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Creative *lifeworld* in Geriana Kauh Village

Intertwining of culture and nature during the pandemics in Bali

LG. SARASWATI PUTRI

ABSTRACT

This research is an attempt to delve into understanding the process of creative imagination of the sacred which is revealed in the intertwining of culture and nature in Geriana Kauh, Karangasem, Bali. This study aims to investigate the relationship between the individual, the social and ecology, as well as the transformation of individual consciousness into a collective awareness sharing a communal reality. This qualitative research is developed by incorporating theoretical analysis and formulating field data collected in the traditional Village of Geriana Kauh, as the villagers resort to their cultural resources to deal with the cosmological imbalances caused by pandemics. By means of a phenomenological examination, this investigation underlines the dynamic interlocking of the cultural and the natural worlds.

KEYWORDS

Intentionality; body; hierophany; sacred; profane; ineffable; *sekala*; *niskala*; magic; lifeworld; Geriana Kauh.

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INTRODUCTION

Not a day goes by in Bali without the spectacle of colour created by the offerings made to the spirit world. The act of offering is part of the Hindu belief system to demonstrate devotion, love, or *bhakti* in Sanskrit. Apart from looking at the concomitant religious activities such as making *sesajen* (offerings), this article attempts to view religious activities as a part of a larger cultural perspective in relation to the natural world. The research focuses on the inextricable relationship between people and nature, expressed through the observances and performances of ancient customs, dance, and music in the hope of using them to translate into traditional wellness.

Despite the large variety of forms of devotion by the making of offerings in the different regions across Bali, there are basic similarities in the content of the offerings. Offerings invariably include a variety of plants, flowers, fruits, grain, vegetables, and other substances. They present emblazoned colour, red, yellow, green, white, and blue. For instance, the colours and contents of the *canang sari*, the daily offerings made on a coconut frond adorned with colourful flowers, are closely related to the cosmological belief in the Tri Murti, the three main deities; *Brahma*, *Wisnu*, and *Siwa*, who govern the cycle of life.

The creativity the Balinese is revealed in the way they imagine their belief and how they represent it using natural objects is an interesting topic. In this study, phenomenology is the tool which enables us to detect the dual combination of abstraction and manifestation as an artistic *lifeworld* (Mark D. Vagle 2014). Understanding the Balinese *lifeworld* requires undertaking a methodological quest to discover what lived experience means to the Balinese. A phenomenological investigation into their *lifeworld* focuses on the intentionality between the Balinese people as subjects, oriented towards an objective world.

The foundation of phenomenology is the view that every stream of consciousness is directed to the world of objects. The Balinese perceive plants, mountains, oceans, and other natural phenomena as a complex engagement which allows people to associate and create their sense of being.

This article will delve into the dynamic space of the sacred and the profane and the Balinese nature and culture, by referring to the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002), Mircea Eliade (1959), and Federico Campagna (2018). Each theory enables us to venture into the possibilities and intricacies of the Balinese *lifeworld*. Borrowing from Merleau-Ponty, we discuss the revelation of the natural world. Rather than thinking about and intellectualizing the world, Merleau-Ponty proposes a return to the actual experiences of the body as it moves in the world. Merleau-Ponty postulates that perception is not restricted to empirical facts but, that to perceive the world, means that the people's bodies are attached and react to a flux of sensations in the world.

In theatrical dances, the Balinese move their bodies not only to express their aesthetic passion, but also to absorb knowledge as they interpret it into movements. Creativity in movements is made possible with the body's realization, as it becomes part of the cosmic movement, that is moving

alongside other objects, other bodies. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is adamant about the independent property of objects. This view means that nature is not constructed by human minds. Instead, nature has its own interiority or, in other words, "quality is not an element of consciousness, but a property of the object" (Luh G.S. Putri 2017: 106). Merleau-Ponty underlines the distinct quality of nature as something inherent in itself, rather than something contrived or owned by people.

Analysing nature from a non-anthropocentric standpoint is essential to reveal what it truly means in terms of sculpting our sense of existing in this world. People are not in a superior position; that is, assuming that knowledge is accessible solely through their unique rationality. On the contrary, our minds are shaped by nature. "[...] a communication with the world is more ancient than thought [...]" (Putri 2017: 107). Merleau-Ponty wants us to consider that the impact of our natural world is beyond a utilitarian idea, it is more ontological: it defines our humanity. We often dismiss the objective world as something taken for granted, always there, standing in reserve for human beings. But for Merleau-Ponty our relationship with nature once was so intimate it preceded our system of language and logic.

In the same way, Merleau-Ponty claims that, in the intimate relationship between a person and nature, there is also a medium which helps to create this unique experience. Mircea Eliade labels this medium *hierophany*. He argues that there is a tendency for a religious person always to live near the divinity. Therefore, they consecrate their lived-space to make it sacred. He has this to say about the idea of *hierophany*:

Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the act of *manifestatum* of the sacred, we have proposed the term *hierophany*. (Eliade 1959: 11).

By applying Eliade's theory of *hierophany*, we can investigate the stages the Balinese have created to elevate ordinary, mundane things into something holy. *Hierophany* is derived from the Greek word *hieros* (holy) and *phainein* (to disclose), hence Eliade investigates the human tendency to distinguish between the sacred and the profane; a decision which depends on how a community constructs spaces. Rituals are crucial to signifying the transition from common, empirical space to the realm of the supernatural. We can learn more about this from looking at the *canang sari* as a form of an offering and how everyday objects such as flowers, rice, sugar cane, et cetera have become indispensable in creating a bridge to the realm of the holy.

The sacred tree, the sacred stone are not adored as stone or tree; they are worshipped precisely because they are *hierophanies*, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the sacred, the ganz andere [...]. 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 1959: 12).

The Balinese perform rituals and hold festivals and ceremonies on the basis of their belief in auspicious dates on which the human world and that of the ancestors and the gods overlap. These days are based on a traditional Balinese calendar which works as a guideline by which the Balinese can communicate with the gods and the ancestors. For the Balinese, space is never homogenous and, by enacting rituals, they believe that people as mortals can indeed transcend and open a hidden space enabling them to converse with the holy.

