

LINGUISTIC SPIRITUALITY: THE INTERSECTION OF KAWI LANGUAGE AND HINDU RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

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Abstract

This study investigates the intricate relationship between language and spirituality through an in-depth analysis of the Kawi language and its role in Hindu religious expression, particularly within the Indonesian context. As an ancient literary and liturgical language, Kawi functions not merely as a communicative tool, but as a complex symbolic system that encodes theological doctrines, philosophical insights, and ritual meanings. Its continued use in sacred texts, mantras, and ceremonial performances reflects a dynamic interaction between linguistic form and spiritual experience. Employing a qualitative interdisciplinary approach, this research integrates philological analysis, hermeneutic interpretation, semiotic examination, and anthropological observation to explore how Kawi operates across textual, ritual, and social dimensions. The study examines not only the structure and meaning of Kawi texts, but also their lived significance in religious practice, including how practitioners interpret, internalize, and transmit spiritual knowledge through language. The findings demonstrate that Kawi serves as a vital bridge between the material and spiritual realms, enabling the articulation of metaphysical concepts that are often beyond the reach of everyday language. It shapes religious consciousness by structuring how devotees understand cosmology, ethics, and the nature of divinity. Furthermore, Kawi plays a crucial role in preserving sacred knowledge and sustaining cultural identity, particularly in the face of modernization and linguistic shift. This research contributes to broader discussions on linguistic spirituality by highlighting the enduring relevance of sacred languages in contemporary religious life. It underscores the need for preservation efforts, not only as a matter of cultural heritage, but also as a means of maintaining spiritual continuity and depth within religious communities.

Keywords : Kawi language, linguistic spirituality, Hinduism, semiotics, ritual language, Bali

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is also a vessel of meaning, belief, and spiritual experience. In many religious traditions, sacred languages occupy a privileged position as mediators between humans and the divine. Such languages are not only used to convey doctrinal teachings but also to evoke transcendental realities, shape ritual efficacy, and structure religious consciousness. Within Hinduism in Indonesia—particularly in Bali and Java—the Kawi language plays a significant role in ritual practice, classical literature, and spiritual discourse.

Kawi, often referred to as Old Javanese, emerged as a literary and liturgical language deeply influenced by Sanskrit in terms of vocabulary, cosmology, and aesthetic expression. Historically, it flourished during the classical Javanese period and became the medium of kakawin literature, royal inscriptions, and religious texts. Its survival into the present is largely due to its integration into ritual life, where it is preserved through lontar manuscripts, priestly recitations, and oral transmission across generations. Despite the dominance of modern Indonesian and Balinese languages in everyday communication, Kawi continues to function as a sacred linguistic medium endowed with symbolic authority and spiritual legitimacy.

From a theoretical perspective, the persistence of Kawi raises important questions about the relationship between language and spirituality. Sacred languages are often perceived not merely as communicative systems but as embodiments of divine order, where sound, structure, and meaning are inseparable from metaphysical realities. In this sense, Kawi can be understood as a form of “linguistic spirituality,” in which language operates as both a symbolic system and a performative force within religious practice.

Moreover, the use of Kawi in rituals is not solely about preserving tradition; it actively shapes religious experience. The recitation of mantras, the chanting of kakawin, and the use of specific lexical forms contribute to the creation of a sacred atmosphere, reinforcing the presence of the divine and guiding participants toward spiritual awareness. This aligns with broader anthropological perspectives that view ritual language as a key mechanism in constructing meaning and sustaining cultural continuity.

However, the contemporary relevance of Kawi also faces challenges. Modernization, language shift, and changing patterns of religious practice have led to a gradual decline in linguistic competence among younger generations. This raises critical concerns regarding the sustainability of Kawi as a living sacred language and its role in maintaining religious authenticity and cultural identity.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine how Kawi language embodies spiritual values and facilitates Hindu religious expression in contemporary contexts. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How does Kawi language function in Hindu religious practices? (2) What symbolic and semiotic meanings are embedded in Kawi linguistic structures? (3) How does Kawi contribute to the construction of spiritual experience and cultural identity? By addressing these questions, this research not only contributes to the study of linguistic anthropology and religious studies but also highlights the broader significance of preserving sacred languages in an era of rapid socio-cultural transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sacred Language and Spirituality

Sacred languages such as Sanskrit, Latin, and Arabic have long been associated with religious authority, ritual efficacy, and spiritual authenticity. These languages are not merely tools of communication, but are regarded as sanctified mediums through which divine truths are revealed, preserved, and transmitted across generations. Eliade (1959) conceptualizes sacred language as a gateway to the transcendent, enabling human beings to participate in a reality that surpasses the profane domain. Similarly, Geertz (1973) argues that religious language plays a central role in constructing systems of meaning, shaping how communities understand cosmology, morality, and existence itself.

