Karangasem, East of Bali. Geriana Kauh consists of 177 families, where most of them are farmers. There are new findings regarding motives and contexts in why the Sang Hyang Dedari ritual is performed. Based on a research back in 2014 funded by Faculty of Humanities, University of Indonesia (https://sanghyangdedari.org), it affirmed upon a common knowledge that the ritual functions as a protection against evil spirit and maladies (Tolak Bala). The resurfacing Geriana Kauh Village as a place for Sang Hyang Dedari tells more information on the origin of Sang Hyang Dedari and its correlation to the rice culture.

Based on an interview, the chief of Geriana Kauh village (http://www.antaranews.com), I Wayan Bhrata explained that the people of Geriana Kauh village have been reviving Sang Hyang Dedari dance for almost 10 years. It was not easy to maintain commitment to perform such intricate ritual. There were various obstacles, but they have prevailed in preserving Sang Hyang Dedari for the past decade. However, the dance was lost for thirty years ever since there was a change into modern agriculture, known as the era of Green Revolution (1979). Farmers were persuaded to use high yielding seeds, in order to optimize harvests. This method pertained also the use of pesticides and fertilizers, which proven fatal to the soil’s healthiness.

“The term Green Revolution refers to the replacement of native rice with hybridized high-yielding varieties that require the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides... In Bali, the Green Revolution was accompanied by new government agricultural policies that promoted continuous cropping of the new rice in an effort to boost rice production. Farmers were encouraged to plant rice as quickly as possible, without regard for traditional irrigation schedules.” (Lansing, 2007: 3)

The transition into modern technology of farming, implicated not only the way people managed their rice fields, but it also changed the Balinese culture regarding The Water Temples (Pura Subak). New schedules of harvests disrupted the perfect order of the traditional irrigation system or commonly known as The Subak system. Stephen. J Lansing explains the importance of Subak,

“Subaks are egalitarian organizations that are empowered to manage the rice terraces and irrigation systems on which the prosperity of the village depends, and they to have frequent meetings that are governed by the same strict democratic etiquette. Between them, the village, and subak assemblies govern most aspects of a farmer’s social, economic, and spiritual life.” (Lansing, 2007: 5)

Subak has also been enlisted as World’s Heritage by UNESCO back in 2012. Unfortunately, statistics shows a dim future for rice culture in Bali, where numbers indicate that rice fields are disappearing more than 1000 hectare/year (Journal of Bali Studies, 2013: 152). Wayan
Windia argues that the rapid depletion of rice fields and subaks are caused by massive land conversion into tourism sector. Other than that, water pollution in the irrigation canals also worsened the situation for the remaining subak farmers. The harmful effect of pesticide has also made matter worse for the rice fields ecosystem, soils are barren and extremely damaged.

In the past, the villagers of Geriana Kauh suffered from failed crops for several years. I Wayan Bratha described, soils were unproductive, ecosystems failed, due to the exploitation to gain more harvests. People started to leave their village, in hope of finding jobs in the city. It was the lowest point of their lives, spirits were broken, and they were about to give up with their village. Until one day they gathered in a village meeting to resolve the problem. They agreed on the decision to resurrect the long forgotten sacred dance of Sang Hyang Dedari. The ritual would be a way to show redemption to the gods and goddesses. A chance to start over, and this time, rebuilt their lives in accordance with nature, as how their ancestors have lived.

Gradually, the villagers of Geriana Kauh restored harmony in their little village. They continue farming, and already are successful in preserving ancient local seeds, which they called, Padi Masa. They cultivate their rice fields organically, using natural fertilizers, creating a sustainable agro-ecology oriented farming. Now, every year they hold the holy dance of Sang Hyang Dedari as a gesture of gratitude to mother nature. The dance usually takes place nearing the time to harvest their rice fields, marked with the fields turning into golden yellowish color. Prior to Sang Hyang Dedari ritual, they have all sorts of ritual such as ‘Ngusaba’ which relates to Geriana Kauh’s agricultural roots. Usaba in Bali has its connection to the Subak tradition.

These findings are valuable to understand why ancient traditions such as traditional irrigation system (Subak) and also rice culture rituals such as Sang Hyang Dedari are vanishing. In order to sustain their existence, we have to see these activities not as a singular ritual, but as an altogether way of life. Sang Hyang Dedari ritual was once lost in Karangasem due to inconsistencies with the scheduling of harvest, a disruption on following the ancient Balinese calendar. Now they follow the harvest of an old organic seed called Padi Masa to indicate the time to celebrate Sang Hyang Dedari’s arrival in their village.

