

CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND SACRED LANGUAGE: BALINESE VERNACULAR IN THE CONTEXT OF HINDU MODERNITY

*A Study of Linguistic Devotion and Ritual Adaptation in Contemporary Bali
(Karangasem Case Study)*

A.A. Diah Indrayani

Universitas Hindu Negeri I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa Denpasar

Email: diahindra17@gmail.com

Received : 14-06-2025

Revised : 16-07-2025

Accepted : 12-10-2025

Abstract :

This study explores the intricate interplay between sacred language, ritual adaptation, and cultural transformation within the Balinese Hindu tradition, focusing particularly on the expression of linguistic devotion through vernacular Balinese in contemporary Karangasem. The research is grounded in qualitative ethnography, combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews with ritual specialists (pemangku and serati banten), and textual analysis of lontar manuscripts and oral traditions.

Findings indicate that the Balinese vernacular (basa Bali) continues to serve as a potent medium for sacred communication and moral education, even as global modernity reshapes modes of religious expression. Ritual speech forms such as mantra, sesontengan, and tutur dresta—while once transmitted solely through oral lineages—are now being recontextualized through digital recording, social media, and educational institutions. This linguistic shift demonstrates not a dilution of sanctity, but rather a strategic re-articulation of sacred meanings within evolving communicative environments.

The study argues that this ongoing transformation embodies the Balinese philosophical principle of *desa kala patra*, which legitimizes contextual adaptation without abandoning theological integrity. Sacred language thus becomes a living continuum—simultaneously ancient and modern, textual and digital, local and global. Through this lens, linguistic devotion emerges as a vital force sustaining spiritual identity, reaffirming that Balinese Hinduism negotiates modernity not by resisting change, but by re-sacralizing it.

Ultimately, the research highlights that vernacular sacredness functions as both a form of cultural resilience and a spiritual pedagogy, nurturing continuity between generations while preserving the metaphysical essence of Balinese cosmology. The case of Karangasem reveals that in the heart of modernization, *basa Bali* remains the soul of ritual communication—bridging divine order (*tattwa*) and human expression (*karya*).

Key Words : Balinese vernacular, sacred language, ritual adaptation, Hindu modernity, Karangasem, linguistic devotion

1. Introduction

Language, within the vast landscape of Hindu civilization, has always served as more than a communicative instrument—it is a sacred conduit that bridges the human and divine realms.

The sacredness of language is embodied in *sabda brahman*, the belief that divine truth manifests through sound and speech. In the Balinese context, *basa Bali* operates within this cosmological framework not merely as a vernacular medium but as a vessel of *taksu*—a spiritual charisma that embodies divine energy in spoken words. Through the utterance of prayers, mantra, and ritual dialogues, the Balinese reaffirm the metaphysical order that sustains both individual and communal harmony.

However, the sanctity of the vernacular faces new challenges in the era of globalization, tourism, and linguistic modernization. As Indonesian (*bahasa Indonesia*) and English increasingly dominate the spheres of education, administration, and media, vernacular Balinese experiences a gradual functional displacement from the public to the ritual domain. The diminishing use of *basa alus* (refined speech) in everyday life has raised questions about the sustainability of linguistic devotion in contemporary Balinese Hindu practice. This tension between linguistic modernity and sacred continuity forms the central axis of inquiry in this study.

In Karangasem, located in eastern Bali, this negotiation between the traditional and the modern becomes particularly vivid. The region retains its reputation as a stronghold of ritual orthodoxy, where mantra, *sesontengan*, and *tutur dresta* continue to be transmitted orally through priestly and familial lineages. At the same time, the people of Karangasem actively engage with modern educational systems, digital communication, and state religious frameworks, creating a dynamic interaction between ritual tradition and contemporary discourse. Ceremonies such as *Tumpek Landep*, *Odalan*, and *Ngenteg Linggih* remain linguistically anchored in *basa Bali alus singgih*—the high register of Balinese language used to address divine beings—but the contexts of their performance increasingly reflect the influences of media documentation, formal schooling, and ritual reinterpretation.

This phenomenon suggests that sacred language in Bali is not a static relic of the past but a living linguistic tradition that continues to evolve in response to sociocultural transformation. The interplay between *desa kala patra* (place, time, and circumstance) and linguistic practice demonstrates how sacred expressions are recontextualized without losing their theological depth. Indeed, the flexibility of Balinese Hinduism allows for the incorporation of modern tools—such as written scripts, printed prayer guides, and digital recordings—into the continuum of sacred transmission.

