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Barong worship and sustainable forest management: A Hindu ecotheological perspective from Amunduk Taro

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ABSTRACT

Background: In Balinese Hindu tradition, Barong is not merely a performing art, but a religious symbol interpreted as a manifestation of *Saguna Brahman* as well, specifically the aspect of *Bānaspati Raja*, the protector of nature and forests. In the region of Amunduk Taro, Gianyar Regency, Barong is worshipped not only as a spiritual entity but also as a medium for the veneration of sacred customary forests. The existence of more than 30 Barongs that are collectively cared for, as well as their association with sacred sites such as the Great Temple of Mount Raung, shows that the practice of Barong worship has been institutionalized in the socio-religious system of the community. **Methods:** This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with a religious ethnographic study design and a constructivist paradigm. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations and literature studies, and analyzed using Roland Barthes' myth theory, Émile Durkheim's religious theory and Ferdinand de Saussure's symbolic interactionism. **Findings:** The results show that Barong in Amunduk Taro is interpreted as a real manifestation of God who acts as a spiritual, social and ecological intermediary. There is an inseparable relationship between the existence of Barong, the myth of *sarwaada* and the legend of Rsi Markandeya's journey to the Taro region. **Conclusion**: His worship does not only strengthen collective solidarity and communal identity, but also forms a sacred ecological awareness. Barong is a living symbol that maintains harmony between humans, God and nature. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** The originality of this research lies in the integration of Hindu theology, ritual symbolism and local wisdom-based forest conservation. This research broadens the horizons of Hindu theology by offering an ecotheological perspective on Barong's role as a *pralingga* that unites spirituality and environmental preservation within the Balinese religious system.

KEYWORDS: Amunduk Taro; Barong; theology.

1. Introduction

Every culture in the world possesses universal elements that serve as the foundation of its society's social and spiritual order. In Kluckhohn's view, there are seven universal cultural elements, one of which is the religious system. Religious systems do not only reflect belief in supernatural powers but also involve sacred symbols that serve as a medium for humans to connect with the Divine (Koentjaraningrat, 1980). Koentjaraningrat divides religious systems into five interrelated components: religious emotions, belief systems, rites and ceremonies, ritual equipment and religious communities. In the Balinese Hindu context, religious symbols serve as the primary medium for religious expression due to human limitations in comprehension and visualizing the essence of God (Titib, 2003).

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Worship practices involving sacred objects or symbols associated with nature are not phenomena found exclusively within the Balinese Hindu tradition. Across various cultures, traditional communities regard certain objects, places, plants, animals, and forest areas as part of sacred spaces associated with supernatural forces. Sacred forest areas in the Western Himalayas, India, are communally protected through religious beliefs, myths, taboos, and ritual practices associated with the presence of deities. Such practices not only preserve the spiritual and cultural values of local communities but also contribute to the conservation of biodiversity. The existence of various prohibitions and regulations governing sacred areas restricts the utilization of natural resources, while religious rituals and festivals held periodically reinforce the community's commitment to the preservation of forests and the deities believed to reside within them (Singh et al., 2017).

The relationship between religious beliefs, worship media, and environmental protection is also evident in various communities across Indonesia. In many indigenous communities, forests are not regarded merely as economic resources but also as spaces imbued with spiritual and social values. Research on indigenous communities in Indonesia has shown that traditional beliefs and local wisdom can shape regulations concerning access to, utilization of, and protection of forests, including through customary prohibitions, myths, rituals, and the recognition of certain areas as sacred spaces (Mulyadi et al., 2022).

One important religious symbol in the Balinese Hindu tradition is Barong, which is theologically comprehended as a manifestation of *Bānaspati Raja*, a spiritual force that guards the forest and wards off danger (Wirawan, 2019a). The symbolism of Barong in various forms, such as Barong Ket, Barong Macan, and Barong Bangkal, embodies the teachings of *Saguna Brahman*, the concept of divinity in a tangible form that can be approached and worshipped by humanity (Donder, 2010). Barong is not merely a cultural artifact or artistic spectacle, but rather a spiritual entity made sacred through lengthy processions, such as *pasupati*, *melaspas*, and *ngelawang*, which mark the transformation from an ordinary object into a sacred one (Sudiana, 2010).

According to the *Lontar Kanda Pat Bhūta*, Barong is *Bānaspati Rāja*, born from the ear, yellow in color, with the sound of "*ah*," and yellow fire. He is embodied as Barong and guards large trees or forests: *kepah*, *kepuh*, *rangdu*, and others. He is permitted to eat anyone who cuts wood or climbs trees during times forbidden by the *kecaping aksara* or *padewasan* (Yoga, 2000).

