Political aestheticization in the representation of Balinese selonding gamelan: between cultural practices and identity strategies

Budi Setiyono [a,1,*]

[a] Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia

[1] budisastrosutarjo@gmail.com *

* corresponding author

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ABSTRACT

Selonding Gamelan in Tenganan Pegringsingan Village, Bali, plays an important role in the traditional *Mekaré-kare* ritual and represents the close relationship between art and the social structure of the local community. This study aims to reveal how the aesthetics of Selonding Gamelan are mobilized as a symbolic strategy in responding to external influences on the local cultural order. Using ethnographic and participatory observation methods, especially in the context of the *Mekaré-kare* ritual, this study finds that Selonding Gamelan not only functions as a musical instrument but also as a cultural medium that dampens elements of violence, negotiates identity, and strengthens social cohesion. Gamelan aesthetics are used consciously as a mechanism for protecting customary values against external cultural intervention. The conclusion of this study shows that ritual art has a transformative power in shaping the collective identity and cultural sovereignty of traditional communities. These findings open up a new space for studying the relationship between art, ritual, and politics in the study of Nusantara performing arts.

1. Introduction

Art and ritual in the context of indigenous communities in the archipelago do not stand as separate entities, but are interrelated in a complex structure of meaning. This relationship shows that art is not merely present as an aesthetic expression, but is an integral part of the symbolic system [1], which supports the sustainability of rituals, cosmology, and social order [2]. Structural analysis of this relationship is important as an initial step to understand how the function, form, and social position of art are systematically designed and institutionalized within the framework of rituals by indigenous communities [3]. However, a structural approach alone is not enough to reveal deeper layers of meaning, especially those related to the dynamics of power and social change [4]. Therefore, a critical theoretical framework is needed to complement structural reading, especially in examining how aesthetics in ritual art plays a role in producing, perpetuating, or even challenging the power structure and dominant civilization narrative. In this context, Clifford Geertz's thoughts on symbolic meaning [5] in cultural actions can be combined with Jacques Rancière's ideas that see aesthetics as a form of sensorium division, namely the limitations of what can be seen, heard, and understood in a political order [6]. This view helps explain how ritual art practices not only function internally within the customary system but also contain broader political dimensions as symbolic strategies to maintain identity and negotiate power, especially amidst the pressures of modernization and external cultural intervention. This understanding is in line with Walter Benjamin's critique of the aestheticization of politics in the context of National Socialism in Germany, where art, through images, media, and visual culture, was used to absorb politics into the aesthetic space and change people's perceptions of power

[7]. Benjamin asserted that when art is incorporated into politics, it is not only politics that is performatively changed, but also the way people view social reality as a whole [8]. An in-depth investigation of symbolic expressions in ritual art and how art is positioned in the lives of indigenous Nusantara communities will help broaden our understanding of how art influences humanity and vice versa. Unfortunately, aspects such as these are still rarely the main focus in studies of Nusantara art, both by foreign researchers and by Indonesian researchers themselves.

Art forms in the Archipelago have long attracted the attention of foreign researchers. Gamelan music is one type of art that has long been the center of attention of these researchers. The classic book Music in Java by Jaap Kunst is a work about the music culture of the Archipelago, which is considered one of the early milestones of the study of Ethnomusicology [9]. After that, many works by other Ethnomusicologists were published on the music of the Archipelago, such as *Traditional Music in Modern Java: Gamelan in a Changing Society* by Judith Becker [10], *Traditions of Gamelan Music in Java: Musical Pluralism and Regional Identity* by R. Anderson Sutton [11], *Unplayed Melodies: Javanese Gamelan and the Genesis of Music Theory* by Marc Pearlman [12], *Rasa: Affect and Intuition in Javanese Musical Aesthetic* by Marx Beunamou [13]. There are also several researchers from Indonesia who study the music/art of the Archipelago, such as Sumarsam [14], Sri Hastanto [15]. The writings of these researchers generally describe music culture as a stand-alone entity, and can be categorized into what Smartt Gullion calls a realist tale ethnography [16] or what Richard Schechner calls normative expectation [17], namely ethnography that represents official voices. The attention of anthropologists towards art in the archipelago has been largely directed at how art is integrated into social and ritual practices, which often involve power relations. Several studies see art as a form of symbolic power [18], spatial political practice [19], or a means of aesthetic politicization [20]. Within this framework, art and ritual become arenas of resistance, identity negotiation [21], and manifestations of symbolic power institutionalized in the grandeur and structure of ceremonies [22]–[24]. However, this approach has not fully captured the dimensions of affective, aesthetic, and spiritual experience that are also inherent in artistic practices, especially in traditional societies such as Tenganan Pegringsingan. In many cases, the value of art is not solely measured by its function in the power structure, but also by its role in creating a space of contemplation, beauty, and holiness that cannot be reduced to political interests. Therefore, this study attempts to bridge the two approaches, between art as symbolic power and art as an expression of aesthetic and spiritual experience to understand how Gamelan Selonding is presented as the center of meaning in the *Mekaré-kare* ritual.