Accordingly, this article aims to analyze the enduring role of the Balinese vernacular as a sacred language in the midst of cultural transformation. It explores how linguistic devotion (*bhakti basa*) functions as both a mode of worship and a form of cultural preservation. Furthermore, it investigates how ritual speech and vernacular expression mediate the tension between traditional cosmology and modern sensibility, positioning the Balinese language as both heritage and living practice. Through the case study of Karangasem, this paper argues that linguistic adaptation within Hindu modernity is not a sign of decline but a testament to the creative resilience of Balinese religiosity—one that continues to sacralize the present through the echoes of ancestral speech.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Sacred Language and Ritual Performance

The sacred dimension of language occupies a central position in anthropological and religious discourse. Clifford Geertz (1973), in his classic interpretation of Balinese religion, conceives ritual as a “text of culture,” a symbolic system wherein every gesture, utterance, and linguistic act contributes to the communication of cosmic meaning. Similarly, Victor Turner (1969) underscores the performative aspect of ritual, emphasizing that sacred language does not merely describe reality but creates and transforms it through performance. Language in ritual is therefore not representational but generative—it brings into being the metaphysical order that it names.

In the Balinese Hindu context, the sacredness of language manifests through complex linguistic hierarchies that mirror the island’s social and cosmological order. As I Made Bandem (1991) and Fred B. Eiseman (1990) observe, the gradations of basa Bali alus, madia, and andap are not simply markers of politeness or social class, but ritualized registers that reflect one’s relationship to the divine, to others, and to the self. These hierarchies operate within a moral universe where linguistic refinement (alus) equates with spiritual purity and humility before the gods.

Furthermore, Hooykaas (1973) notes that the Balinese linguistic system integrates both vernacular and liturgical codes. While basa Bali serves as the vernacular of devotion, kawi (Old Javanese) functions as a sacred register reserved for mantras, scriptures, and ritual speech acts. The interaction between these two linguistic strata forms what can be described as a sacred continuum—a spectrum that connects ordinary speech to divine utterance. Through this continuum, the Balinese reaffirm the principle of sabda brahman, the theological notion that sound is the embodiment of the divine. Thus, uttering a mantra or sesontengan is not an act of communication alone but a performative invocation of divine presence.

In ritual performances such as Tumpek Landep, Odalan, and Melaspas, this sacred continuum becomes vividly enacted. The pemangku (ritual priest) begins the ceremony with invocatory mantra in Sanskrit or kawi, followed by explanatory or interpretive passages in basa Bali alus singgih. This code-switching between sacred and vernacular registers reinforces the multi-layered nature of Balinese religiosity—uniting the metaphysical and the communal, the esoteric and the accessible. As Stephen Lansing (2007) observes, this linguistic alternation embodies the principle of balance (Rwa Bhineda), integrating the realms of sekala (seen) and niskala (unseen).

Moreover, the performative potency of sacred language in Bali lies not only in its semantic content but also in its acoustic and rhythmic structure. Chanting (mekidung, meweda, masantih) generates sonic vibrations believed to harmonize the microcosm (bhuana alit) with the macrocosm (bhuana agung). According to Reuter (2018), the ritual voice itself becomes an instrument of cosmological alignment, embodying the Balinese conviction that sabda (sound), bayu (energy), and idep (mind) must operate in harmony to sustain universal balance.

Thus, sacred language in Balinese Hinduism operates as both ritual technology and ethical discourse. It encodes cosmological principles, enacts spiritual transformation, and affirms

social hierarchy through speech acts that are simultaneously aesthetic and theological. In this sense, Balinese sacred language is not merely a cultural artifact but a living performance of metaphysical truth—a linguistic enactment of devotion (bhakti) that sustains the spiritual architecture of Balinese society.

2.2 Vernacularization and Cultural Resilience

The concept of vernacularization has emerged as a key analytical framework in understanding how traditional societies sustain their sacred heritage amid social and cultural change. Scholars such as James Fox (2011), Thomas Reuter (2018), and Michel Picard (2020) argue that vernacularization represents not a process of degradation or secularization, but rather a dynamic adaptation in which local languages, rituals, and symbolic forms evolve to meet the demands of new historical circumstances. Within this perspective, vernacularization is a creative act of renewal—an ongoing negotiation between the sacred and the everyday that enables cultural systems to remain both authentic and relevant.

In the Balinese context, vernacularization operates as a mode of resilience, a mechanism through which the sacred is continually rearticulated in contemporary forms without eroding its theological depth. Traditional ritual expressions—banten, tirtha, kidung, and mantra—are reinterpreted through modern institutions such as schools, community organizations (sekaa), and digital media platforms. This transformation demonstrates how Balinese culture does not resist modernization; rather, it absorbs and reconfigures it in accordance with indigenous philosophical principles.