Barong Ket, which exists in every village in Bali, is mostly worshipped at *Dalem* Temple. In addition to Barong Ket, several temples in Bali sanctify Barong in the form of a tiger or leopard, in the form of a lion, *bangkal* or wild boar, and *sampi* or cow. The reasons for worshiping Barong in these various animal forms are certainly different in each temple (Adnyana, 2024). The form of Barong Macan or Barong Bangkal resembles the form of Barong in general, namely having two rooms, but what distinguishes it is the body shape of Barong Macan and Barong Bangkal is very effortless, with few carvings, using cloth with animal patterns such as black or yellow according to its manifestation, and wearing a mask like the head of a tiger, cow, or pig (Agung, 2023).

An interesting phenomenon occurs in the Amunduk Taro region of Gianyar Regency, a hilly region with customary forests. The people of this region revere no fewer than 39 Barongs, including Barong Ket, Barong Macan, and Barong Bangkal. The existence of the Mount Raung Grand Temple and the *Ngelawang* Amunduk ritual, held on the *Umanis Galungan* holiday, demonstrate Barong's importance as a spiritual center and a unifying force for the community. Barong worship serves not only theologically or socially but also has an ecological dimension.

The preservation of customary forests to this day is inseparable from the existence and ritualization of Barong. This aligns with the teachings of *Wana Kertih*, a Balinese Hindu teaching concerning the reverence and preservation of forests as sacred spaces, sources of life and sanctuaries for the gods (Sutana et al., 2021). In sacred texts such as the *Bhuwana Kosa* and *Pancawati*, forests are even classified as *Maha Wana*, *Tapa Wana*, and *Sri Wana*, each describing the ecological, spiritual, and economic functions of forests, which are traditionally and religiously protected. From the perspective of sustainable forest

management, such practices are important because sustainability is determined not only by formal regulations but also by the values, norms, and social institutions that encourage communities to limit forest utilization and maintain its ecological functions across generations. The sacralization of forests can be understood as a form of values-based governance that brings together ecological, social, and spiritual interests.

One of the temples left behind by Rsi Markandeya and also a gathering place for Barong in the Amunduk Taro region is the Agung Gunung Raung Temple, located in the Taro Kaja area, Tegalalang District, Gianyar Regency. The Agung Gunung Raung Temple is one of the temples dedicated to the protection of the universe. Based on the remains at the Agung Gunung Raung Temple, we can trace the journey of Maharsi Markandeya as he practiced the Dharma teachings and spread Hinduism in Bali around the 8th century. The Agung Gunung Raung Temple also bears the traces of Maharsi Markandeya's journey during his sacred journey to spread Hinduism to Bali. The Agung Gunung Raung Temple was founded by the Rsi at the same time as the opening of *Sarwa Ada* Village, which became the forerunner of today's Taro Village.

Furthermore, in addition to the Agung Gunung Raung Temple, in the *Puakan* area there are the *Sabang Daat* Temple and the *Puseh Puakan* Temple, located in the middle of the Taro forest, which serve as the gathering center for Barong in the Amunduk Taro area during the *Wraspati Umanis Galungan* or *Umanis Galungan*, also known as *Ngelawang* Amunduk Taro. The use of Barong as a medium of worship and its rituals at several temples in the Amunduk Taro area, as well as efforts to preserve the Amunduk Taro forest, certainly have other meanings that require further study to reveal the connection between Barong as a medium of worship and forest conservation efforts in Amunduk Taro.

Previous studies generally discuss Barong from the perspective of its existence (Wirawan, 2016), performing arts (Sudiana, 2010), mythology (Agung, 2025), religious symbolism (Putra et al., 2017), ritual function (Dana et al., 2009), a symbol of unity (Bontot, 2020), and customs (Dirgantini & Sudarsana, 2020). However, studies that explore the role of Barong as a spiritual entity that animates and protects natural spaces, especially forests, are still very limited. In fact, in Hindu teachings, Barong as a manifestation of *Bānaspati Raja* represents sacred ecological awareness that has not been elaborated in depth in academic literature. Most Barong studies focus on areas such as Badung, Tabanan, and Denpasar. Amunduk Taro, despite having a strong tradition of Barong worship and a sacred forest area that is spiritually protected, has not been widely studied. This creates a void in ethnographic and philosophical studies in the region, even though Amunduk Taro has the potential to serve as an ideal model for integrating Hindu spirituality and local wisdom-based nature conservation.