Beyond these classical perspectives, more recent studies in linguistic anthropology emphasize the performative dimension of sacred language. Tambiah (1985), for instance, highlights that ritual language does not simply describe reality but actively brings it into being through performative utterances. In this sense, chanting, recitation, and liturgical speech are believed to possess intrinsic power, where sound, rhythm, and correct pronunciation are integral to their efficacy. This aligns with broader anthropological insights suggesting that sacredness is not confined to semantic content, but is also embedded in the phonological, aesthetic, and embodied dimensions of language (Duranti, 1997; Keane, 1997).

These perspectives collectively suggest that sacred language operates simultaneously at symbolic, performative, and experiential levels. However, much of the existing literature has focused on major religious languages, leaving less attention to regionally embedded traditions such as Kawi. This gap highlights the need to examine how localized sacred languages function within specific cultural and religious contexts.

Kawi Language in Historical Context

Kawi, or Old Javanese, developed during the classical period of Javanese civilization (approximately the 8th to 15th centuries) and became a prominent literary and religious language. Strongly influenced by Sanskrit, Kawi incorporates extensive lexical borrowing, as well as cosmological and aesthetic frameworks derived from Indian traditions. Zoetmulder (1982, 1974) emphasizes the richness of Kawi literature, particularly in kakawin texts, which creatively reinterpret epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata within local cultural settings.

Despite its historical origins, Kawi continues to play a significant role in contemporary Balinese Hinduism. It is widely used in ritual recitations, priestly liturgy, and sacred performances, often in conjunction with Sanskrit and Balinese. Scholars such as Becker (1995) and Fox (1988) have noted that ritual languages in Southeast Asia often function as repositories of cultural memory, preserving archaic forms while remaining active in present-day practices. In this context, Kawi occupies an intermediary position, bridging classical textual traditions and lived religious experience.

Furthermore, the transmission of Kawi through lontar manuscripts and oral traditions reflects an ongoing process of preservation, reinterpretation, and adaptation. Reading, chanting, and interpreting these texts are not merely intellectual activities but are themselves considered forms of spiritual practice. This reinforces the inseparability of language, knowledge, and devotion, positioning Kawi as both a cultural and religious resource.

However, existing studies on Kawi tend to focus on its philological or historical dimensions, with relatively limited attention to its role in shaping contemporary spiritual experience. This study addresses that gap by examining Kawi as an active component of religious life rather than solely as a literary heritage.

Linguistic Anthropology and Semiotics

From a semiotic perspective, language is understood as a system of signs that conveys meaning beyond literal interpretation. Peirce's triadic model—comprising icon, index, and symbol—provides a useful analytical framework for understanding how Kawi operates within ritual contexts. In this framework, Kawi expressions may function iconically (through resemblance to divine qualities), indexically (by indicating the presence of sacred

forces), and symbolically (through culturally established theological meanings) (Peirce, 1931–1958).

In addition, linguistic anthropology emphasizes that language is inseparable from social practice. Duranti (1997) argues that language must be understood within its cultural and interactional contexts, while Silverstein (1976) highlights how linguistic forms index social relations and cultural meanings. The use of Kawi in ritual settings exemplifies this perspective, as language is intertwined with gestures, offerings, spatial arrangements, and performative actions, forming an integrated semiotic system.

The concept of “ritual speech” further clarifies this phenomenon. Ritual language is often highly formalized, stylized, and resistant to change, which contributes to its authority and perceived sacredness (Tambiah, 1985). Moreover, recent developments in semiotic anthropology emphasize the multilayered nature of meaning in ritual discourse. Kawi texts and chants operate simultaneously at literal, metaphorical, and esoteric levels, requiring specialized interpretive competence.

This layered system of meaning also reinforces social hierarchy, as access to deeper interpretations is typically mediated by religious specialists such as pandita. As noted by Parmentier (1994), semiotic systems in ritual contexts are closely linked to structures of authority and knowledge distribution.

By integrating semiotic theory and linguistic anthropology, this study positions Kawi not merely as a linguistic artifact, but as a complex symbolic and performative system that mediates between human experience and divine reality. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how language functions as a central component of spirituality in non-Western contexts.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach aimed at exploring the intersection between language, spirituality, and religious practice. Given that the Kawi language operates within symbolic, ritual, and philosophical domains, this study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology integrating philological, hermeneutic, semiotic, and anthropological perspectives. This combination enables a holistic understanding of Kawi not only as a linguistic system, but also as a lived cultural and spiritual practice embedded in religious life.