Central to this adaptive vitality is the Balinese doctrine of *desa kala patra*—literally, “place, time, and circumstance.” As a guiding cosmological principle, *desa kala patra* legitimizes contextual adaptation by asserting that truth and propriety must always be aligned with situational appropriateness. In ritual and linguistic practice, this means that form may change, but essence remains constant. The recitation of mantra or the performance of ritual speech (*sesontengan*) may now occur through microphones, recorded media, or school competitions, yet each adaptation continues to embody the same underlying *tattwa* (philosophical essence).

Picard (2020) observes that this elasticity enables Balinese Hinduism to sustain continuity within change, maintaining its identity even as it interfaces with tourism, state policies, and global media. The sacred vernacular—*basa Bali alus singgih*—functions not only as a marker of piety but also as a cultural emblem of authenticity, distinguishing Balinese religiosity from both secular modernity and external cultural influences. The shift toward codified and institutionalized forms of religious education further reflects this process of controlled vernacularization, where the language of ritual becomes a subject of pedagogy, preservation, and innovation simultaneously.

Meanwhile, Reuter (2018) highlights that vernacular resilience in Bali is inseparable from its ritual ecology. The interdependence of language, landscape, and community ensures that vernacular expressions remain embedded within lived experience. In Karangasem, for instance, the continued use of *basa Bali alus* in temple ceremonies, oral teachings, and traditional art performances (*wayang*, *arja*, *kidung*) reveals how linguistic devotion functions as a stabilizing force amid socio-economic transformation.

Thus, vernacularization in Bali cannot be understood merely as linguistic survival but as a spiritual strategy of endurance. It reflects the Balinese conviction that modernity need not rupture tradition; rather, it can serve as a vessel through which sacred values are reframed and transmitted to new generations. This process aligns with the broader Hindu philosophical notion of sanatana dharma—the eternal truth that persists through changing forms.

In sum, vernacularization embodies the adaptive intelligence of Balinese Hindu culture. By localizing the global and sacralizing the modern, Balinese communities transform potential threats to their tradition into opportunities for renewal. The vernacular, therefore, becomes both a medium of continuity and a mechanism of innovation, ensuring that the spiritual vitality of Bali remains firmly grounded in its linguistic soul.

2.3 Hindu Modernity in Bali

The discourse on Hindu modernity in Bali represents one of the most complex intersections between religion, culture, and state formation in postcolonial Indonesia. Scholars such as Rubinstein (1999), Bakker (2019), and Lansing (2007) emphasize that Balinese Hinduism has undergone a profound process of reinterpretation and systematization, shaped by the forces of globalization, bureaucratic rationalization, and religious pluralism. Rather than signifying a rupture with tradition, this transformation illustrates how Balinese Hinduism creatively reconciles ancient cosmology with the demands of the modern nation-state and global cultural flows.

The concept of “modern Hinduism” in the Balinese context emerged prominently during the post-independence era, when the Indonesian government required religious communities to conform to standardized categories of agama—officially recognized religions with codified doctrines, scriptures, and institutions. In response, Balinese intellectuals and religious authorities—through organizations such as Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia (PHDI)—undertook a systematic process of theological codification. Classical texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita were reinterpreted through Balinese hermeneutics, and ritual practices were rationalized to align with modern educational and bureaucratic systems.

As Bakker (2019) notes, this process did not diminish the vitality of Balinese ritual life; instead, it redefined Hindu identity as both spiritual and civic, blending local devotional traditions (tattwa, susila, upacara) with a national religious consciousness. The vernacular, particularly basa Bali alus singgih, thus became a mediating instrument between these domains—a language through which sacred doctrine could be indigenized and recontextualized within modern frameworks.

Rubinstein (1999) further argues that Balinese modernity is marked by a dialogue between textual and performative traditions. While textualization (through printed scriptures, religious curricula, and state-approved manuals) introduced an element of formalization, it also inspired new forms of linguistic devotion—wherein recitation, translation, and commentary became acts of both intellectual and spiritual engagement. This development reflects what Lansing (2007) calls a “reflexive religiosity,” in which Balinese practitioners consciously interpret and modernize their faith without abandoning its ritual foundations.