Research on Balinese customary forests generally focuses on conservation, customary regulations, or community participation in natural resource management (Yogantara, 2022). No study has explicitly considered the use of Barong as a medium of worship as part of the forest veneration system, specifically how Barong worship spiritually plays a role in maintaining the sanctity and ecological balance of customary forest areas through its rituals. This research aims to bridge the gap between spiritual-ecological studies and legal or customary approaches.

By addressing this gap, this research does not only expand the study of Barong as a medium of worship but also enriches theological discourse on the role of sacred rituals in maintaining ecological harmony. Based on the above description, the relationship between Barong as a medium of worship and the forest in Amunduk Taro, with its history, is very interesting to study. This interest is based on the community's sacred position of Barong as a medium of worship for God and as a symbol of forest preservation, through various rituals performed to maintain forest sustainability in Amunduk Taro, Gianyar Regency. The research focuses on three main aspects: the reasons why the community uses Barong as a medium of worship in forest glorification, the function of Barong as a medium of worship in Amunduk Taro, and the theological significance of Barong as a medium of worship in Amunduk Taro.

2. Methods

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a religious ethnographic study design based on a constructivist paradigm. This approach was chosen because this research focuses on exploring, comprehending, and interpreting the symbolic meaning, ritual function, and religious and theological values of Barong as a medium of worship in the context of forest glorification in Amunduk Taro, Gianyar Regency. The selection of the research location is based on the distinctiveness of the Amunduk Taro area as one of the villages in Bali that has a vast and diverse number of Barong. These Barongs are sacred by the community and are carried collectively in various religious rituals, especially those related to forest worship and preservation. This location has a strong spiritual history as well, related to the sacred journey of Maharsi Markandeya and the existence of the *Sarwa Ada* forest which is maintained through a system of customs and rituals.

This study utilizes primary data from interviews with community leaders, *sulinggih*, priests, and village leaders (*bendesa*) who possess Barongs in the Amunduk Taro area. To date, no research on Barongs has been conducted in Amunduk Taro. Secondary data include books, palm-leaf manuscripts, research, documentary videos, and articles published in scientific journals related to Hindu theology, Barongs, and forest preservation. The data collection techniques employed include document study in the form of literature or videos, library research, and systematic interviews, with informant selection using a snowball technique.

The conclusions are also linked to the theoretical framework used: Roland Barthes' theory of myth, Emile Durkheim's theory of religion, and Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism. These are used in an integrative manner to interpret the relationship between humans, sacred symbols, and ecological space in the context of forest preservation through the spiritual intermediary of Barong. With this detailed and systematic methodology, it is hoped that this research can be reproduced and contribute to the development of Hindu theological studies.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Mythological reasons for using Barong as a medium of worship in Amunduk Taro

In the Balinese Hindu religious tradition, Barong is not only comprehended as a mythological figure in ritual dance, but also as a sacred entity with theological standing as a manifestation of God in the form of a protector. In the teachings of *Veda Smrti*, particularly as developed in Balinese Hindu theology, God (*Brahman*) is recognized in two primary forms: *Nirguna Brahman* (which has no attributes and is beyond the mind) and *Saguna Brahman* (which has attributes and can be manifested through symbols and tangible forms in worship). Barong is positioned as part of *Saguna Brahman*, a manifestation of *Bānaspati Rāja*, the energy of Lord Shiva who protects the forest and the universe (Titib, 2003).

Barong is not merely a cultural symbol, but also a means of *bhakti yoga* for the community. It is an object of worship because it is believed to be the abode of *niskala* (unseen) power capable of neutralizing evil forces (*bhuta kala*) and maintaining cosmic balance. In Barong Suari palm-leaf manuscript, it is stated that Barong's footprint represents the incarnation of Shiva's protective power (*Siwa Pasupata*), manifesting in the form of a protective animal such as a lion, boar, tiger, or other, depending on the type of Barong that thrives in a particular region. In Amunduk Taro, Barong form is more often associated with a protective energy that lives and spiritually guards forest areas.

In religious semiotics, symbols like Barong can be seen as spiritual icons, visual forms that represent the divine. Roland Barthes, in his theory of myth, stated that symbols like Barong function within a second-order sign system, where the physical forms of masks, hair, and dances are no longer seen as mere art but as collectively agreed-upon mythological meanings. In Balinese society, Barong is interpreted as a symbol of the guardian of purity, a balance between *dharma* and *adharma*, and a protector of forests and villages.