Consequently, the Balinese are able to invoke the spirit world because of their fundamental *hierophany* setting. They also believe that, in performing rituals, the corporeal body of a medium can transform itself into a vessel for the holy. The Balinese call this, *kerawuhan*, or being possessed. When possessed, the ordinary corporeal bodies are believed to transform themselves and, by so doing, are capable of amassing extraordinary strength.

At this point we turn to examining the idea of magic through Federico Campagna's theory of the ineffable. In the emergence of pluralistic spaces, in between the sacred and profane, the Balinese find that there is a lack of articulation to describe the ambiguity of the self. Not only is there a lack of explanation because the experience is subjective, but also the experience places the subject in a state of contradiction (Campagna 2018: 97-98). The Balinese have worked this paradox into their dualistic worldview of *Sekala* and *Niskala*: *Sekala* is the Realm of the Seen, whereas *Niskala* is the Unseen.

That the Balinese demonstrate their artistic expression in variety of art forms can be taken to dovetail with what Campagna mentions about ineffability:

The passage from the first to the last level in Magic's cosmogony, marked a passage from a state of utter ineffability and language, existence and essence, life and death are deeply intertwined. This passage took the form of an emanation of symbolic language out of the ineffable that affirmed the primacy of ineffable *existence* over linguistic essence while not denying legitimacy to the latter. (Campagna 2018: 184).

Based on Campagna's idea of the cosmogony of magic, we can interpret that acts of constructing pluralistic worlds can be accomplished through artistic expressions which transgress the strict categories of formal language or rigid linguistic boundaries. For instance, for the Balinese, the origin of the *Barong* and *Rangda* dances is deeply religious. Dancing is an act of mirroring the everydayness of being but also simultaneously revealing what is indefinable or difficult to clarify in relation to the spiritual.

In Balinese philosophy, good and evil are not isolated from each other – and interpreting the *Barong* and *Rangda* dances –, we see that this philosophy can be considered an unending flow. The choreography of the *Barong* and *Rangda* is traditionally understood as a battle between the mythical creature, *Barong*, and the personification of a powerful witch, *Rangda*. The dance is an act of symbolizing the formidable reality of the continuation of good and evil, since good and evil cannot be categorized as two opposing forces but as a total energy which moves the universe, or *jagat*.

But if the *Barong* is a protective animal, for whom does it protect? And what is its relation to *Rangda*, the other guardian of the graveyard? We must divest ourselves of the familiar Christian conception of Good and Bad, Light and Darkness. The *Barong*, equally with *Rangda*, belongs to the dark or earthly side of things, as opposed to the heavenly. *Civa* himself, as well shall soon see, plays an active part in the blackest magic, while his wife, *Devi Cri*, Goddess of Fertility, is also *Durga*, Goddess of Death. (Walter Spies and Beryl de Zoete 2002: 95).

Nature surpasses our classification of good and evil; there is always a shortage of words to capture the totality of nature. Most Balinese have been engaged in dancing since childhood. Their dancing is profoundly inspired by nature, as it strives to mimic animals, to embody the wisdom of trees, to worship the process of life. Therefore, to dance is to marvel at the ineffability of nature and surrender to the irrationality of life itself.

At this point, we are carefully unveiling layer upon layer of the Balinese religious *lifeworld*. Walter Spies, the famous German painter, once said, "One may say that there is no stage in Bali, or that everywhere there is a stage. For wherever there is a space to dance, to mount a play, there is the Balinese stage" (see Spies and De Zoete 2002: 11). Life is a stage for the Balinese and dancing is an experience in between the sacred and the mundane. Space is elastic, the body shifts back and forth from finite to infinite. The imagination of an elongated space is the essence of the Balinese *lifeworld*.

Now, by examining everyday life during the pandemics in Geriana Kauh, I investigate what the creative *lifeworld* is for the Balinese and ask how does phenomenology as a method pierce this issue in order to understand a more philosophical approach to the intertwining of the cultural and natural aspects of the lived experience. Lastly, in the final section, I examine what the ineffability of nature means according to the Balinese.

GERIANA KAUH AND THE PANDEMICS

This research is based on a field study conducted in the small Village Geriana Kauh, in the Karangasem Regency, in the eastern part of Bali (see Figure 1). The data were gathered over five months. However, this is also a continuation of a previous community engagement which has been taking place since 2017. What differentiates this article is its emphasis on systematizing an ontological topography of the subject's consciousness in the natural world.

Why Geriana Kauh? What is so unique about this place and its villagers? The traditional Village (Desa Adat) Geriana Kauh is a small village two hours' travel northeast of the hustle and bustle of Denpasar, the capital of Bali. It is a nostalgic place, reminiscent of Bali as it once was. Going there is like returning to the 1950s. It is as if time has stood still in Geriana Kauh. The village is nestled among bamboo clumps at the foot of Mount Agung. Only 932 people live there, most of whom are farmers.

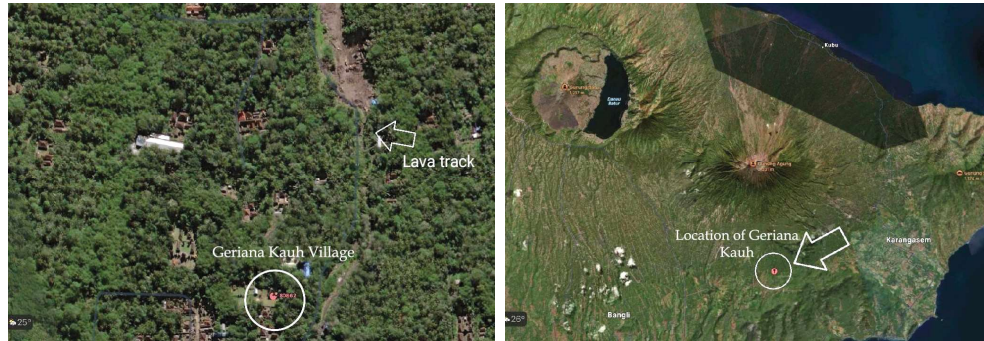


Figure 1. Map of Geriana Kauh in the southern foothills of Mount Agung.¹

It is an uphill battle trying to do field research during the pandemic. The recent interview data were collected in March 2021, several days before and after Silent Day (*Nyepi*). I recorded interviews between 11 and 15 March 2021. It was pivotal to documenting how rituals were being conducted in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic and I could observe how the villagers of Geriana Kauh were adjusting to the “new normal” (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Sang Hyang dancers are believed to be the medium through whom the goddesses repel misfortunes, such as plagues, diseases, and social disputes.