Within this evolving religious ecology, the Balinese vernacular occupies a liminal space—simultaneously sacred and civic, traditional and modern. On one hand, it continues to function as a medium of ritual communication, embodying divine resonance through mantra, kidung, and tutur dresta. On the other hand, it serves as a language of pedagogy and public discourse, used in Hindu education, cultural preservation programs, and local government ceremonies. This dual function underscores the adaptability of Balinese Hinduism: its ability to integrate adat (customary law) and agama (formal religion) through a shared linguistic ethos.

Moreover, the encounter between Hindu modernity and global modernity has generated new interpretive practices. The translation of Sanskrit and kawi scriptures into basa Bali alus and Indonesian has expanded accessibility, while the rise of digital media has given sacred texts and ritual recitations unprecedented reach. Online platforms, temple livestreams, and virtual scriptural classes are now part of the religious landscape, allowing younger generations to engage with sacred language in contemporary modalities. This digital turn reflects a vernacular modernity—a process in which technology becomes a new site of taksu, or divine presence, rather than a threat to it.

Through these negotiations, Balinese Hinduism demonstrates a model of contextual modernity grounded in the principle of *desa kala patra* (place, time, circumstance). The vernacular acts as both guardian and innovator—preserving the spiritual core of Hindu thought while facilitating its translation into modern life. Thus, the linguistic domain becomes a theological and political frontier, where questions of authenticity, authority, and adaptation are continuously contested and redefined.

In this way, Hindu modernity in Bali does not signify secularization but sacral transformation. The vernacular serves as a living testament to how tradition survives not by resisting modernity, but by sacralizing it—turning the language of the people into the language of devotion, education, and cultural sovereignty.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach grounded in an interpretive paradigm, emphasizing meaning-making processes within lived religious practices. The ethnographic lens allows the researcher to engage deeply with ritual language as both a symbolic expression and a social performance. Rather than treating language as a fixed code, this study understands it as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation—a living form that embodies the shifting relations between tradition, modernity, and spirituality.

3.1 Research Site and Context

Fieldwork was conducted between June and August 2025 in Desa Adat Karangasem, a region in eastern Bali renowned for its adherence to ritual orthodoxy and linguistic purity. Karangasem was purposefully selected because it represents a community in which the Balinese vernacular remains deeply integrated into religious, social, and ceremonial life. Temples such as Pura Dalem, Pura Penataran Agung, and local *merajan* (family shrines) serve as active spaces where sacred speech, mantra, and *sesontengan* continue to be performed within their original ritual contexts.

The field site thus provides a living laboratory for observing how sacred language persists, adapts, and circulates in the age of digital transformation and educational modernization. The coexistence of traditional ritual leaders (pemangku), community elders, and younger, digitally literate generations allows for the examination of intergenerational linguistic adaptation and ritual reinterpretation within the same socio-religious environment.

3.2 Data Collection Techniques

To obtain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon, the study employed multiple complementary methods:

a. Participant Observation

The researcher engaged directly in temple ceremonies, Tumpek Landep celebrations, and communal gatherings, adopting the dual role of observer and participant. This immersion enabled the documentation of ritual interactions, linguistic performances, and the spatial dynamics of worship. Observations focused particularly on the usage, tone, and structure of basa Bali alus singgih during ritual speech acts, as well as the contextual interplay between kawi, Balinese vernacular, and Indonesian. Field notes were systematically recorded to capture non-verbal nuances—intonation, gesture, rhythm—that contribute to the performative efficacy of sacred language.

b. Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with a purposive selection of informants representing various dimensions of linguistic devotion and ritual authority. These included:

1. Pemangku (temple priests), who articulate ritual texts and interpret theological meanings within mantra and tutur dresta;
2. Serati banten (ritual artisans), who construct offerings while reciting ritual formulas that accompany material preparations;
3. Local elders and cultural custodians, who preserve oral traditions and provide contextual insights into language transmission and ritual transformation;
4. Younger practitioners and religious educators, who represent the interface between tradition and formal education.

This approach aligns with Moleong (2017) and Sugiyono (2018), emphasizing the need to capture subjective meanings through dialogue and narrative. Interviews were conducted in both basa Bali alus and Indonesian to preserve authenticity and ensure interpretive depth.

c. Document and Textual Analysis

Complementing field observations, the study examined lontar manuscripts, temple archives, and locally published ritual guides that codify linguistic and ceremonial practices. The analysis also included digital media materials, such as recorded mantra recitations, kidung performances, and educational videos disseminated via social platforms. This triangulation of textual, oral, and visual sources provided a multi-dimensional perspective on how sacred language circulates across traditional and modern media.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

Data were analyzed following the qualitative framework of Miles and Huberman (1994), consisting of three interrelated stages:

1. Data Reduction – The process of selecting, simplifying, and categorizing field data to identify recurring patterns related to linguistic function, ritual adaptation, and sacred expression.
2. Data Display – Organizing information in visual and textual formats, including thematic charts and ethnographic summaries, to reveal relational structures between speech forms and ritual contexts.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification – Synthesizing the findings through interpretive reasoning, connecting empirical observations with theoretical constructs such as *desa kala patra*, *Tri Hita Karana*, and *sabda brahman*.