Consequently, the presence of Barong is always associated with the purification of the region, especially forest areas believed to be the abode of sacred energy.

Historically, Barong's presence as a symbol of worship in the Amunduk Taro area is closely linked to the spiritual journey of Rsi Markandeya. This holy figure is believed to have opened the *Sarwa Ada* forest area and established several important temples, such as Mount Raung Temple and *Sabang Daat* Temple, which have become centers of local religious faith. The forests surrounding these temples have been designated sacred areas and places of divine manifestation since their inception. In this context, Barong is believed to be an extension of the sacred energy inherited from Rsi Markandeya as the protector of the area. The Taro area is a center for the spread of cosmic theology based on the purity of forests, where symbols like Barong serve as concrete representations of supernatural powers grounded in rituals and customs.

Theologically, the practice of Barong worship in the forest area also reflects the teachings of ecological *dharma* in Hinduism. This teaching places nature as part of God's body (*virat purusha*), and humans are obligated to maintain harmony with all elements of life. In this regard, Barong symbolizes sacred ecological awareness, ensuring that communities do not overstep the boundary of environment. The presence of Barong serves as a reminder that forests are not merely resources, but sacred places that must be protected with respect and devotion.

Thus, the reason the community venerates Barong as a medium of worship stems not only from local beliefs but also from a strong Hindu theological foundation. Barong represents the aspect of God present in everyday life, guiding the community to live in harmony with nature and God. In this tradition, the forest becomes a place of worship, and Barong represents God, guarding its sanctity. This relationship is reciprocal and spiritual: the community protects the forest because it harbors sacred power, and Barong protects the community on the condition where they do not neglect their spiritual and ecological responsibilities.

3.2 The aesthetic function of Barong as a medium of worship in Amunduk Taro

Barong, as a cultural and religious entity, is not merely present in the realm of performing arts but is deeply rooted in the religious, cosmological, and ecological structures of Balinese society, particularly in Amunduk Taro. This sacred Barong art form is not a standalone or autonomous art form, but rather part of the total spiritual life of Balinese Hindu society (Suarka, 2012). In Hindu aesthetics, beauty is not merely viewed in its physical form but is integrated with the values of purity (*Siwam*), truth (*Satyam*), and balance (*Sundaram*) (Dibia, 2003).

Barong is not merely a cultural symbol but also a living and active medium of worship, bridging humans with supernatural powers. Barong art encompasses elements of religious aesthetics known as *Tri Wisesa*, or *Satyam*, *Siwam*, and *Sundaram*, which unite spiritual and artistic functions in a sacred whole (Duija, 2008). Barong is positioned not merely as an aesthetic object or cultural artifact, but as a religious symbol embedded in the social and spiritual fabric of society (Duija et al., 2022). Its presence manifests a supernatural power that is collectively experienced. This aligns with Émile Durkheim's theory of religion, which states that religion is a system consisting of beliefs and practices related to sacred matters, and that religion functions to bind individuals into a unified moral community (Pals, 2012).

According to Durkheim, one of the main elements of religion is a clear separation between the sacred and the profane. Barong, as a medium of worship in Amunduk Taro, clearly affirms this separation. When Barong is worshipped, all rituals are carried out according to strict rules, the atmosphere is transformed into a sacred one, and the community submits to a transcendental collective consciousness. At this point, Barong's function confirms Durkheim's thesis that religion is a symbol of society itself, sanctified through ritual practice.

The concept of *Satyam* in Barong at Amunduk Taro states that the value of truth is not only a moral guideline but also the main foundation in the implementation of rituals. Barong

is presented not as an art object, but as an embodiment of *dharma*, the power of goodness that maintains the balance of the universe. The performance is carried out within the framework of the *wali* rite, which is only permitted in the context of sacred ceremonies (Wirawan, 2019b). This is emphasized by the local community, who state that Barong is worshipped not as its own form, but as a manifestation of the God Shiva and the Goddess Uma.

This aspect of truth is also manifested in sacred texts such as the Lontar Barong *Suari* and Lontar *Kanda Pat*, which position Barong as the guardian of harmony between the great and small worlds (Wirawan, 2018). In practice, everything related to Barong must be based on honesty, sincerity, and sincerity. Therefore, the value of *Satyam* is not only an ethical principle but also a spiritual energy that animates Barong as a sacred practice.