Critical studies of art and ritual in Indonesia, especially those developed in cultural anthropology and political history studies, often position both as instruments of representation of elite or state power. Researchers such as Clifford Geertz [25] and Benedict Anderson [26] emphasize that ceremonies and artistic expressions in the palace space are part of a symbolic mechanism to legitimize power, regulate social hierarchies, and strengthen state discourse. This perspective is also seen in colonial and postcolonial studies that highlight how palace art is integrated with hegemonic power structures, both in pre-colonial and colonial contexts. However, this approach tends to reduce the complexity of history, social functions, and cultural dynamics of art and ritual, especially in regions that have a history of local civilization that is not entirely in line with the narrative of the modern nation-state. In the context of the archipelago, the existence of the palace is often a continuation, directly or indirectly, of a pre-colonial civilization that has collapsed or transformed. In addition, some forms of art and ritual can actually be read as symbolic responses to external forces, not merely as a reflection of internal domination. Unfortunately, this responsive and adaptive dimension is often overlooked in analyses that focus too much on one-way power relations. This article ethnographically aims to explore how a particular art form, in this case Gamelan Selonding, is positioned in the *Mekaré-kare* ritual in Tenganan Pegringsingan Village, Bali. Through participant observation and symbolic analysis, this study shows that aesthetics not only function as a complement to the ritual but as a symbolic strategy for the community to maintain identity and respond to the forces of civilization present in their lives. In this context, aesthetics is understood as a medium that is able to absorb, soften, and adapt external forces, not merely as a representation of power. Thus, aesthetic practices can indicate the level of political civilization of a society and open up space for the reinterpretation of art as an active arena for cultural negotiation.

Inspired by the views of Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe [27], as well as Roberto Esposito [28], who see the aestheticization of politics as an attempt to make politics appear as if it