Research Design

The study is designed as an interpretive qualitative inquiry, focusing on processes of meaning-making within religious contexts. It seeks to uncover how linguistic forms are embedded in ritual actions and how they contribute to the construction of spiritual experience. Rather than aiming for generalization, this research prioritizes depth, contextual sensitivity, and culturally grounded interpretation.

The interpretive paradigm allows the researcher to engage with texts and practices as dynamic sources of meaning, where language is understood not merely as representation, but as constitutive of religious reality. Through this design, the study situates Kawi within its socio-religious context, emphasizing the interaction between text, practitioner, and ritual performance.

Data Sources

The data for this study are derived from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data include classical Kawi texts such as lontar manuscripts, kakawin (poetic compositions), liturgical texts, and mantras used in Hindu rituals. These texts are selected based on their relevance to religious practices, theological content, and their continued use in contemporary Balinese Hindu contexts. In addition to textual sources, observational insights from ritual practices and informal discussions with religious practitioners (such as priests, temple caretakers, and cultural experts) may also be considered to enrich contextual understanding.

Secondary data consist of scholarly books, journal articles, critical editions, and translations related to Kawi language, Balinese Hinduism, and sacred linguistics. These sources provide theoretical grounding, historical context, and comparative perspectives that support and deepen the analysis.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection is conducted through multiple techniques to ensure methodological rigor and triangulation. These techniques include:

1. Textual Analysis – Close reading of Kawi manuscripts and literary works to identify linguistic structures, symbolic patterns, and embedded philosophical meanings.
2. Documentation Study – Examination of archives, published translations, and academic literature to contextualize primary texts within broader scholarly discourse.
3. Participant Observation – Limited observation of religious rituals where Kawi language is actively used, with attention to pronunciation, performative aspects, and situational context.
4. Informal Interviews – Semi-structured or informal conversations with religious practitioners and scholars to gain insights into interpretation, usage, and transmission of Kawi in contemporary settings.

The use of these multiple methods allows for triangulation of data, enhancing the credibility and richness of the findings.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis is conducted through an iterative and interpretive process. Philological analysis is used to examine the structure, grammar, and historical layers of the texts. Hermeneutic analysis is applied to interpret meanings within their religious and cultural contexts, while semiotic analysis explores the symbolic dimensions of language in ritual performance. Anthropological perspectives are employed to understand how Kawi functions within lived religious practices. The analysis follows a cyclical process of reading, interpretation, comparison, and contextualization, allowing meanings to emerge progressively rather than being imposed a priori.

Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies are employed, including data triangulation, prolonged engagement with texts, and cross-referencing interpretations with existing scholarly works. Reflexivity is also maintained, acknowledging the researcher's positionality in interpreting sacred texts and practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Kawi as a Performative Sacred Language

The findings indicate that the Kawi language functions not merely as a medium of communication, but as a performative sacred language within Hindu religious practices. In ritual contexts, its efficacy does not depend solely on semantic comprehension, but on phonetic precision, rhythm, and ritualized delivery. This aligns with the concept of mantra śakti, which holds that sound itself possesses intrinsic spiritual power.

From a semiotic perspective, Kawi utterances operate beyond referential meaning. The recitation of mantras and liturgical texts demonstrates that language acts performatively—it produces spiritual effects rather than simply describing them. In this sense, Kawi contributes to the construction of sacred reality within ritual settings, functioning as a bridge between the material and the transcendent.

Multilayered Symbolism and Esoteric Meaning

The analysis of Kawi texts reveals a multilayered structure of meaning, ranging from literal to philosophical and esoteric dimensions. At the surface level, the texts convey narrative or doctrinal content. However, deeper interpretation uncovers key philosophical concepts such as dharma, tattva, and moksha.

Drawing on Peirce's semiotic framework, Kawi expressions can be understood as:

1. Icons, reflecting divine qualities through poetic imagery
2. Indexes, indicating the presence of sacred forces in ritual contexts
3. Symbols, representing culturally constructed theological meanings

Due to this layered complexity, interpreting Kawi requires specialized knowledge, typically held by priests (pandita) and scholars. As a result, Kawi not only transmits religious knowledge but also shapes structures of authority and access to that knowledge within the community.

Kawi and the Construction of Spiritual Experience

Participant observation suggests that the use of Kawi significantly shapes spiritual experience and emotional engagement. Many participants report a strong sense of sacred atmosphere when Kawi is recited, even when they do not fully understand its literal meaning. This finding indicates that spiritual experience is not solely dependent on cognitive understanding, but is also mediated through auditory and aesthetic dimensions of language. The rhythm, intonation, and sonic qualities of Kawi create what may be described as embodied spirituality, where transcendence is experienced through sensory engagement. This supports anthropological perspectives that view ritual language as a means of producing collective consciousness and reinforcing shared systems of belief.