¹ Left: Map of south side of Mount Agung (<https://goo.gl/maps/XT5LnU3pvBjLoCT7A>), right: Map of Geriana Kauh (<https://goo.gl/maps/avSrXgMSXQTtpmqS8>).

Because of the pandemic, the Balinese are struggling to make a living as it has caused an abrupt halt to tourism. Hotels, restaurants, and tourist sites are closed, causing thousands of people to become jobless overnight. Bali's economy relies heavily on tourism and the pandemic has seriously disrupted this main source of livelihood. De-urbanization has occurred as people have been returning to their villages, going back to their family homes. Some who have maintained their ancestral land manage to farm it to meet their bare necessities.

The majority of the villagers in Geriana Kauh work as farmers but some of them, like the village chief, Nyoman Subrata, also worked part time as tour guides in South Bali. Nyoman Subrata has been the village' customary chief since late 2019. His leadership is a sign of a progressive shift in the village, as he is one of the youngest chiefs in Geriana Kauh's history. His predecessors, I Wayan Brata (aged 61) and Nengah Likub (aged 85) had held their position as the village leader for years. The people of Geriana Kauh elected this young leader as part of their efforts to rejuvenate the village management and its leadership. The villagers have been subjected to all sorts of difficulties just in 2021 alone. To name some, they have suffered ecological problems caused by unsustainable farming methods, experienced social frictions, survived a natural disaster in the eruption of Mount Agung, not to mention that they have also been heavily hit by the pandemic.

With jobs disappearing in the city, the young people are coming back to their villages, including those in Geriana Kauh. In an interview, Eka Sudiarti (aged 22) explained that she felt the need to come home to Karangasem because she wanted to help her parents cultivate their land. Both her parents are farmers. Nevertheless, she does not feel it is the pandemic which has forced her to leave the city. Instead, she also sees it as an opportunity to give something back to her village. In her defence, she pointed out that her college friends, indeed young people in general, are so focused on finding jobs in the tourism sector. Certainly, most people in Bali regard tourism as far more lucrative than, for instance, farming. The most obvious reason is that it generates fast income. However, Eka Sudiarti begged to differ as she reflected on the pandemic and how it has completely annihilated the single economic dependence on tourism.

Eka Sudiarti was raised by her parents to believe in the traditional Hindu-Bali values. She was taught to be respectful of and caring towards nature. She has internalized this teaching, which is what motivated her to study agriculture at Udayana University. She reflected that young Balinese have forgotten the importance and beauty of farming. Farming is not a popular profession in modernized Bali. Working in the fields and the onerousness of manual labour means that it is now considered a lowly job. Eka Sudiarti disagrees as for her farming teaches her the art of patience and the happiness of living a simple life. Currently she is working on developing products made from papaya, including jams. Learning from her training in technology and agriculture, she realizes the importance of farming techniques which have been passed

down from her ancestors. In the theory of Federico Campagna, modernization disassociates technic from magic. Rapid changes are taking place in Bali which are distorting the continuous cosmology of technic and magic.

Looking at the situation in greater detail, the pandemic has had a completely different meaning for the Balinese in Geriana Kauh. If most people see it as something negative which hinders their daily activities, the community in Geriana Kauh sees it as a way to reflect on themselves. Therefore the villagers are not pointing outwards, rather they have turned inwards. In one sense, this is what has given them their ability to cope with the misfortune which has befallen them. On the other, it is their way of overcoming this pandemic by imagining another, alternative reality. Federico Campagna (2018) argues that magic has the power to restore the agency of one's world into one's presence (paraphrase, Campagna 2018: 116). In short, magic can be used as an alternative reality-system to grasp with the uncertainties caused by the pandemic.

Furthermore, resilience in Geriana Kauh is not confined to this plague but tends to show itself in the way the people face calamities as a community. This was also visible in 1963 when Mount Agung erupted and plunged the whole sky into pitch-darkness (Iswara N. Raditya 2018). Not long after Bali, and certainly Geriana Kauh did not escape, experienced another disaster. Only two to three years after the volcanic eruption, there was a massacre triggered by political instability. In 1965, Indonesia went through a massive political change and the military allowed everyone who knew or was aware of someone who was connected with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) to be captured and/or killed (Geoffrey B. Robinson 2018: 121-123). Imagine living in Bali around that period when one catastrophe followed another and the wounds and grief caused by previous disaster were not fully healed.

RICE CULTURE

Strangely enough, amidst this seemingly never-ending series of disasters, hope was cultivated and preserved through rites. The people in Geriana Kauh believe that their strength in overcoming the disasters can be attributed to the rituals which were performed in the middle of these calamities. In short, they have relied on the ability of rites to invoke and imagine another reality in the world (Campagna 2018: 182-183). Another interesting thing to point out is that, even though Mount Agung erupted and wrought destruction on everything in its wake, Pura Besakih temple remained unscathed. This temple, located at the foot of the mountain, is still standing today.