Within the framework of *Satyam*, or truth, Barong is positioned as the embodiment of *dharma*, the power of truth that protects and organizes the universe. Beyond its artistic representation, Barong is the actualization of the moral and spiritual norms believed in by the community. According to Durkheim, the moral power of religion arises because individuals unite themselves into a collective consciousness. Therefore, when the people of Amunduk Taro make offerings to Barong, they are in fact reflecting a shared value system, strengthening solidarity, and forming a collective awareness of what is considered true and sacred (Pals, 2012).

This truth is not only transcendental but also social. Barong embodies ideal societal norms, a guardian of goodness and a protector from chaos. Durkheim stated that religious symbols are actually symbols of society itself elevated to a sacred level. Therefore, when Barong is worshipped as a representation of Shiva and the Goddess Uma, it is not only a spiritual act, but also a social and moral one (Parmita, 2020).

The sanctity of Barong, or *Siwam*, touches on the aspect of *taksu*, an invisible but strongly felt spiritual energy. *Taksu* is believed to radiate sacred power that brings art to life (*adung, pangus, mataksu*). To attain this *taksu*, Barong is made by following certain spiritual rituals, such as selecting an auspicious day, selecting sacred wood, and the *pasupati* ceremony (Pereira, 2012).

Siwam also encompasses the sacred relationship between humans and nature. The customary forest where Barong is worshipped is viewed as a sacred place, not simply an ecological area. Thus, efforts to protect and care for forests are not only interpreted as environmental preservation, but also as part of worshiping God's manifestation in the form of nature.

The value of holiness (*Siwam*) in Barong worship contains strong spiritual and social dimensions. The process of purifying Barong, from the selection of materials to the *pasupati* ritual, is a concrete form of object purity, as explained by Durkheim. Holiness is not a quality of the object itself, but rather the result of a social construction agreed upon and maintained by the community. Durkheim stated that something becomes sacred not because of its natural properties, but because it is treated in a special way by the community. In this context, ordinary wood becomes sacred when it is processed to make a Barong mask, and through the purification ritual, the Holy Spirit is believed to reside within it. This process demonstrates that holiness is a collective product that binds the community in a simultaneously spiritual and social relationship (Pals, 2012).

The concept of *Sundaram* in Barong unites aesthetic beauty and spiritual balance. Barong dance, accompanying gamelan, and movement expressions do not only provide entertainment but also become part of cosmic harmony. The beauty of Barong reflects the balance between good and evil, between the microcosm and the macrocosm. This beauty is also displayed in the glorification of customary forests, where natural beauty becomes part of the sacred system. Barong rituals are performed not only in temples but also within customary forest areas, demonstrating that the forest is viewed as part of the sacred. This aligns with the Hindu principle that nature is a manifestation of God and must be respected (Hadi, 2006).

Beauty in Barong context is not merely visual or a performance, but a symbol of harmony between the forces of good and evil. The concept of *rwa bhineda*, rooted in

Balinese Hindu philosophy, is integrated into the aesthetics of Barong ritual, as Durkheim observed, demonstrating that religious symbols possess moral power generated by intense social interaction. Durkheim noted that the most powerful religious experiences emerge in collective situations, during shared ceremonies and rituals. In Barong worship, the Amunduk Taro community experiences what Durkheim called collective effervescence, a moment when individuals are immersed in intense shared feelings, creating a social energy that binds and strengthens solidarity.

Barong's existence as a medium of worship is inseparable from its sacred communal atmosphere. The crowds in Barong rituals, such as during *ngelawang*, are not worldly commotion, but rather a gathering filled with collective spiritual power. This gathering generates spiritual vibrations that signal the presence of supernatural powers (Djelantik, 1999). Barong ritual as a medium of worship encompasses three aspects: appearance, content, and presentation. These three aspects form a unified whole that does not only connect humans with God but also strengthens the communal identity of the Balinese people (Wirawan, 2019b).

The crowds in Barong rituals are not profane noise, but spiritual vibrations that signal the presence of sacred power. Durkheim emphasized that rituals and crowds are forms of actualization of shared awareness of shared values. When people gather in the *ngelawang* procession, the sounds of gamelan, dance, and togetherness serve as a medium for the formation of communal spiritual identity. Thus, Barong symbolizes sacred collectivity, and its *ramya* represents spiritual intensity in social interactions.