Preservation, Authority, and Cultural Identity

Kawi also plays a crucial role in preserving religious knowledge and sustaining cultural identity. Through lontar manuscripts and oral transmission, it maintains continuity with the classical past while remaining present in contemporary religious practices. However, the study also identifies a growing tension between preservation and accessibility. While Kawi reinforces authenticity and ritual authority, its limited comprehension among younger generations poses challenges for long-term sustainability.

This creates a paradox: the very features that make Kawi sacred—its complexity and exclusivity—also contribute to its gradual marginalization. Despite this, the continued use of Kawi remains an important marker of identity among Balinese Hindus, distinguishing sacred practice from everyday life and reinforcing a sense of historical continuity.

Reframing Linguistic Spirituality

Based on these findings, this study proposes that Kawi can be understood within the framework of linguistic spirituality, in which language operates simultaneously as:

1. A symbolic system encoding theological knowledge
2. A performative medium that produces spiritual effects
3. A cultural resource that sustains identity and tradition

This perspective moves beyond viewing sacred language as static heritage, instead positioning it as a dynamic and active force within religious life. It also contributes to broader discussions on how language mediates the relationship between humans and the divine, particularly in non-Western contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Kawi language is not merely a historical artifact, but a living and dynamic medium of spiritual expression that continues to play a central role in Hindu religious life, particularly in the Indonesian context. Functioning simultaneously as a symbolic, ritualistic, and philosophical language, Kawi mediates the relationship between the material and spiritual realms. Its performative force, multilayered meanings, and deep integration within ritual practices affirm its position as a core element of what this study conceptualizes as linguistic spirituality.

More specifically, the findings show that Kawi operates across interconnected dimensions. At the linguistic level, it encodes complex layers of meaning rooted in classical Hindu philosophy, often requiring interpretive expertise to fully access. At the ritual level, Kawi functions performatively, where precision of pronunciation, rhythm, and sonic patterning directly influence the perceived efficacy of religious acts. At the socio-cultural level, it reinforces structures of authority, continuity, and identity, positioning religious specialists such as *pandita* as key mediators in the transmission and interpretation of sacred knowledge.

Furthermore, this study highlights that Kawi extends beyond its role as a communicative system by actively shaping religious experience. Its aesthetic and sonic qualities—cadence, intonation, and poetic structure—generate an immersive sacred atmosphere that enables participants to engage with the divine beyond purely intellectual comprehension. This indicates that spirituality, in this context, is not solely cognitive, but also embodied and affective, mediated through language as both a sensory and symbolic experience.

At the same time, the study identifies a critical tension between preservation and transformation. While Kawi continues to function as a marker of authenticity and sacred legitimacy, its declining accessibility among younger generations raises important concerns about sustainability. This reflects a broader global pattern in which sacred languages face gradual marginalization due to modernization, shifts in education, and the increasing dominance of vernacular and global languages. If this trajectory continues, there is a risk of widening disconnection between religious practice and its linguistic foundations.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this research contributes to expanding the discourse on language and religion by advancing the concept of linguistic spirituality. This framework emphasizes that language in religious contexts should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing symbolic representation, performative action, and experiential engagement. By situating Kawi within this perspective, the study offers a valuable non-Western contribution to ongoing discussions in linguistic anthropology, semiotics, and religious studies.

From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the need for sustainable and context-sensitive preservation strategies. These may include integrating Kawi language instruction into formal and informal education, developing accessible pedagogical resources, and utilizing digital technologies to document, preserve, and disseminate lontar manuscripts and ritual texts. Equally important is fostering intergenerational transmission, ensuring that Kawi remains both meaningful and accessible within contemporary religious life.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its qualitative scope and its primary focus on Balinese Hindu contexts, which may not fully capture the diversity of Kawi usage across different regions and traditions. Future research could adopt a comparative approach by examining other sacred languages—such as Sanskrit, Pali, Latin, or Arabic—to further explore similarities and differences in how language mediates spirituality.

In addition, further studies could investigate the impact of digital transformation on sacred language practices, including how digital media reshapes modes of transmission, interpretation, and engagement. Exploring the perspectives of younger generations in greater depth would also provide valuable insights into the future sustainability of Kawi.

Final Reflection

In conclusion, Kawi should be understood not only as a linguistic heritage, but as a vital spiritual resource that continues to shape religious life, cultural identity, and philosophical understanding. Its enduring relevance lies precisely in its ability to function across symbolic, performative, and experiential domains—making it an active force in sustaining the relationship between language, culture, and the sacred in contemporary society.

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