If we borrow Eliade's term, to understand the psyche of *homo religiosus* fully, we have to understand how the people of Geriana Kauh (as *homo religiosus*) exist in relation to their world – in this case how they make sense of their “world”. Take the example of the rites which the people of Geriana Kauh perform as a part of their life. They have lived their lives in the rhythm of the cycle of rice-planting. This fact raises the question of what happens when their life-cycle is disrupted as the result of some kind of disturbance or disasters? As just intimated, in Geriana Kauh this is not hypothetical question, a series

of disasters occurred just after the incident in 1965. The central government imposed a policy intended to sustain the nation's food reserve by producing more rice. This required that the rice-fields and the farmers, including those in Geriana Kauh, needed to harvest their crops not once but twice a year with the help of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The government called it the *revolusi hijau* (green revolution) (Putri 2017).

It is obvious that this green revolution disrupted the life-cycle of Geriana Kauh, especially in regard to their rites, and deprived the community of its spiritual continuity. To put the problem into context, the direct result of this nationwide farming policy, which involved the immediate change of the harvesting of rice to twice a year, inevitably involved a disruption in the rites in Geriana Kauh community. According to I Wayan Brata, the former chief of the village, the *Sanghyang Dedari* dance disappeared and was considered virtually extinct from 1965 to 1999 (Putri 2020: 5). The drastic change in their mode of farming was detrimental to the sequence of rituals (including *Sanghyang Dedari*).

In a farming village like Geriana Kauh, it stands to reason that their rites are performed synchronously with their rice-cycle and their purpose involved producing healthy crops. More importantly, as time is also closely tied up with the *beginning* or *time of origins* (Eliade 1959: 77-78), it is not unusual for Geriana Kauh as a community be in continuous search of ways to become closer to the cosmos through performing rites. The beginning (of time) is associated with the place in which the gods reside and from where they created the world. Hence, as Eliade states, cosmogony is the supreme divine manifestation (Eliade 1959: 80). In simple terms, these rites accomplish two purposes: 1) The regeneration of time's sacredness through the repetition of rites; 2) by participating in these rites, the life of *homo religiosus* begins again as if in a rebirth (paraphrase, Eliade 1959: 80-81). Therefore, after understanding the importance and the complexity of time in addition to how it is interwoven in rites, it is no understatement to say that their way of life made the people in Geriana Kauh extraordinarily resilient.

In the middle of the pandemic, feelings of uncertainty and chaos loom large. Most modernized societies are unequipped to deal with the unpredictability of the future. However, in Geriana Kauh, as *magic and technic* do not represent conflicting ideas of the world the pandemic is not something to be confronted with anguish. This attitude is possibly because the villagers, like Eka Sudiarti and other members of the community, realize the importance of the harmonization of these two dimensions. The fusion of both dimension is similar to two images stacked one on top of another to create a new depth of understanding to uncover the underlying reality (Edwin Bernbaum 2016). But, to be able to see the harmonization of both dimensions it is not enough just to know about it. It has to be cultivated in both each individual and in relation to the community as a whole through rites and religious practices.

The purpose of the repetition of rites and religious practices is to create a situation which enables people to make sense of the world. In other words,

these acts have helped them to create cosmos out of chaos. As Eliade (1959) states, man symbolically transforms his surroundings into the cosmos through a ritual repetition of the cosmogony. Furthermore, what is known as "one's world" needs to be created in a semblance of the divine (paraphrase, Eliade 1959: 32). This idea is important to understand Geriana Kauh both as a village and as a community. Even people who have migrated from the village continue to long for their interconnectedness with the sacred. This is because, for them, the village retains its sense of sacredness as a space regardless of the calamities which might have been visited upon them. This means that the tradition which has been preserved and cultivated for years has turned the village into a sacred space.

For Balinese the harmonization of the cosmos, customs, and norms, including their local knowledge of diseases has been documented in their *lontar* (palm-leaf manuscripts). Sugi Lanus, a Balinese scholar, has explained his philosophical view of the importance of *lontar* as written guidance for the Balinese. He has found that, in various *lontar*, there are instructions consisting of various procedures and steps which need to be taken in times of plague. Among these are *Lontar Sada Gede*, *Lontar Usada Cukil Daki*, *Lontar Widhi Sastra Sang Hyang Swamandala* (Sugi Lanus 2020). The wisdom is supplemented with instructions about the way in which the offerings and rites should be performed. It shows that, as previously mentioned, there is always an orderliness of things in relation to the cosmogony. However, it is important to recognize that this wisdom is not identical to scientific enquiry or logical explanation. The difference is that the wisdom has rooted itself in tradition and in the repetition of rites. In a nutshell, the villagers have their own internalized values which they practise and use to decrypt the wisdom contained in the manuscript.

In Geriana Kauh, they are also revisiting their local knowledge. The pandemic has forced the villagers to become versatile in their farming methods. They are re-learning their ancestral wisdom, particularly the art of concocting traditional remedies which the Balinese call *usada*. Knowledge of *usada* can be obtained from various old *lontars* in Bali: *Usada Rare*, *Usada Tiwang*, *Usada Tuju*, and many more. In an interview, the chief of the village, Nyoman Subrata (49), explained that they are currently planting 650 red ginger seedlings (*Zingiber officinale* var. *rubrum*) (see Figure 3). Learning from their elders, they have realized the importance of plants such as red ginger in cultivating health. Subrata explained that he envisioned a future for Geriana Kauh which will lie in organic farming, enriching the soil by planting diverse local crops, guided by the local wisdom of the Tri Hita Karana. The Tri Hita Karana are Hindu-Bali principles explaining how to attain happiness by balancing a three-way relationship: between humans (*pawongan*), the environment (*palemahan*), and God (*parahyangan*) (Putri 2020).



Figure 3. Seedlings of three-week-old red ginger as way to recultivate ancient wisdom.

The next section contains a description of how the people of Geriana Kauh perceive their surroundings by looking at their rites, nature, and the life of *padi masa*. These components can help us imagine how the villagers see the natural space around them. It also demonstrates the incorporation of their nature and culture into their own unique creative lifeworld.