were a work of art, this article describes how aesthetics not only decorate politics, but also construct it symbolically. In the context of the Tenganan Pegringsingan community, this process does not take place neutrally or without conflict. The aesthetics formed through Gamelan Selonding and the *Mekaré-kare* ritual can be read as a symbolic field where the community negotiates its identity amidst external cultural pressures. Here, the aestheticization of politics is not only a strategy of expression but also a form of symbolic resistance to the hegemony of external values that tend to weaken local customary structures. This idea tries to understand the community as a "work" that must be produced, as an activity that corresponds to subjectivity (both individual and collective) that involves the "production" of its aesthetics [29]. By incorporating aesthetic elements into political culture, society seeks to create a deeper and more emotionally resonant experience for the individuals involved. The aestheticization of political culture is intended as a means of communication and persuasion, the aesthetic presentation of political culture, conveying ideology and eliciting emotional responses from individuals and groups [30]. This research significantly contributes to the fields of performing arts and cultural anthropology in the archipelago by providing a critical analysis of the interplay between art, ritual, and politics, which has often been narrowly interpreted as solely a function of power. This study situates Gamelan Selonding within the context of political aestheticization, revealing that aesthetics serves not merely as a vehicle for cultural expression, but also as a symbolic strategy employed by local communities to address and negotiate the impacts of external civilization. This research transcends the conventional discourse of traditional art, illustrating how aesthetics may serve as a medium of nuanced resistance and a validation of the identity of an independent civilization.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods as the main framework in examining the position of Gamelan Selonding in the context of the *Mekaré-kare* ritual in Tenganan Pegringsingan Village. Because this method focuses on a particular social environment and interactions between individuals in that context [31], this method can be used to reveal the symbolic meaning and cultural values inherent in art and ritual practices, especially in explaining how aesthetics are used strategically in the realm of local politics and civilization. Data collection was carried out through participatory observation and a textual ethnographic approach [32], [33], namely by interpreting the presence of Selonding gamelan in the *Mekare-kare* ritual based on previous ethnographic texts and cultural documents of the Tenganan Pegringsingan community. According to Daniel, text is an active social entity [32], and the concept of literary ethnography is also used by Ulsperger as a method for analyzing documents [34]. Meanwhile, participatory observation was conducted by attending and recording the implementation of the *Mekaré-kare* ceremony, an important ritual that is the main space for the manifestation of Gamelan Selonding. Researchers were directly involved in community activities to feel the social atmosphere, understand the relationships between individuals, and observe the aesthetic symbols that emerged during the ritual. This observation data is supported by field notes that include social interactions, the use of cultural artifacts, and the emotional reactions of the community to the gamelan performance. The data analysis is interpretive and consists of a combination of empirical data and critical political aestheticization theory. The theories used are those of Nancy Lacoue-Labarthe [27], Roberto Esposito [28], and Boris Groys [35], who view aesthetics as a medium for political and civilizational subjectification. This theoretical framework facilitates the understanding of the values associated with Gamelan Selonding in a broader context, not only as an artistic endeavor, but also as a medium of cultural resistance to external hegemony. With this approach, this study can reveal the complex interdependence between art, ritual, and civilization strategies in the life of Tenganan Pegringsingan. Fig. 1 is the research chart used in this study.
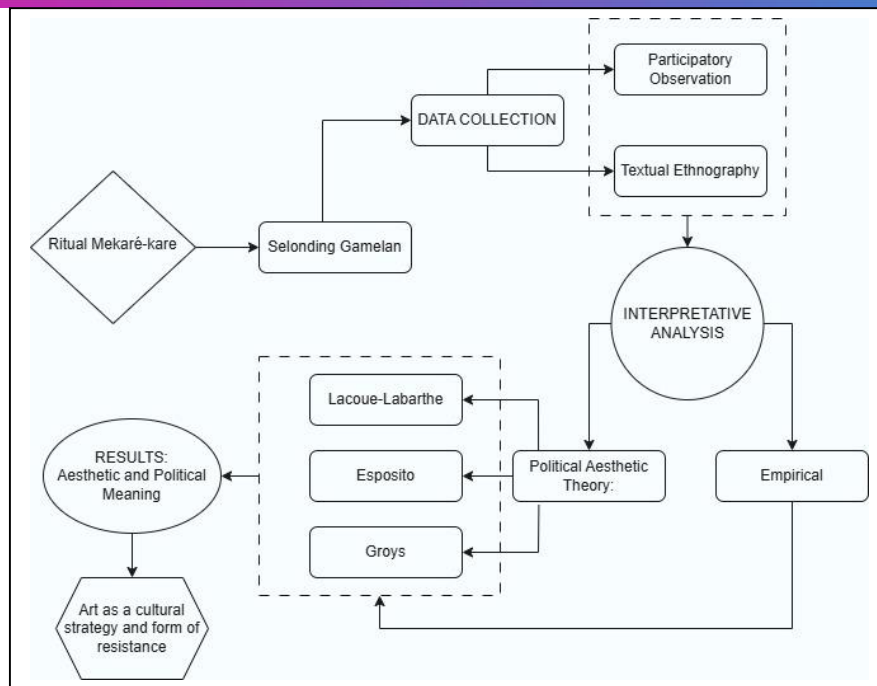
Fig. 1. Research chart

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Tenganan Pegringsingan Village: A Surviving Civilization

The Tenganan Pegringsingan community is often associated with a group called the Bali Aga, a term that in anthropological discourse refers to Balinese communities that are considered to maintain elements of pre-Majapahit culture. This term itself is problematic because it is often used in opposition to the concept of "Bali Majapahit" without considering the internal dynamics of the indigenous community. In this context, the Tenganan community builds its cultural identity through an origin myth that is passed down from generation to generation. In this narrative, they believe that the existence of Tenganan Village existed long before the influence of Majapahit, even estimated before the 11th century AD. Although it has not been fully proven through written historical sources, this narrative has an important value as a symbolic expression of the legitimacy of local cultural identity and sovereignty. Geographically, Tenganan Village is located on the slopes of Mount Agung, Karangasem Regency, about 70 kilometers east of Denpasar. This geographical position contributes to the relative closure of external interactions, which also supports the preservation of a distinctive ritual system and social structure, including artistic practices such as Gamelan Selonding. In this context, the discussion of art and ritual, especially the *Mekaré-kare* ceremony, becomes relevant to understanding how this community maintains civilization and identity through structured and sacred aesthetic expressions.