Sunia is not comprehended as a blank emptiness, but rather as a silence that presents God in the deepest inner experience. In Barong ritual, there is a moment of silence where all activity ceases and the congregation enters into inner silence. This moment becomes a spiritual space to unite with *sunyatma*, or pure consciousness.

The concept of *sunia* in Barong reflects the collective religious experience as explained by Émile Durkheim. Silence in a crowd becomes a collective means of entering the sacred realm, bridging the profane and sacred dimensions in a shared spiritual experience (Pals, 2012). In *Sunia Tattwa*, where the community enters into collective silence after the crowd, the profane space is abandoned and replaced by the sacred. This silence is not emptiness, but a moment when the community unites in the deepest spiritual awareness.

Sunia is a concrete manifestation of Durkheim's assertion that religion is a symbolic system that provides a transcendental experience to a community. When the gamelan ceases and the eyes are closed in prayer, a sacred moment occurs that affirms the vertical relationship between humans and God, as well as the horizontal relationship between humans united by a common feeling and purpose. Barong is not only a religious symbol but has a social function as a unifying force for the community as well. In Amunduk Taro, Barong unites communities across the *banjar* through shared activities such as temple ceremonies and the *ngelawang* procession. This social function aligns with Durkheim's view that religion strengthens social cohesion and acts as the glue for the structure of society (Pals, 2012).

Furthermore, the use of the *keris* by men during *ngelawang* reinforces the symbolism of collective identity and the community's spiritual readiness. This tradition is not only a cultural heritage but also a form of training in social and spiritual responsibility across generations. All men from various regions wear a *keris* during *ngelawang*, following a pattern inherited from their elders. This is a symbolic actualization of a shared belief system.

Religious symbols are symbols of society itself. Thus, the *keris* and Barong are not merely cultural properties, but symbols of the community's moral strength. Interactions between communities in rituals strengthen what Durkheim called collective conscience, a collective awareness that guides and unifies social behavior. Within this framework, Barong is not only a spiritual guardian but also a unifying pillar and guarantor of social order.

What distinguishes Barong in Amunduk Taro from other areas is its ecological function. As a medium of worship, Barong does not only maintain spiritual balance but also serves as an instrument for the glorification of the customary forest. Barong worship takes place in

the midst of a forest area considered sacred. This positions Barong as an ecotheological entity, a bridge between humans, God, and nature (Agung, 2025).

The presence of Barong in the customary forest area is a concrete manifestation of Hindu theology that supports environmental sustainability. In practice, the Amunduk Taro community protects the forest not only based on positive law but also out of religious belief. Thus, forest preservation becomes an integral part of sacred rituals that connect humans with cosmic powers.

3.3 The theological meaning of Barong as a medium of worship in Amunduk Taro

In the lives of the Amunduk Taro people, Barong is interpreted as the embodiment of *Saguna Brahman*, a concept in Vedanta philosophy that states that God, who is essentially formless (*Nirguna Brahman*), can be manifested in an attribute-based form so that he can be approached and worshipped (Donder, 2006). In this context, the Amunduk Taro people experience Barong as a *murthi*, a personal representation of a living and sacred divine power. Through this experience, a personal relationship emerges between the congregation and Barong entity, which, in symbolic interactionism, can be explained as the result of symbolic agreements and collective actions that shape religious meaning in everyday life. When Barong is called *Ida Ratu Lingsir* or *Ida Ratu Anom*, the title does not only indicate identity but also emphasizes the divine character believed to reside within it.

The Amunduk Taro people believe that Barong is not merely a symbol, but a manifestation of God in a visible form, accessible, and worshipped through ritual. Barong Ket, Barong Bangkal, and Barong Macan are believed to embody the nurturing and protective aspects of *Brahman*, as described in texts such as Barong *Suari* and *Kanda Pat* (Adnyana, 2024). As emphasized in Bontot (2020) research, the presence of symbols like Barong facilitates the community's ability to build spiritual connections through directly tangible means. Barong is also perceived as an *imanen* force that brings God's presence into village life. When Barong appears in the *ngelawang* procession, the community believes that God's power is incarnating and maintaining the balance between *Dharma* and *Adharma*. This belief aligns with Durkheim's concept of sacredness, created by society through collective rituals that strengthen collective conscience.