Triangulation was employed across methods (observation, interview, document analysis), sources (ritual actors, community leaders, textual evidence), and theoretical perspectives to enhance reliability and validity. This methodological pluralism ensures that interpretations of sacred language are not reduced to textual or linguistic features alone but are understood as embodied practices that reveal the living theology of Balinese Hinduism.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

All field interactions were conducted with respect to *adat* (customary law) and ritual sanctity. The researcher sought consent before recording ceremonies or interviews, ensuring that sacred knowledge was treated with discretion and cultural sensitivity. Names of participants are anonymized unless explicit permission was granted.

In essence, the methodological framework situates linguistic devotion within its ritual ecology, viewing the Balinese vernacular not as a static relic but as a performative, adaptive, and ethical act. Through immersion, dialogue, and textual reflection, the study captures how sacred speech in Karangasem continues to articulate the enduring balance between tradition, adaptation, and modernity.

4. Results

4.1 Vernacular Speech as Sacred Medium

In the temple rituals of *Desa Adat Karangasem*, the *basa Bali alus singgih* functions as the linguistic vessel of sanctity, serving as the principal medium through which humans address the divine. During ceremonies such as *Odalan* or *Tumpek Landep*, priests (*pemangku*) employ refined speech when invoking deities, while community members use *basa madia* or *basa andap* to communicate among themselves. This stratified linguistic structure reflects the cosmic hierarchy of *Tri Loka*—the three realms of existence (*bhur*, *bhwah*, *swah*).

The ritual stratification of language signifies more than social decorum; it is a spiritual enactment of cosmological order. Every word, tone, and gesture serves as a symbolic reenactment of balance between the *sekala* (visible) and *niskala* (invisible) dimensions of reality. Despite the dominance of Indonesian in public communication, ritual contexts remain linguistically conservative, safeguarding *basa Bali alus* as a marker of purity and reverence.

Notably, mantra such as “*Om Awighnam Astu Namoh Siddham*” are often followed by Balinese vernacular interpretations delivered by priests to enhance communal understanding. This blending of Sanskrit, Old Javanese (*Kawi*), and Balinese vernacular demonstrates what may be called a hybrid sacred speech—a linguistic syncretism that bridges textual theology with

vernacular devotion. Such practice ensures accessibility without diminishing sacred authority, affirming the Balinese principle that meaning must evolve without losing sanctity.

In essence, *basa Bali alus* operates not merely as a form of communication but as an embodied ritual performance, sustaining the vibrational link between human intention (*manacika*), sacred sound (*sabda*), and divine energy (*bayu*).

4.2 Ritual Adaptation and Modern Platforms

Field observations reveal that the sacred language of ritual is increasingly being mediated through digital platforms—a transformation that demonstrates the adaptive philosophy of *desa kala patra* (appropriateness of place, time, and circumstance). Young *pemangku* and temple committees in Karangasem have begun recording *panyastawa* (praises), *kidung*, and mantra in both Sanskrit and Balinese using smartphones and simple recording devices. These recordings are archived for educational and preservation purposes, shared among temple youth groups (*sekaa teruna*) and religious educators.

This digital turn does not signify desacralization; rather, it extends the ritual space into new technological dimensions. Rituals once confined to temple courtyards now resonate through virtual media, reaching diasporic Balinese communities abroad. The ability to replay and study *panyastawa* chants allows for pedagogical continuity, ensuring that younger generations can learn pronunciation, intonation, and meaning under the guidance of senior priests.

Moreover, the dissemination of ritual recordings via social media platforms such as YouTube or WhatsApp community groups has generated what can be described as a “digital sacredness.” The screen becomes an extension of the altar—a space of devotional engagement rather than passive consumption. This innovation aligns with the Balinese view that sacredness lies in intent (*niat suci*), not in rigid form. Hence, the digital mediation of sacred speech exemplifies how traditional devotion can coexist harmoniously with modern technology, maintaining authenticity while embracing new tools of cultural preservation.