Contemporary researchers of Balinese society and culture, such as I Wayan Ardika [36] and Robert Pringle [37], have expressed reservations about labeling communities such as Tenganan Pegringsingan as "Old Bali" or remnants of pre-Hindu culture. According to them, such labeling tends to ignore the internal dynamics of the community and creates an impression of ahistorical essentialization. Pringle, for example, rejects the claim that the Bali Aga people are the original inhabitants of pre-Majapahit Bali. He prefers to call them "Mountain Bali," because etymologically the term "Aga" means mountain in Old Javanese. This naming indicates a geographical dimension that is closely related to cultural and social identity. However, the term "Mountain Bali" is more than just a location; it implies a distinctive way of life, patterns of social relationships, and forms of cultural expression. The relatively isolated geographical position of the Tenganan community contributed to the preservation of a distinctive social structure and ritual system, including in artistic expressions such as the Gamelan Selonding. Gamelan art in this society not only functions as ritual music, but also as a representation of cosmological values embedded in the customary system that has developed autonomously from the centers of royal power in South Bali. By reconnecting this historiographic

reading to artistic practice, we can see how identity narratives such as "Mountain Bali" help shape the way society expresses itself through art. In this context, Gamelan Selonding cannot be separated from the discourse of civilization and the social position of the community, but is a manifestation of the identity narrative that is formed and strengthened through aesthetics and rituals. This study shows that understanding gamelan art requires integration between historiography, customary symbolism, and aesthetic practice.

Pringle's rejection of the claim that the Bali Aga community had inhabited the island of Bali before the arrival of Majapahit ignores a number of quite clear facts. Social systems such as caste, belief systems and religious practices, gender relations, architecture and spatial planning, and many other things that are different between those in the Tenganan community and those in the Balinese lowland community are not seen by Pringle as facts that support the claim. Other evidence that can also strengthen the claim is the findings of an ethnoarchaeological study conducted by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin and I Wayan Ardika [38], North Bali. Hauser-Schäublin and I Wayan Ardika conducted research in Sembiran village, Tejakula sub-district, Beleleng district, and its surroundings, as well as Tenganan Pegringsingan and Trunyan villages located near Lake Batur, which is a settlement of the Bali Aga community. Based on archaeological evidence in the form of bronze inscriptions dated 922-1181 AD found in the villages of Sembiran and Julah, it can be estimated that around the 10th century, the area had become a developed region. In the Sembiran inscription number A I dated 922 AD, for example, there are the words market, and market officers (*ser pasar*) in Julah, regulations regarding stranded ships and their contents (*tawan karang*). It is also mentioned that the people living in the fortified settlement (*kuta*) in Julah were attacked by their enemies, forcing some of them to flee from other villages [38]. Based on the inscription, Ardika suspects that in the early 10th-12th centuries, when the Majapahit community had not yet entered Bali, Julah and its surroundings had become part of maritime trade. The archaeological facts found by Ardika and his team regarding different burial practices show that not many village settlements on the north coast were culturally homogeneous even in the most ancient times [38]. This assumption is strengthened by Bellwood's opinion by pointing to archaeological evidence in the form of bronze drums that are thought to be related to Dong Son bronze works from the north, which we now know as Vietnam. This archaeological evidence shows that the northern coastal area of Bali may have been an open area since the second millennium BC [38]. The assumption that the northern coast of Bali is thought to have been an open area since the beginning of the first millennium strengthens the claim that Bali Aga existed long before the arrival of immigrants from Majapahit [39]. The facts in the form of customs that regulate the economic and political systems, architectural and textile knowledge, "artistic expressions" that are different from the Balinese people in the plains, can be suspected as remnants of an ancient civilization that has survived, some even show that it existed before the Hindu religion [38]. It is true that the Bali Aga community living today is not the same society that lived in the 10th century, but some of the culture that lives and is inherited by today's society is likely to be an ancient culture that has survived.