NYEPI AND THE VOICE OF NATURE

Nyepi Day in the time of the pandemic revealed the many-sidedness of nature. The natural world is often perceived as a silent background or landscape against which people can interact. However, during *Nyepi*, the only sound is that of nature. The meaning of *Nyepi* has always been related to an ecological consciousness, calling for meditation on unity with nature (see Figure 4). In Geriana Kauh, *Nyepi* is the moment for nature's symphony to take pride of place – bamboos rustling against each other, inter punctuated by the sounds by frogs and crickets. The birds are flying in formation towards Mount Agung, circling the great mountain and then vanishing beyond the horizon. It is a beautiful choreography, a dance of freedom. For one day, nature is undisturbed by human activity, the sky is clear unspoiled by any man-made pollution.

Nyepi Day in Karangasem is an invocation of nature, a hopefulness of being able to reconnect with nature. A couple of days before surrendering themselves to *tapa brata* (asceticism) on *Nyepi* Day, the villagers of Geriana Kauh celebrate *Ngusaba Dodol*, a festival in praise of Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa and the ancestors. Last year, the villagers complied with the health protocols by maintaining a safe distance and wearing masks. When I arrived at the temple to join the villagers

celebrating *Ngusaba Dodol*, I was received by the young people. All the boys and girls were wearing colourful attire. Behind their masks, I imagined they were smiling, their eyes glistened, and they were bubbling over with happiness at being able to celebrate *Ngusaba Dodol*. The year before, *Nyepi* Day had had to be celebrated under strict quarantine rules to avoid spreading the virus. Consequently rituals were celebrated at home and no large gatherings were allowed.



Figure 4. The villagers often describe the solitude of *Nyepi* as akin to the serene feeling of living in bamboo forest.



Figure 5. Palm trees are common in Geriana Kauh. The sap from these trees is used to produce the traditional liquor called *tuak*.

As midday approached, the rain was pouring down heavily and we sat in a large circle in one of the *bale*. One of the people handed out glasses of *tuak*, a traditional liquor made from the sap of the palm trees grown around the village (see Figure 5). I sipped my *tuak* slowly, while listening to their stories about surviving the pandemic. Drinking *tuak* is a pivotal part of social bonding in Bali.

Drinking at the end of festivals is a way of winding down and relaxing after the strenuous, hectic days of ritual preparation. Before the pandemic, in social gatherings such as this one, people shared their drinks from one glass. The circulating of one glass signifies equality and a sense of solidarity among the villagers. The traditional liquors; *tuak*, *arak*, and *brem* are more than just alcoholic beverages, they form an integral part of any Balinese rituals and prayers (Fred B. Eiseman 1990). *Arak brem* (rice-wine), for instance, is one of the key components of offerings. *Arak tabuh*, from the Balinese word *tabuh*, which also means the act of offering to the other world by sprinkling or pouring the liquid on the ground. When creating a sacred space, *arak tabuh* is used as an offering intended for the world of the *Bhuta Kala* or underworld beings. *Arak brem* is poured on the ground when beginning and ending prayers. In Geriana Kauh, *arak brem* is made from *padi masa*, the local rice variety which is considered a sacred heritage.

While waiting for the rain to stop, I saw that the villagers were trying to cover their *sokan*, offerings in the form of 1.5 metre-high towers with umbrellas or tarpaulins (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Even in the pouring rain, villagers elatedly perform the *Ngusaba Dodol* ritual.

Sokan are offerings assembled using colorful fruit and flowers, some harvested in the village such as *salak*, bananas, and grapefruit, and some such as apples and oranges bought at the market. At the bottom of the *sokan*, the people place rows of large packages of *dodol* (chewy sweets made from rice) which form its base (Putri 2020) (see also Figure 10). I sat beside Nyoman Civir (aged 40),

the villager who is assigned to take care of security during the ceremony. We discussed the corona virus and how it has changed everything. Although he expressed concern about economic uncertainties, he remained hopeful that the gods and goddesses would grant the villagers their protection.

Before the pandemic, Nyoman Civir worked in construction, building temples, and other structures using black lavastone all over Bali. Now, he has returned to the village permanently, working mainly on his family farm. I saw the uneasiness in his eyes, the anxiety, but also a quiet glimmer of faith and solemn faith that the gods would keep them safe. As we finished our *tuak*, together we strolled towards the rice-fields. The pandemic is an unfortunate event; people were unprepared and forced to adjust to living with adversity. Nevertheless, the villagers are unceasingly optimistic. I thought about what has befallen this village and the collective courage shown by the people. They have survived natural disasters, endured social disruptions and now, with the pandemic, they are facing yet another formidably challenged future.

On the morning after *Nyepi*, I took a stroll in the bamboo forest. The village was calm, only a couple of women with sickles were walking on their way do weeding. They greeted me and we exchanged good wishes for the Saka New Year. A sudden mist enveloped the village as I made my way to the Sang Hyang Dedari temple (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. The Sang Hyang Dedari temple is revered as one of the most important temples in Geriana Kauh.

I contemplated the connection between maintaining creative imagination and conserving resilience to overcome hardship. For not only were the villagers supplicating the mysterious, magical worlds for guidance when they perform their rituals. The act of creating worlds is a reciprocal commitment between individuals to safeguard and care for each other.

THE LIFE OF THE SEED

In Geriana Kauh, the people do not see agriculture solely as an economic activity. Their whole sense of self, their collective realization is structured by agriculture. Farming, most particularly rice-farming, is considered a sacred profession. In an interview, I Nengah Artha (aged 60), the head farmer, described the long tradition of rice-farming in Geriana Kauh. The rice-fields are divided between those planted with modern seeds and others planted with the traditional *padi masa* seed. *Padi Masa* is a rice variety which the villagers protect as a legacy from their ancestors. Even though this variety takes a whole year before it can be harvested, I Nengah Artha described the superiority of its grains compared to the modified seeds.



Figure 8. Farmers during harvesting in Geriana Kauh.

The stems of *padi masa* are longer and one *padi masa* plant can generate more than 500 grains (see Figure 8).