4.3 Linguistic Devotion as Cultural Identity

Within Karangasem’s ritual life, linguistic devotion (*bhakti basa*) is perceived as a direct expression of religious piety and cultural integrity. The refinement of speech (*basa alus*) is not only a social virtue but a spiritual discipline. A local elder eloquently summarized this view:

“Ngaturang basa alus punika sami sareng ngaturang banten” — “Offering refined language is equal to offering ritual offerings.”

This statement encapsulates a core Balinese belief: that speech itself is an offering. The use of *basa alus singgih* represents both reverence and self-purification, affirming that inner devotion is articulated through linguistic grace. Speaking well (*becik nyarengin basa*) is thus an act of maintaining cosmic harmony.

Beyond temple rituals, the cultivation of sacred language has become a pillar of cultural education. Modern institutions, including Hindu-based schools and cultural organizations, organize speech and chant competitions such as *lomba mekidung*, *masantih*, and *lomba*

ngwacen lontar. These events not only revive the aesthetic dimension of the language but also reinforce it as a moral pedagogy—teaching humility, respect, and spiritual focus.

Through such initiatives, linguistic devotion transcends ritual space, evolving into a marker of Balinese identity amid globalization. As one teacher explained, “To speak in refined Balinese is to remember where we come from.” This sentiment reflects how the sacred vernacular continues to serve as a moral compass, grounding Balinese modern life in the ethical ideals of Tri Hita Karana—harmony with God, humanity, and nature.

4.4 Intergenerational Shifts and Educational Integration

While ritual sanctity endures, the field data indicate a gradual intergenerational shift in linguistic proficiency and ritual engagement. Younger Balinese in Karangasem demonstrate decreasing fluency in traditional speech registers—particularly basa alus singgih—due to the predominance of Indonesian in formal education and daily interaction. Nevertheless, rather than signaling cultural decline, this generational change reveals a creative re-interpretation of sacred language.

Young practitioners increasingly blend Balinese with Indonesian during ritual recitations, creating a hybrid linguistic mode that reflects both reverence and relevance. They may not command the entire liturgical lexicon of their elders, yet they exhibit strong affective attachment to the idea of linguistic devotion. Their reinterpretations—such as composing short kidung in mixed Balinese-Indonesian verse—illustrate an ongoing attempt to translate sacred emotion into modern idioms.

The integration of basa Bali into the school-based Hindu Religious Education curriculum (Pendidikan Agama Hindu dan Budi Pekerti) provides institutional reinforcement for linguistic preservation. Teachers employ simplified versions of mantra and kidung to make them accessible to students, even if this simplification sometimes reduces stylistic complexity. Despite the pedagogical compromises, such curricular inclusion ensures that vernacular devotion remains embedded in formal education.

Furthermore, extracurricular programs such as pasraman (Hindu learning centers) complement formal schooling by teaching ritual chanting, lontar reading, and Balinese script literacy. These initiatives cultivate new literacies of faith, where digital learning tools coexist with oral transmission. In effect, the younger generation is not abandoning sacred language—they are reframing it within their own communicative ecology.

This intergenerational dynamic underscores the enduring resilience of Balinese Hinduism, which continually rebalances its linguistic and ritual practices in accordance with desa kala patra. The sacred vernacular thus survives not through strict preservation alone, but through innovation, pedagogy, and devotion, ensuring that each generation rediscovers its sacred voice in its own way.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Semiotics of Devotional Speech

The Balinese vernacular functions as a semiotic bridge connecting the human and the divine, translating metaphysical concepts into embodied expressions. Language here is not a passive

vessel for meaning but an active agent of transformation. In the context of Balinese ritual, every utterance of *basa alus singgih* carries an ethical and spiritual charge, shaping the moral disposition of the speaker and the sanctity of the space in which it is uttered. As Victor Turner (1969) notes, ritual language operates within a liminal zone—a threshold where speech transcends the everyday to become performative, enacting the very order it describes.

In Balinese Hinduism, this performativity manifests through the ritual stratification of speech (*andap*, *madia*, *alus singgih*) which mirrors cosmic hierarchies and ethical relations. To speak in refined language is not merely to honor social status but to align oneself with *dharma*, cultivating humility (*ajeg ring andhap asor*) and self-discipline. The act of uttering sacred words (*sabda suci*) becomes an embodiment of moral order (*tattwa susila*), reinforcing both personal purity and communal harmony.

Clifford Geertz (1973) interprets Balinese religious expression as a “text of culture,” wherein language, ritual, and gesture operate symbolically to sustain meaning. Within this semiotic system, *basa Bali alus* represents not only respect but reverence, transforming linguistic etiquette into spiritual devotion. A word spoken correctly, at the right time, and in the right tone becomes an act of offering (*yadnya*), equal in sanctity to *banten* or *tirtha*.