The customary system in Tenganan Pegringsingan Village, which is still practiced today, may be another proof of the survival of past civilizations. In the Tenganan community, custom is narrated as the main axis of collective life that regulates almost every aspect of life, starting from building architecture, village spatial planning, economic systems related to land resource management, community welfare, harvest rules, resource sustainability; political and legal systems that include restrictions on citizens and non-citizens, the rights and obligations of citizens in custom, mechanisms for regulating positions in custom (customary clients), laws against violators of custom, marriage systems, ceremonies and various other aspects of life. The customary system that applies today has undergone changes from the customary system that existed centuries ago; however, at least some of these customs are ancient legacies that survive and continue to be used to organize the lives of its people. The structure and layout of the Tenganan Pegringsingan village reflect the position of custom in the Tenganan community. The traditional hall buildings are built about one and a half meters above the ground (stilt houses), located right in the middle of the village in the form of an open space with the left and right sides used as roads, between rows of residents' houses. The traditional hall consists of a *bale agung* (a large meeting place), *bale banjar* (a sacred hall that may not be used as a meeting place, and is only used for sacred ceremonies), three *bale petemu* (meeting halls), namely, *petemu kelod* (south), *petemu tengah*, and *petemu kaja* (north), *balai kul kul (kentongan* tower), *pawon desa* (village kitchen), *pawon teruna* (youth kitchen), *wantilan* (meeting hall also called a community hall that people outside Tenganan can use Tenganan); *jineng* (rice barn), and *bale pacar* (relaxation place). Almost all collective traditional activities of the Tenganan Pegeringsingan village are held in these

spaces. Customary activities are held in the customary hall, such as deliberations, general ceremonies, customary hearings, and are also used to store assets or objects belonging to the village that are considered valuable or sacred. The customary hall also serves as a kind of customary office where customary officials carry out customary activities at night. These customary buildings are forbidden places for non-residents of Tenganan to enter. The elevated and sacred customary hall building marks the existence of custom as a high entity because it represents a civilization inherited from the past. There are likely to be ancient cultures that have survived.

The structure, layout of buildings, and architectural style of the Tenganan Pegringsingan community settlement have different characteristics from those of the lowland Balinese community. The settlements of the Tenganan residents are arranged lengthwise from the north of the village, which is higher, forming neatly arranged steps to the south, which are getting lower, adjusting to the contour of the mountain slope. The houses of the residents are built from a mixture of river stones, bricks, wood, with thatched roofs, in a row facing each other, separated by a village road (*awangan*), where the traditional hall building, as the center of the village, is located. Rows of houses that are integrated with the houses on the left and right, and collide behind the house, form three banjar, namely: *Banjar Kauh* (west), *Banjar Tengah* (center), and *Banjar Kangin* (east). *Banjar Kangin* is also called *Banjar Pande,* which consists of two villages, namely *Pande Kaja* (North/Mountain) and *Pande Kelot* (South/Sea), which are the villages of the Tenganan community who were punished for violating customs. The main settlement in Tenganan village is surrounded by a wall as a boundary, with gates (*lawangan*) to enter on the north, south, and east sides. The wall separates the main settlement from the *banjar kangin* and *banjar kauh*, as well as from the customary forest, rice fields, and customary gardens that surround the village. These architectural differences can be seen as evidence of the claim that the Tenganan Pegringsingan community is rooted in a civilization different from the one that gave rise to the Balinese lowland community.

Gringsing woven cloth and Selonding Gamelan can be other evidence of claims about the civilization of the Tenganan community. *Gringsing* cloth is a type of weaving made with a double ikat technique and complicated dyeing. The double ikat technique is a way of forming a cloth motif by tying (blocking) the threads, both warp and weft, in the dyeing process before the cloth is woven. Certain parts of the thread are tied to prevent them from being colored when dyed and when woven, the warp and weft threads that are not colored will meet each other to form a cloth motif. The double ikat technique is a rare weaving technique, which is said to only be found in two places in the world, namely in India and Tenganan. This technique has a high level of difficulty, so only people who are truly experts can work. Another thing that makes *Gringsing* cloth considered special is the method and materials of the dyeing. To achieve perfect coloring, dyeing must be done in stages and repeatedly, each stage taking months. The dyes used are natural ingredients from tree bark concoctions that are kept very secret. Knowledge of the techniques and ingredients of the dyes is knowledge that can only be known by the Tenganan people. To produce one piece of *Gringsing* cloth measuring 1 x 2.5, it takes years, sometimes even up to dozens of years, depending on the fineness of the thread texture, the complexity of the motif, and the maturity of the coloring. That is why *Gringsing* cloth is considered sacred, very expensive, and is one of the important ceremonial equipment and a symbol of social status in Tenganan Village. Geringsing cloth must be worn by members of the Tenganan community in every ritual in the village. In a large ceremony consisting of many stages, male and female villagers of various ages must change clothes many times according to the stages of the ritual. Every time someone has to change clothes, one or more *Geringsing* clothes must be worn.