The *padi masa* grains are bigger, more polished and, when cooked, the texture of the grains is plump and tastier than that of modern varieties. While conducting my interview, we enjoyed a traditional treat called *dodol*. It is made from *padi masa* rice-flour mixed with palm sugar. The texture of the *dodol* is not too dense, comfortably chewy and sweet. In March *dodol* is essential in every Geriana Kauh household, since it is incorporated into one of their festivals. Each family has its own *dodol* recipe and wraps it up with corn husks. Some *dodol* are rolled into smaller cylinders, but for the ritual of *Ngusaba Dodol*, mentioned in previous paragraph, the *dodol* is presented as a large block to form the foundations of the tall offering to the gods (see Figures 9, 10, and 11).



Figure 9. Artistic offerings using various ornaments: fruit, leaves, and rice wafers.



Figure 10. *Dodol* placed as foundations at the bottom of the offerings.

Continuing the discussion, I Nengah Artha explained that the land used for farming in Geriana Kauh covers around 600,000 m² (60 hectares). He lamented the current situation of rice-farming in Bali. This is twofold. The rice-fields have been dwindling over the years and there are not enough young people interested in rice cultivation. Other dangers on which he also elaborated were the threat posed by climate change; the weather and ecosystem are now extremely unpredictable which makes crops vulnerable. Despite all these problems, for a couple of years the crops in Geriana Kauh have been producing steadily. The people believe this consistency is the result of their devotion to the goddess, Dewi Sri, whom they honour with prayers and festivals. *Padi masa*

is the epicentre of their cultural life. Their lives are intertwined with *padi masa*. Their calendar of important dates or *rahinan* (auspicious days and festivals) has been developed in the context of *padi masa*. Their cultural expressions, their dance performances, songs, oral traditions, and belief system are all bound up with this precious crop.



Figure 11. Offerings consisting of corn, rice, jackfruits, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, *keladi/taro*, et cetera.

In the interview, I Nengah Artha stressed, “*Jangan sampai punah*” (Do not allow it to disappear). He has a mounting fear that this hundreds-of-years-old tradition might be in danger of extinction. Back in the 1960s, Geriana Kauh had already faced and overcome one ecological problem (Putri 2020). During the Green Revolution, they almost lost the seed of *padi masa*. The land was barren and for years they suffered failed crops. Only in 1998-1999 did they begin to regenerate their soil, gradually restoring sustainable farming and replanting *padi masa*. Learning from this past mistake, the villagers are always very careful about taking care of their lands. Miguel Covarrubias (1937) states a significant idea regarding the collective land in Bali,

We have seen that the true Balinese village is an independent economic and social unit, ruled by a council of villagers with voting power, equal rights for all, and ownership of land restricted by village regulations. The lands are communally cultivated to maintain the village festivals, and even the ground on which the houses stand is village property that can be reclaimed if the tenant abuses his privileges. Since the land and its products belong to the ancestral gods, the idea of absolute property is not firmly rooted among the Balinese. (Covarrubias 1937: 91-92).

Nos	The life of the <i>padi masa</i> seed
1	<p><i>Ngusaba emping</i> Time of ritual: Third full moon (around September)</p> <p><i>Ngusaba emping</i> is the ritual of the sharing out the <i>padi masa</i> seeds to the farmers by the village chief (<i>jero bendesa</i>). The <i>Ngusaba emping</i> procession begins with prayers at the <i>Pura Pusah</i> temple, after which the seeds are distributed to farmers to be planted in the rice-fields.</p>
2	<p><i>Ngusaba goreng</i> Time of ritual: fifth full moon (around November)</p> <p><i>Ngusaba goreng</i> (see Figure 9) is a ritual to express gratitude to Dewi Sri for the <i>padi masa</i> (see Figure 11) seeds which have been planted and are thriving. During this ceremony, the villagers make offerings of <i>sanganan</i> or cakes made from the previous harvest's rice. These have been fried into a variety of beautiful cakes of differing shapes and colours. After the rice cakes have been fried, they are arranged in artistic displays.</p>
3	<p><i>Mecaru or Mesegeh</i> Time of ritual: around January</p> <p>This ritual is centred on the <i>Pura Dalam</i> temple in Geriana Kauh. The purpose of the <i>Mecaru</i> or <i>Mesegeh</i> ritual is to neutralize any negative forces which might have the potential to disrupt the tranquility of the village, and the people also believe that this purification ritual will protect them from unpredictable disasters.</p>
4	<p><i>Ngoncang or Ngelawang</i> Time of ritual: around February</p> <p>The <i>Ngoncang</i> ritual is carried out by holding prayers and traditional dances, in a neighbouring village. Geriana Kauh residents will process from their village to the neighbouring village where they will stage their performance. The purpose of the <i>Ngoncang</i> ritual is to invoke prosperity and re-establish kinship ties between villages.</p>
5	<p><i>Nyungsung</i> Time of ritual: around March</p> <p>The <i>Nyungsung</i> ceremony is performed in praise of the goddess of fertility, Dewi Sri. This ceremony is observed in the <i>Pura Pusah</i> temple for two consecutive days. The first day's ceremony is called the <i>Penantenan</i> and the second day's ceremony is called the <i>Pemelayatan</i>.</p>
6	<p><i>Ngusaba dalam / Ngusaba dodol</i> Time of ritual: around March</p> <p>The <i>Ngusaba dalam</i> or also called <i>Ngusaba dodol</i> ceremony is a festival to express gratitude to the gods. It is also celebrated close to <i>Nyepi</i> Day (Silent Day), one of the most important spiritual moments in the Balinese year. It also marks the Saka New Year. The hallmark of the <i>Ngusaba dodol</i> ceremony is the <i>sokan</i> which is composed of various fruits from the village: oranges, apples, guava and so forth and, at the bottom, to form the foundation are placed largish packets of <i>dodol</i>, sweets made from sticky rice.</p>
7	<p><i>Sanghyang Dedari</i> Time of ritual: around March/April</p> <p>The <i>Sanghyang Dedari</i> dance is a ritual performed to ward off calamities and disaster. The <i>Sanghyang Dedari</i> is performed by selected girls who have not yet reach puberty. In Geriana Kauh, the <i>Sanghyang Dedari</i> dance is performed as harvest time approaches to protect the rice-fields so as they yield an abundant harvest.</p>
8	<p><i>Mendak ritual</i> Time of ritual: around November during harvesting</p> <p>The villagers pray in their temple celebrating the signs of the approaching harvest. This ceremony symbolizes an encounter with Betara Sri in the form of rice grains. The villagers pray to Mother Earth expressing gratitude for a succesful harvest.</p>

Figure 12. The life-cycle of *padi masa*.