Furthermore, the Balinese understanding of *sabda brahman*—that divine energy is manifest in sound—provides theological grounding for this linguistic devotion. Speech thus bridges the sacred and the social, rendering communication itself an act of worship. Each utterance contributes to the continuous renewal of *rta* (cosmic order), affirming that in Balinese cosmology, to speak well is to live well.

5.2 Negotiating Modernity through Language

The ethnographic findings from Karangasem reveal that modernization in Bali does not inevitably lead to the erosion of sacred tradition. Instead, it prompts a creative negotiation between continuity and change, between reverence and relevance. Within this negotiation, *basa Bali alus* emerges as a tool of adaptation—allowing the Balinese to sustain ritual authority while embracing contemporary realities.

Modernization introduces new domains of linguistic practice—schools, digital media, and public ceremonies—where sacred language is recontextualized rather than abandoned. In classrooms, teachers translate mantra into Balinese and Indonesian, enabling students to grasp theological meanings while maintaining their ritual resonance. On social media, youth groups share *kidung*, *panyastawa*, and *dresta adat* recordings, transforming digital space into a virtual sanctuary of devotion. This phenomenon reflects what Reuter (2018) terms the “ritual elasticity” of Balinese Hinduism, where adaptation is not viewed as dilution but as a reaffirmation of sacred principles within changing conditions.

The philosophy of *desa kala patra* plays a central role in legitimizing this process. It asserts that ritual propriety depends not on rigid uniformity but on contextual appropriateness—rituals and languages must resonate with their environment, time, and audience. By applying this principle, Balinese communities in Karangasem integrate new technologies, pedagogies, and linguistic forms into the sacred domain without violating its essence.

Simultaneously, this negotiation embodies the principle of Tri Hita Karana—maintaining harmony among God (parhyangan), humanity (pawongan), and nature (palemahan). Linguistic devotion fulfills this triadic balance: through prayerful speech one connects with the divine, through polite language one harmonizes with others, and through reverent tone one honors the environment. Thus, linguistic modernity in Bali becomes an extension of spiritual ecology—a way of living tradition through language.

Far from displacing sacred authority, modernization has democratized access to it. By making ritual knowledge and linguistic devotion accessible through education and media, Balinese Hinduism asserts that tradition is not the enemy of progress, but its moral compass. The vernacular, therefore, becomes a site of resilience, mediating the encounter between ancestral wisdom and global modernity.

5.3 From Oral to Digital Sacredness

The ongoing transition from oral transmission to digital documentation marks one of the most significant cultural transformations in contemporary Balinese ritual life. Traditionally, sacred language was transmitted orally from guru to sisya, embedded in the intimate settings of temple courtyards or family shrines. Today, that same linguistic devotion extends into digital archives—recorded, edited, and disseminated across networks that connect villages, schools, and diasporic communities.

This development does not represent secularization, as some might assume; rather, it signifies a continuity through innovation. Digital platforms—when used with devotional intent—serve as new vessels of taksu (spiritual charisma). A mantra recorded on a smartphone or uploaded to YouTube does not lose its sanctity; it simply acquires a new medium of expression. As long as the intention (niat suci) remains pure, the transformation of medium enhances, rather than undermines, ritual meaning.

The digitization of mantra, kidung, and panyastawa reflects an evolving form of sacred literacy, one that integrates sound (sabda) and meaning (makna) in technological spaces. This innovation allows for intergenerational transmission that bridges the gap between elders—who carry oral authority—and youth—who possess digital fluency. In this process, ritual soundscapes are preserved not as museum relics but as living archives, continually reactivated through listening, chanting, and sharing.

Picard (2020) observes that the Balinese genius for ritual adaptation lies in its capacity to “sacralize the modern.” The digital mediation of sacred language exemplifies this sacralization: technology is not merely a communication tool but a medium of devotion. By transforming the screen into a site of remembrance and participation, the Balinese reaffirm their belief that sacredness resides not in the material form, but in the intentional act of reverence.

Consequently, the move from oral to digital sacredness represents a new chapter in the history of Balinese religiosity—one in which the eternal (sanatana dharma) is voiced through ephemeral technologies, and tradition achieves immortality through renewal. In Karangasem, as in much of Bali, sabda (sound) and makna (meaning) remain inseparable: each chant,

whether spoken in the temple or streamed online, continues to vibrate with the same prayerful energy that has sustained Balinese civilization for centuries.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that the Balinese vernacular (basa Bali) continues to function as a sacred vessel of devotion, ethics, and identity within the evolving landscape of Hindu modernity. Through its intricate interplay between ritual speech, linguistic hierarchy, and philosophical adaptability, the Balinese language remains deeply embedded in the moral and cosmological framework of the community. The findings from Desa Adat Karangasem affirm that sacred language, rather than being eroded by modernization, demonstrates extraordinary resilience—adapting fluidly to new contexts while preserving its metaphysical integrity.