Public rituals for the Tenganan community are not merely worship activities, but also an arena for displaying reminders, as well as maintaining inherited civilization. There are many types of ceremonies performed by the village community; some of them are held domestically by families, such as birth ceremonies, marriages, and deaths. Several major ceremonies are held once a year, involving all villagers, and take place in almost all areas of the village. Major ceremonies in Tenganan include: *sasih kasa* (new year ritual), *mekare-kare* (*pandanus* war) held in the fifth month, and *usaba sembah* held in the eighth month according to the Tenganan calendar. A series of major ceremonies is usually held for days, even months, and consists of many stages accompanied by parties and the slaughter of sacrificial animals. Each stage in the major ritual is carried out in different places in almost all residential areas and other places outside the residential area. In such events, all villagers are required to wear traditional clothes at each stage of the ritual, which almost always includes *Gringsing* cloth.

3.2. Ritual, Aesthetics, and Political Civilization

A ceremony, which is often only seen as an activity of worshiping the supernatural, is actually also an event for conveying a message that is considered very important in a performative way. The large ceremony held every year by the Tenganan community in the fifth month according to the local calendar, perhaps, represents this. The ceremony, called *Mekare-kare* or Mageret *Pandan* (*pandan* war), was held in honor of Bathara Indra, the highest god in the Hindu belief system adopted by the Tenganan people, apparently not just a worship ritual, but a display of messages about civilization. God Indra is revered and celebrated every year, because in the Tenganan people's narrative about the origin of the village (narrative of the origin) it is stated that the existence of Tenganan village was a gift from God Indra who came down to earth to fight the evil king named Mayadenawa who forbade residents to present offerings to him. the gods. In the beliefs of the Tenganan people, the god Indra is the god of war, and to honor him and celebrate the day believed to be the birth of the village, the Tenganan community holds a ceremony that culminates in a scene of fighting armed with a bunch of thorny *pandan* leaves (*pandan* war). It is a fact that the Tenganan people place the god of war as the highest deity in their belief system, and the *Pandan War* ritual is the biggest celebration in the community ceremony (*Sasih Semb*ah) to honor the God Indra. This fact could be carelessly interpreted to mean that the culture of the Tenganan community is a worshiper of war, because at first glance it seems like that. If phenomena such as the *Mageret Pandan* rite are interpreted in this way, it means that it ignores the fact that ceremonies and art for the Tenganan community are disguised expressions of symbolic ideas. To understand this fact, one must carefully examine how the elements of the ceremony, including other facts within the community, are integrated as a whole to form a symbolic expression of the community. *Mekare-kare* consists of a series of ritual offerings, worship, and feasts that last almost one month and culminate in the *Pandan* War. In general, the series of ceremonies begins with what is called mamiut, namely the ritual of asking permission from the gods at Paseh Temple. Six days after that, the mebiu ritual continues, namely a series of activities centered on slaughtering a male buffalo. Furthermore, right on the full moon, a pig-slaughtering ritual is carried out for the mulan saat (thief-thief) event, where several young people are required to play a symbolic role as if they were thieves, and when caught, they will be humiliated by throwing pork at them. On the two days before the peak of the celebration, in the morning, the Melasti (purification) ritual is carried out on Candidasa beach. The culmination of the *Mekare-kare* series is the "scene" of war between Tenganan youth who were deliberately divided into two opposing groups known as the *Pandan* War or Mageret *Pandan*.