The meaning of Barong is also integrated with the teachings of the *Catur Marga* which encompass *Bhakti*, *Karma*, *Jnana*, and *Raja Marga*. First, in *Bhakti Marga*, the community demonstrates spiritual devotion through ritual worship, offerings, and sacred dances to Barong. This practice reflects total love and devotion to the manifestation of God personified through Barong (Suhardana, 2010). Second, in *Karma Marga*, the value of selfless work (*ngayah*) is a key pillar. The Amunduk Taro community actively participates in ritual preparation, building equipment, and guarding the ceremonial procession without compensation. This value of devotion is evident in the roles of the *pecalang* (local securities), priests, and the younger generation, who carry out ritual duties as *dharma*, not as work. Third, *Jnana Marga* is present in the transmission of knowledge about the origins, symbolic meaning, and rituals of Barong to the younger generation. This knowledge is taught orally and practically by traditional elders, reflecting the value of spiritual education based on experience and social practice. Fourth, *Raja Marga* is embodied in the contemplative dimension of Barong worship. Barong rituals, such as *melasti* and *melaspas*, are not merely physical activities but also a means of spiritual purification and concentration (*samadhi*) aimed at uniting with divine power. Barong's presence in rituals is accompanied not only by music and dance, but also by a silent, reflective atmosphere, emphasizing the meditative element of the tradition (Wirawan, 2016).

The meaning of Barong is also manifested in Hindu ethical practices through the *Tri Kaya Parisudha* namely *manacika* (good thoughts), *wacika* (good speech), and *kayika* (good deeds). In *wacika*, priests and devotees are taught to use good language, especially during Barong worship rituals such as *ngelawang* and *piodalan* (celebratory ceremonies), as every word is believed to carry spiritual vibrations that influence the sanctity of the ritual. In terms of *kayika*, Barong ritual practice in Amunduk Taro serves as an arena for moral

education for all levels of society. From children to adults, they are involved in arranging offerings (*banten*), maintaining the sanctity of the temple, and taking care of the sacred forest where Barong is believed to reside. This demonstrates the unity between outward actions and spiritual awareness in maintaining social and ecological harmony. Meanwhile, *manacika* reflects the collective awareness of the community in revering Barong not as an inanimate object, but as a living force present in everyday life. This understanding internalizes the spiritual awareness that worshipping Barong is worshipping the manifestation of God in a living form.

Barong in Amunduk Taro is not merely a spiritual symbol, but also a symbol of social cohesion that bridges the relationship between individuals and communities. From Durkheim's perspective, religious rituals such as Barong worship are expressions of collective solidarity. When people engage in Barong rituals, they are building and strengthening a communal identity bound by sacred symbols. The shared rites of Barong worship create a collective emotional intensity that renews and strengthens social integration. This also explains how Barong unites different generations, social groups, and even outside visitors who come during the ritual. The meanings generated from social interactions with Barong, whether verbal, visual, or emotional, reinforce the symbolic consensus that Barong is the guardian of village harmony.

The meaning of Barong in worship at Amunduk Taro cannot be separated from the Hindu theological system, the symbolic system of Balinese society, and the social structure in which Barong is embedded. In practice, Barong manifests as a representation of God (*Saguna Brahman*), the path to *moksha* (*Catur Marga*), and ethical conduct (*Tri Kaya Parisudha*). Within Durkheim's framework, Barong represents the pinnacle of collective emotion, sacred as a pillar of the community's spiritual and social unity.

Barong's presence as a medium of worship does not only strengthen the bond between humans and God, but also between humans and each other, and humans and nature. This makes Barong not merely an aesthetic medium or cultural heritage, but a living *pralingga* that unites religious, moral, social, and ecological aspects into an integral system deeply rooted in the lives of the Amunduk Taro people.

Barong's religious and social significance as medium of worship in Amunduk Taro can be examined through Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach as well, particularly within the framework of structural symbolic interactionism. Saussure divided signs into two main components: the signifier and the signified. In the context of Barong, its physical form, mask, feathers, fangs, and dance function as the signifier, while the meaning the community attaches to it, as a village protector, an incarnation of God's power, and a medium of worship, is the signified formed through cultural processes.

According to Saussure, the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary yet socially agreed. This means that there is no natural connection between Barong form and the meaning of divine power; rather, the relationship is formed through a process of interaction and collective meaning construction within the community. In Amunduk Taro, the community collectively imparts sacred meanings to Barong form based on religious teachings (such as *Saguna Brahman*), ritual experiences, and symbolic transmission between generations.