Covarrubias emphasized the meaning of rice for Balinese,

“Since man lives off rice and his body and soul are built from it, rice itself is treated with reverence and respected and the whole rice culture has developed into an elaborate cult.” (Covarrubias, 1973: 60)

In an interview with Ni Ketut Arini (12th of January 2016) a Balinese dance maestro, she explained an important piece of information relating to Sang Hyang Dedari dance. Currently, Ni Ketut Arini resides in Sumerta, Denpasar, Bali. She remembered her childhood days dancing as a Sang Hyang Dedari dancer. Ni Ketut Arini, 73 years old now, explained that the ritual was performed approaching harvest time in Denpasar. She said Denpasar was so different back then, it was covered with lush green rice fields. Most of those rice fields have gone now, replaced by crowded buildings. With the rice fields no longer exist in Denpasar, this fact connects to the extinction of Sang Hyang Dedari dance in Denpasar. Ni Ketut Arini added that the last time the dance was performed was in the 1960s. This testimony corroborates the phenomena in Geriana Kauh, Karangasem, that Sang Hyang Dedari is embedded to the Balinese rice culture.

With the assistance from the University of Indonesia community engagement program, in partnership with the people of Geriana Kauh, a museum will be built to commemorate the
spirit of Sang Hyang Dedari. This community museum will be focusing on documenting history about Sang Hyang Dedari, gathering data (pictures, books, texts, paintings and others) scattered all over the world. The museum will be a testament on how the villagers of Geriana Kauh struggled to save their village. It conveys the message to the younger generation on the significance of socio-ecological principal, living in harmony and sustainably alongside nature.

This museum represents the university's involvement to put theories into practices, and the commitment to engage with the community. The meaning of building a museum is not limited to understanding Sang Hyang Dedari as an artifact. Moreover, it is a living museum, located in the heart of the village, managed by the villagers. Through the museum, visitors will learn the importance of Sang Hyang Dedari ritual and the following social and ecological messages. It will also emphasize the role of society in safeguarding their local knowledge.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, reflecting on the revival of Sang Hyang Dedari dance in Geriana Kauh, Karangasem, we can understand that ecological degradation could also lead into social problems. Moreover, we cannot separate the individual, the society and the nature from each other. Balinese people live by the wisdom of Tri Hita Karana, meaning three fundamental principal of well-being. Balance must be carried out in social life, among human beings (Pawongan), the nature (Palemahan), and subsequently with the divine (Parahyangan). This value has been a foundation for Balinese since hundreds of years ago, it has been the guiding norm for them in living their everyday lives.

Modern unsustainable developments and progress in tourism mega infrastructures have caused tension to the harmony of Tri Hita Karana in Bali. But the people of Geriana Kauh have shown that there is a holistic solution to the problem, incorporating aspects of ritual, and socio-ecological sustainability. The solution is quite elegant, underlining willingness to live a modest lifestyle, without exploiting nature’s gifts. Geriana Kauh is an example on how the power of community is capable of solving ecological and social crises. Geriana Kauh is an inspiration and a message of empowerment to local movements who are struggling to protect their villages and traditions from unsustainable development. By utilizing traditional ecological values, creating equilibrium between human and nature.

The choice to reinvent a long lost ritual such as Sang Hyang Dedari is a conscious decision made by the people of Geriana Kauh. We can assess it as a strategy to defend their values from negative influences of modernization. As a collective consciousness, the people of Geriana Kauh reconstructed their knowledge about themselves as human beings inseparable with their environment. This is an intellectual and also ethical conduct, an awareness to take action upon environmental problems.

We can see the emergence of similar efforts in other parts of Bali. In Nusa Lembongan for instance, for 3 years they have been striving to consistently revive the worship of Sang Hyang Grodog. An ancient ritual related to the coastal society, the ritual was absent for more than a decade. Prompted by the dangers of massive pollution, overfishing, and declining coastal ecosystem in Nusa Lembongan and Nusa Penida, they resurrect Sang Hyang Grodog as a declaration of restoring balanced life with nature. They realized that exploiting the oceans has driven away the sacred (Hyang), hence, through this ritual, they hoped to re-invite the spirit of the oceans. At the same time, they are relearning their relationship with nature, improving their fishing methods based on sustainability, and rehabilitating the reefs.

These contemporary cases are good signs of public participation in fighting back environmental deprivations. They also show that solutions to environmental problems should not be segregated from the socio-cultural aspects. It should be a nexus of the social,
economic, and also spiritual issues. *Sang Hyang Dedari* is the epitome of how local traditions are very relevant to overcome social-ecological problems.

University of Indonesia working together with the villagers of Geriana Kauh is the form of effective synergy to save the environment and its people. *The Sang Hyang Dedari* museum is also a manifestation of protecting the archipelago (nusantara) heritage. It shows how the university as an institution of education, is responsible to conserve the richness of Indonesia’s cultures.

![Image of the Chief Village and Secretary: I Wayan Bratha and Nyoman Ardana in front of the Museum Sang Hyang Dedari construction](image)

*Fig. 4 The Chief Village and Secretary: I Wayan Bratha and Nyoman Ardana in front of the Museum Sang Hyang Dedari construction*
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