The assessment of land management in Bali is still relevant in Geriana Kauh. The seeds are owned collectively and the land is managed as a whole for the villagers' welfare. This strong communalism is also the basis of the social organizations in Geriana Kauh and, conversely, these existing organizations are the outward and visible sign of the communal sense. They have *banjar* (customary primary-level organizations), *sekaa teruna teruni* (youth organizations), and *subak* (water-sharing organizations). During the pandemic, these traditional institutions have been very effective in maintaining social justice.

The circular, perpetually flowing reality of the Balinese can be observed in Geriana Kauh. Their language does not separate people from nature. The Balinese calendar, for instance, is an aid to recognizing particular days and the empirical and metaphysical realms are invariably interconnected. Referring to Mircea Eliade, in my interpretation, I argue that the idea of the holy is not simply created, but is a complex search for connection. Sacredness is not a territorial or just an essentialist matter but sacredness is an imagination of finding the connection between people and entities in the natural world.

We can observe a map of the creative *lifeworld* in Geriana Kauh through the social activities surrounding the life-cycle of *padi masa* (see Figure 12).

BAMBOO AND WATER



Figure 13. Bamboo is not merely a useful plant for the villagers, it is also considered sacred when used in rituals.

As mentioned earlier, the life of the Balinese is closely linked to their natural world. One of the most important parts of this is their conception of water and how their agriculture and belief systems depend on water. Water is used not only as a resource to irrigate fields, its role is far more important and it is consecrated in various rites which symbolize purification. In one example, the ritual *melukat*, it is believed that immersing oneself in a sacred spring can neutralize the mind and the body from negative energy. As water, bamboo is also very important to the Balinese. In Geriana Kauh, daily life and the environs

are closely attached to bamboo, as if their living space, sacred space, and natural space are interconnected by bamboos (see Figure 13).

These two examples, water and bamboo, barely encapsulate the complexity of the relationship of the Balinese with their natural world. However, they do give a hint of their perception of the world and how it shapes their society as a whole. Now, we delve deeper in order to understand even more about the Balinese and the space they inhabit.

J. Stephen Lansing (2007: 55) explains how water, specifically holy water, is the core of the religion called *agama tirta* or “the religion of water”. It is holy, in a sense similar to that to which Eliade refers, because it is consecrated to release it from profaneness and there are various processes needed to accomplish this. Firstly, it is obtained from the most sacred water sources and is consecrated by an ordained priest (*pedanda*) or it can be produced using clean water from the well and stored in a family shrine. Although its sacredness can vary because of various circumstances, there are steps which need to be taken to attain this level, such as banishing impure thoughts. Secondly, it must be stored in a clean container and handled with respect. This is the point at which the bamboo called *bungbung* comes into its own as a container for the holy water. However, this does not mean it *has* to be kept in *bungbung*, a glass jar or even empty *coke* bottles can be used in emergency, as long as it has been thoroughly cleaned. Finally, whenever the holy water has to be transferred, it should be held as high as possible, usually it is placed in the head and higher than everyone nearby. It is absolutely essential that the holy water not be disturbed and it must never touch the ground at any point – this is also the reason that upstream water is more sacred than water downstream. It is as if the divinity or sacredness of the water will be lost should this happen (Eiseman 1990: 52-53).

There are a couple things to keep in mind about the creation of holy water. For example, its use, who can make holy water and the state of mind a person has to have in the presence of holy water. However, the most important point in this article is that the whole process requires not just an individual and his/her relationship with the divine but a community or a collective identity and its relationship with the natural world around it.

The link between holy water and bamboo also can be perceived as a way to seek the divine. A four-metre-high bamboo pole is used by the dancers in the *Sang Hyang Dedari* (Putri 2017). The dancers, in a state of unconsciousness or *trance* (see Figure 15), climb fearlessly to the top of the pole which can be seen a metaphor to the way holy water is always stored above the ground. Therefore, the meaning is that the divine or the sacred differentiate themselves by always being on a higher level than people. There is also another ritual called *Sang Hyang Jaran* when the dancer mimics the movement of riding a horse, or *jaran* (see Figure 14). This horse is also made of bamboo.

Bamboo is one of the primary components of the ritual in Geriana Kauh. In the *Sang Hyang Jaran* dance, the bamboo to be used in the ritual is first washed and blessed by the priest. Consequently, the ordinary bamboo is transformed into a powerful medium. The *Sang Hyang Jaran* dancer is a village

elder named I Wayan Kisid (65). He is the last *Sang Hyang Jaran* dancer. There have so far been no portents or signs indicating who the next dancer for this ritual is going to be. *Sang Hyang Jaran* is a dance of possession. The dancer is believed to be possessed by the spirit of the mighty horse which protects the village from disasters and plague.



Figure 14. A *Sang Hyang Jaran* dancer performing dangerous act of walking on fire.

MOUNT AGUNG

The sacred *Sang Hyang Dedari* and *Sang Hyang Jaran* dances were not performed in 2020 because of the increased number of of Covid-19 cases in Bali. However, in 2021 the dances have been performed observing strict health protocols and the rituals were closed for outsiders. The people hoped that, by demonstrating the earnestness of their supplications and pious surrendering to the Divine, they would be redeemed and the balance in the world (*buana*) would be restored. The *Sang Hyang Dedari* and *Sang Hyang Jaran* dances were performed in the most challenging fashion, an existential plea to escape the clutches of the plague. I have seen this dance being performed under similar frightening circumstances in Karangasem in 2017 when Mount Agung erupted (Figures 14 and 15).