Armed with a bunch of thorny *pandan* leaves and a shield made from woven Ata tree bark, a war scene between two young men (*teruna*) was staged on a wooden stage, surrounded by hundreds of spectators. The selonding gamelan, which had been beaten from the beginning, suddenly changed its rhythm to become faster and louder, to give the two young men the code to lunge and attack each other using a bunch of thorny *pandan* leaves on the body, arms, or neck of their "opponent". Occasionally, the girls who were watching from the top of the meeting hall clapped and cheered to encourage the young man they were championing. The girls dressed up in their best clothes and wore *Gringsing* woven cloth, which is the type of cloth that is most sacred to the Tenganan community and is very expensive. The atmosphere became noisy as the rhythm of the accompanying gamelan sounds became faster and louder, mixed with the cheers of hundreds of spectators who also cheered them on. When the bodies of the two young men who were fighting each other had turned red and blood was even flowing from being hit by *pandan* thorns, and their emotions were starting to get out of control, the gamelan rhythm immediately changed to a soft one to signal the fighting young men to calm down their emotions, suppress their surging desires and end the attack on them opposing party. The two of them then shook hands with each other, their lips curved into a smile, and a peaceful relationship was restored as before. After each war scene, the gamelan gives a code, and will be continued with the next war scene between two young men, also with the same gamelan accompaniment, and so on until all the young people who took part in the *pandan* war have had their turn.

The *Pandan* War scene becomes an arena for displaying, channeling and controlling the desire to destroy each other's opponents, which is a natural human instinct. Instinctively, men want to show off their masculinity by having the courage to hurt and accept the pain of wounds and blood flowing on bodies hit by prickly *pandan*. His masculinity was shown to the public, and even more so to the people in his village who would later marry him as his life partner. The cheers of the *daha* who were dressed and groomed like goddesses became the encouragement for the ongoing war between the

young people. You don't need to worry about the wounds and blood that oozes from scratches from *pandan* thorns, because it will be a sign that someone deserves to be called a strong man. The wounds will soon heal with antibiotics made from local knowledge. A joint party called *megibung* with various foods in the form of delicious curry ready to be eaten together was prepared by all the residents involved in the ritual, after the war scenes were over. At the end of the ritual, it is possible that some of the spirits of outsiders present may be left behind in the village, even though their physical bodies have returned to their origins. To deliver some of the spirits that may be left behind, a ritual is held, accompanied by the slaughter of a cow. The sounds of the Selonding Gamelan and the finest *Gringsing* woven cloth worn by the girls accompany the war scenes at the peak of the biggest celebration in the community to honor the god of war as the highest deity of the Tenganan community. Gamelan Selonding for this community is not just a musical instrument for producing sound, but is positioned as a sacred object that is part of the upper world. As part of the upper world, Selonding gamelan must be protected from contact with the underworld, the everyday world of humans. This instrument cannot be touched by people outside Tenganan, including Tenganan residents who have not undergone the purification ritual. The gamelan is also not allowed to touch the ground, and the sounds of the gamelan are prohibited from being recorded, because the things mentioned in the Tenganan people's belief system are part of the underworld. If the prohibition is violated, a purification ritual must be held at a temple spring outside the village to restore the purity of the gamelan.

As an instrument, the Selonding gamelan is included in the metallophone category, which in one device consists of eight sets of blades, and each set consists of eight blades consisting of five main notes and three individual notes plus a pair of kecer. *Ricikan* (instruments) of the selonding gamelan consist of *nyong-nyong ageng, nyong alit, kempur ageng, kempur alit, penem, petuduh, gong ageng, gong alit*. According to information from a Tenganan resident, the gamelan instrument that is usually played during the *Mekare-kare* ritual today is an imitation of an older and more sacred type of gamelan, which is said to have only four blades. The more ancient Selonding Gamelan is no longer played and is always kept in a sacred space, and is only taken out for purification purposes in the Selonding Gamelan, which is played in rituals, if there is a violation of the existing rules. The tone system in Gamelan Selonding is different from the slendro pelog tone system in Balinese gamelan and Javanese gamelan. Professor Sri Hastanto, a Gamelan expert from Surakarta, said that the tone system in this gamelan cannot be categorized as a *Slendro* tuning or a *Pelog* tuning. The musical patterns played show complex interlocking and have many variations. At first glance, the percussion pattern of the Selonding gamelan is slightly similar to the percussion pattern of the *Gamelan Pakurmatan* in the Kraton of Surakarta and Yogyakarta. It could be that the name Gamelan Carabalen, which is a type of *Gamelan Pakurmatan* in Javanese palaces, is related to the Gamelan Selonding. To prove this assumption, further research is needed.