Barong as a sign that does not only signify God's power but also serves as a medium of communication between the human world and the supernatural. In the *ngelawang* procession, for example, Barong dance is not merely a performance but a form of parole (a concrete expression of the linguistic sign system called langue) that conveys spiritual messages and protection to the community. When the community refers to it as *Ida Ratu Gede* or *Ida Ratu Lingsir*, the community is producing new meanings from the religious linguistic system that lives within their culture (Titib, 2003).

Furthermore, Barong sign system is reinforced through collective rituals and mythological narratives that continuously shape a stable system of meaning within the community. Through ritual and social interaction, Barong symbol becomes a living word, not only comprehended but also felt, internalized, and transformed into a spiritual and social guide for life. This integration of Saussure's semiotic approach strengthens the

analysis of Barong symbolism as a meaningful cultural and religious product through a socially constructed sign system. In this context, Barong is not just art, not just a ceremony, but a living sign that unites humans with divine power and their community through a symbolic language passed down through generations.

4. Conclusions

Barong plays a significant role in the religious life of the Amunduk Taro community as a medium of worship that connects spiritual, social, and theological dimensions. Barong worship is based on the theological belief that Barong is a manifestation of *Saguna Brahman*, specifically as the embodiment of *Bānaspati Raja*, the protector of nature and forests. This belief is not solely based on mythology or local beliefs, but also stems from profound Hindu teachings regarding the maintenance of cosmic harmony and the sanctity of living space.

Barong serves as a sacred bridge between humans and supernatural powers. This function manifests itself in religious rituals, sacred aesthetics, moral education, and ecological preservation. Barong is not only a religious symbol but also a driving force for collective consciousness and social cohesion. As a representation of the values of *Satyam*, *Siwam*, and *Sundaram*, Barong embodies truth, purity, and beauty, integrated into the community's life. Its function also reflects the values of *Tri Kaya Parisudha* and the profound meaning of the concept of *taksu* in sacred art.

Barong is interpreted as a *murthi*, or living and tangible embodiment of God. Through a symbolic interactionist approach, Barong is seen as the result of a collective construction of meaning that lives within the social practices, rituals, and symbolic language of the community. Barong is not merely a visual sign (signifier), but contains a mutually agreed-upon transcendental meaning (signified). This meaning is also manifested through the teachings of the *Catur Marga* and the collective spiritual, social, and ecological practices of the Amunduk Taro community in preserving the forest as a sacred space.

Overall, the reasons for worship, the socio-religious functions, and theological meaning of Barong are closely interconnected, forming a Hindu ecotheological system that lives within the practices of the Amunduk Taro community. Barong is not only a meaning of worship but also a collective symbol that maintains the sanctity of nature, strengthens social solidarity, and affirms the harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and God. Thus, Barong in Amunduk Taro is a religious entity that unites theology, ecology, and culture into a holistic and sustainable unity.

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Author Contribution

Conceptualization, I.P.A.D., I.N.L., R.D.; Methodology, I.P.A.D.; Software, I.N.L.; Validation, R.D.; Formal Analysis, I.P.A.D., and I.N.L.; Investigation, R.D.; Resources, I.N.L.; Data Curation, I.P.A.D., and I.N.L.; Writing–Original Draft Preparation, I.P.A.D., and R.D.; Writing–Review & Editing, I.N.L.; Visualization, R.D..; Supervision, I.P.A.D.; Project Administration, I.P.A.D.

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Ethical Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with established research ethics principles, including respect for the rights and dignity of informants, voluntary participation, confidentiality of personal identities, and academic responsibility in data collection and analysis. All stages of the research were carried out with due consideration for the social and cultural norms, as well as the customary practices of the local community. Formal ethical approval from a Research Ethics Committee was not obtained, as such approval was not required by the applicable institutional policies or regulations for this type of research.

Informed Consent Statement

All informants involved in this study were provided with a clear explanation of the research objectives, procedures, and potential benefits before voluntarily agreeing to participate. The researchers ensured the confidentiality of informants' identities and personal information and guaranteed that all data collected would be used exclusively for academic purposes and scholarly publication. Informant participation was entirely voluntary and free from any form of coercion, undue influence, or pressure from any party.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study were obtained through field observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation conducted throughout the research process. The research data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to the principles of confidentiality, privacy protection, and informant consent. Certain data cannot be made publicly available because they contain personal information and are subject to ethical considerations related to the protection of research participants.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest. The funding agency had no role in the design of the study; the collection, analysis, or interpretation of the data; or the decision to publish the research findings.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Mendeley software to facilitate reference management and the formatting of in-text citations and the reference list.

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