The Balinese expression *nyegara gunung* is used to describe the order and unification of this world. The philosophy behind *nyegara gunung* is that it symbolizes unified reality, which has been created from two primordial elements: ocean and mountain. The most revered mountain in Bali is Mount Agung. Towering over Bali as the highest point in the island, Mount Agung influences not only the physical but also the spiritual world of the Balinese. Mount Agung is a fundamental part of the mythological narrative which

recounts the beginnings of Bali as an island. Covarrubias puts it poetically, to the Balinese, “The Gunung Agung is regarded as the Navel (*puséh*) of the World” (Covarrubias 1937: 45). Sheltered on the slopes of Mount Agung is *Besakih*, the mother temple of the Balinese.



Figure 15. Angga Mahendra (2017), *Sang Hyang Dedari at night during Ngukup*, using fragrant incense to invoke the goddess. (Courtesy of the artist; Collection of Museum of Sang Hyang Dedari Giri Amertha).

Mount Agung is an active volcano and it erupted in late November of 2017, displacing thousands of people, forcing them to leave their homes. Geriana Kauh, located at the foot of Mount Agung lay in the dangerous zone. It was only 5-7 km away from the crater! The people did not evacuate immediately, but chose instead to hold a ceremony called *Pemendak* (see Figure 16).



Figure 16. Prayers to Mount Agung on the lava flow.

The last time this ritual was performed had been during the eruptions in 1963, which killed an estimated 1,500 people (these eruptions lasted for almost a whole year from 1963-1964). I Wayan Bratha, the village chief at the time of the disaster, told me that they believe that Geriana Kauh was spared from the monstrous lava flows in 1963 because the ritual had been performed.

I Wayan Bratha sees Mount Agung as a powerful being in the sense that it is more than an inanimate object for the people in Geriana Kauh. They consider Mount Agung to be *Sang Hyang Giri Tohlangkir* and they should perform the *Pemendak* ritual – literally meaning “welcoming ritual” – for it. This ritual acts as a form of greeting to the returning deity, *Sang Hyang Giri Tohlangkir*. This ceremony encapsulates the complex relationship between the villagers of Geriana Kauh and Mount Agung. They do not see the eruptions as disasters but as the way of the natural world. At dawn on 18 December 2017, after the lava flow subsided, the villagers of Geriana Kauh prayed near the lava flow, which had created a massive trench. As they were worshipped all was quiet and tranquil; the only sound was to be heard that of the *genta*, the bell being rung by the priest. Solemnly and lovingly they prayed to Mount Agung.

CONCLUSION

I began this research inspired by the metaphysical question – one of the oldest questions in philosophy – of what does reality consist? I marvel at the creativity, honesty, and passion of the villagers in Geriana Kauh. Even though I have worked in Karangasem for years, there are always new perspectives and findings to be explored. Investigating the process of the creation of the cultural world in Geriana Kauh is an intriguing quest. I have gradually realized that the cultural world is never alienated from the natural world. Moreover, it is by absorbing the meaning of nature that the Balinese are able to arrange their own particular cultural world.

Reality is not dualistic, meaning that the sacred and ideal are entirely different to and separated from the mundane. Instead, for the villagers of Geriana Kauh, reality is overlapping, flowing in every direction, back and forth, constantly creating and remaking new spaces. In an attempt to understand this reality, I have applied a phenomenological approach to penetrate the problem of plural realities in Bali. Phenomenology is a critical instrument because it enables this research to venture into the collective consciousness of the people in Geriana Kauh. I have been able to comprehend the spectacle of artistic expressions performed by the people in Geriana Kauh as a collective experience in relation to the divine.

Understanding the creative lifeworld experienced by the people living in the village has not been an easy task. Therefore, I have opted for an analysis focusing on the artistic understanding of the subjective experience to capture a sense of these worlds through their bodies. The creative mind does not engage solely with rationality, beyond this, creativity is the way in which the body of the subject reacts to the contradictory aspects of life. It is a way which enables the body to cope with temporality, not negate it but to regard

it as an existential realization of the world. Artistic expression in this sense is a medium by which to reflect on the paradox of reality.

After applying Eliade's concept of *hierophany*, I gained an important insight into how the people of Geriana Kauh perceive their physical and metaphysical worlds. The sacred is not created intrinsically solely from the natural object itself, instead the manifestation of the sacred is created by revealing the hidden connection between entities in nature. I have delved into the connection between the individual, the society and the environment by envisaging the seed of *padi masa* as the centre of the nexus.

I want to highlight the core idea of magic as a reality. I have grasped for the limitations of our articulation in conveying our deepest fascination with, love of, and sense of wonder at the holy. Ineffability in this context is a part of the everlasting continuum of the cosmogony of magic. *Niskala*, or the invisible side of the natural world, signifies the infinite possibility of ever-changing nature. It is beyond our comprehension and categorization of the world. I have pondered on how the villagers dwell between the realms of technic and magic, traversing intuitively, without being bothered by the burden of logical incompatibility. For them, the shifting reality from *sekala* and *niskala*, resembles a pendulum which is constantly moving, swinging lightly.

Lastly, the pandemic has indeed been an unpredictable and terrible ordeal. However, I have learned from the villagers, from their strength and resilience in facing the unknown. They are blessed with the sensibility to understand the pandemic as a complex way by which nature highlights imbalance and the pressing problem of ecological disharmony. What they undertake is not just communal creativity carried out by collective intelligence, I have also witnessed love and caring between them. They depend on their rituals to display their devotion to the gods, but these rituals (*Ngusaba goreng*, *Ngusaba dodol*, *Sang Hyang Dedari*, and *Sang Hyang Jaran*) symbolize the people's trust in the power of their community. They believe they can solve problems and face calamities together. They have survived volcanic eruptions in both 1963 and in 2017, the social upheavals and killings in 1965, environmental degradation and now they are enduring the capriciousness of the pandemic together. I have concluded that the essence of their success as survivors lies in their faith to imagine their lifeworld creatively, directed towards the salvation for all (*jagadhita*).

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