The placement of Gamelan Selonding and *Gringsing* cloth in the *Mekaré-kare* ceremony has a high symbolic meaning in the belief system of the Tenganan Pegringsingan community [40], [41]. These two elements are consistently presented in the most important moments in the ritual cycle, and are treated with special procedures that show respect and protection for them. In this context, both can be understood as cultural objects that have a high level of sacredness and occupy an important position in the symbolic structure of society [42]. The use of Gamelan Selonding as an accompaniment to the peak of the *Mekaré-kare* battle ritual, together with the presence of *Gringsing* cloth as ritual clothing worn by the participants of the ceremony, creates a juxtaposition between refined aesthetic elements and rituals full of physical tension. This contrast is not accidental, but rather contains an aesthetic-symbolic strategy to convey values such as steadfastness, honor, and courage that are upheld by the community. This claim is based on participatory observations during the ceremony as well as statements from traditional figures and ritual leaders who show how these two elements are sacred through oral narratives and the customary rules that govern them. The narrative of the origin of the village states that Bathara Indra was present in Tenganan village to eradicate the evil king Mayadenawa and was then worshiped as the supreme god, indicating the acceptance of the new civilization. The presence of this new civilization seems inevitable to be accepted, but when that civilization brings with it doctrines that are less compatible with the old culture, certain strategies must be used to manage it. The Selonding gamelan instrument represents the community's old civilization, not only because the gamelan represents something that is considered original (not brought by a new civilization), but also because the gamelan represents the softness of the aesthetic as one of the peak achievements of the Tenganan community. Juxtaposing war scenes with highly sacred gamelan sounds and various other paraphernalia, which are also sacred in a ritual, can be interpreted as a

strategy to transform the political doctrine of war into an aesthetic performance. A strategy to change the desire to destroy each other into a performance that touches the hearts of humanity.

War as a political path exists -and is known- in almost every society in the world [43], because it is an expression of the ancient male instinct to rule, which often requires mutual destruction. In many nations, this instinctive desire is glorified and translated into action, becoming part of the value system, even commodified as an economic resource. In the case of the Tenganan community, the doctrine of war as a political path is thought to have entered simultaneously or become part of the spread of Hindu civilization. The worship of the war god Bathara Indra, who is placed as the highest god of the Hindu religion adhered to by the Tenganan people, can be interpreted to mean that the doctrine of war as a political method is an idea that comes from outside the local culture. The issue of war is a big and fundamental idea in the culture of a society, which concerns views on power, sovereignty, humanity, world sustainability, ambition, destiny, and other matters related to it. Such basic doctrines, when they enter a society that already has an established civilization, will undoubtedly be responded to with ideas and through established methods in that society. Rather than being a rite of war worship, *Mageret-Pandan* should instead be seen as a mechanism for channeling the ancient desire to achieve power, a collective space to calm emotions, and a cultural performance of masculinity to soften the desire to destroy each other. Positioning the Selonding Gamelan as the most sacred object and also the existence of the beautiful, sacred and expensive *Gringsing* and performing it in the most important ceremonies of the community is a strategy to glorify a civilization that is claimed to be the original property of the community, to suppress the presence of a new civilization that is incompatible.

4. Conclusion

Material evidence, such as the form of village architecture, social structure, and customary practices of the Tenganan Pegringsingan community, shows a unique cultural continuity that is different from the structure of Balinese society influenced by the Majapahit migration wave. This uniqueness is often associated with the category of Bali Aga society, namely a community that maintains elements of pre-Hindu local culture. However, the term "ancient civilization" needs to be understood as a construction of identity based on local narratives, not as an absolute historical claim without the support of strong archaeological evidence. In the *Mekaré-kare* ritual, Gamelan Selonding not only functions as musical accompaniment but also as a symbolic element that strengthens the sacred and aesthetic dimensions of the ritual event. This ritual shows the process of cultural articulation in which symbolic elements such as battle, music, and clothing are combined to form a collective space of expression. Rather than being viewed as a form of "resistance to new civilization", it is more appropriate if this ritual is read as a form of cultural transformation, a way for the Tenganan community to respond to change through structured symbolic channels. This finding shows that aesthetics in the context of ritual cannot be separated from the social and historical dimensions of society. Gamelan Selonding, in this context, has a strategic role not only in supporting the implementation of rituals but also as a medium to negotiate collective identity. The contribution of this research lies in the effort to understand art as part of the symbolic system of society, not just an aesthetic object, and to enrich the study of Nusantara performing arts with an ethnographic approach that is oriented towards meaning and social function.

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