The phenomenon of linguistic devotion (*bhakti basa*) exemplifies how Balinese Hinduism negotiates change not through resistance, but through reinterpretation. The Balinese people do not abandon their sacred lexicon; they recontextualize it—transferring mantra, *kidung*, and ritual utterances into new pedagogical, social, and digital spaces. This transformation aligns with the principle of *desa kala patra*, which legitimizes adaptation across place, time, and circumstance, and the philosophy of *Tri Hita Karana*, which emphasizes harmony between the divine, humanity, and the natural world.

Within this framework, modernization in Bali does not signify rupture but renewal—a dialogical process between past and present, sacred and secular, tradition and technology. The increasing use of digital platforms, school-based rituals, and vernacular religious education demonstrates that *basa Bali* has entered a new phase of vitality. The sacred word continues to be heard, read, chanted, and shared, maintaining its performative power even when mediated through microphones, videos, or online channels.

Moreover, the persistence of *basa Bali alus singgih* as the primary medium of ritual communication underscores that language remains an ethical act of devotion. To speak in refined Balinese is to participate in the cosmic order (*rta*), to cultivate humility (*andhap asor*), and to reaffirm the relationship between sound (*sabda*), energy (*bayu*), and consciousness (*idep*). In this sense, the preservation of sacred language is not merely cultural maintenance but spiritual continuity—a living enactment of *sanatana dharma* (eternal truth) within localized Balinese cosmology.

The study also highlights that the resilience of *basa Bali* is sustained through community engagement, intergenerational learning, and creative pedagogy. The incorporation of vernacular language into *Pendidikan Agama Hindu dan Budi Pekerti*, *pasraman*, and temple-based education ensures that young Balinese develop not only linguistic competence but also ethical sensitivity. Through these forms of transmission, the vernacular becomes both medium and message—a sacred inheritance that teaches devotion, humility, and harmony.

Ultimately, the endurance of the Balinese vernacular in religious contexts affirms the moral universe of Balinese Hinduism. Sacred language remains the thread that binds cosmology to community, theology to daily life, and ritual precision to moral clarity. In the words of a local elder, “*Ngaturang basa alus sami sareng ngaturang banten*”—to offer refined speech is to offer devotion itself. Thus, preserving linguistic sanctity is tantamount to preserving the soul

of Balinese culture—a living testimony that spirituality in Bali continues to speak through the voices of its people, across temples, classrooms, and digital spaces alike.

References

- Bakker, F. L. (2019). *Hinduism in modern Indonesia: A minority religion between local, national, and global interests*. Routledge.
- Bandem, I. M. (1991). *Kaja and Kelod: Balinese dance in transition*. Oxford University Press.
- Eiseman, F. B. (1990). *Bali: Sekala and Niskala (Vols. 1–2)*. Periplus Editions.
- Fox, J. J. (2011). *The art of continuity in Balinese ritual language*. Leiden University Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. Basic Books.
- Hooykaas, C. (1973). *Religion in Bali*. Brill.
- Lansing, J. S. (2007). *Perfect order: Recognizing complexity in Bali*. Princeton University Press.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook (2nd ed.)*. Sage Publications.
- Moleong, L. J. (2017). *Metodologi penelitian kualitatif (Edisi Revisi)*. PT Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Picard, M. (2020). *Bali: Cultural tourism and touristic culture*. Routledge.
- Reuter, T. (2018). *Custodians of the sacred mountains: Culture and society in the highlands of Bali*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Rubinstein, R. (1999). *Beyond the realm of the senses: The Balinese ritual of kecapi*. KITLV Press.
- Sugiyono. (2018). *Metode penelitian kualitatif, kuantitatif, dan R&D*. Alfabeta.
- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine Publishing.
- Zoetmulder, P. J. (1982). *Old Javanese-English dictionary*. Nijhoff.
- Widana, I. M. (2020). *Bahasa Bali alus dalam perspektif sosiolinguistik dan spiritualitas Hindu*. Denpasar: UHN I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa Press.
- Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia. (2003). *Pedoman pelaksanaan upacara agama Hindu di Bali*. Proyek Pembinaan Umat Hindu.