



Embodying the divine in Bali gender, ritual authority, and the politics of representation in Hindu

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ABSTRACT

Background: This article examines how women's bodies serve as a medium for divine power, or *Śakti* (transcendent feminine power), in Balinese Hindu rituals, to explain the articulation of religious authority and gender representation within patriarchal customary structures. Conceptually, this study draws on literature concerning ritual embodiment, religion as material practice, and community-based gender activism, which shows that religious authority arises from the performativity of sanctity embedded in social relations. **Methods:** The methods used include religious ethnography with participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and the documentation of rituals performed by female leaders such as Jero Mangku Istri and Jero Balian, as well as an in-depth case study of a female priest who her community has recognized since childhood as a medium for the goddess Danu. **Finding:** Women are not merely ritual performers but key actors who materialize and mediate the divine through movement, voice, and spiritual service; their authority is often not formally institutionalized but gains spiritual and symbolic legitimacy through communal recognition. These results align with the framework of ritual and material religion: transcendent experiences, the performativity of sanctity, and social networks work together to shape women's religious authority despite structural male domination. **Conclusion:** In conclusion, women's bodies become a field of negotiation between the sacred and the profane as well as a source of effective religious authority at the practical level. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** The novelty of this research lies in its empirical demonstration of how women's bodies as mediums of *Śakti* generate community-recognized authority despite not being formalized, as well as in its integration of religious ethnography with the framework of materialization and religion to map the dynamics of gender and power in contemporary Balinese Hinduism.

KEYWORDS: divine; gender; ritual authority; Hindu; Bali.

1. Introduction

In many religious societies, women's spiritual authority is often negotiated in hidden, symbolic, or informal spaces. Hindu tradition, particularly in Bali, is no exception to this dynamic. Although Hindu philosophy recognizes the concept of *Śakti* as a divine feminine power that is an essential aspect of the highest reality, in ritual practice and religious institutional structures, women's roles are often marginalized or restricted by customary norms and patriarchal interpretations of gender. This article explores how women's bodies

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in Balinese Hindu ritual traditions are not only cultural objects but also active spiritual actors who mediate *Śakti*'s power, shape religious authority, and challenge established boundaries of representation.

This research is rooted in the experiences of female spiritual leaders in the Kintamani region of Bangli Regency, a sacred area for the worship of Dewi Danu and Bhatari Batur. One of the central figures is Jero Jemiwi, a Jero Mangku Istri at Pura Alas Arum, believed to have possessed spiritual powers since childhood. Her body is not only a symbol of sacredness, but also a medium between the *niskala* and *sekala* worlds, between the power of the goddess and the needs of the people. She leads *piodalan* ceremonies, prepares *tirta*, performs *melukat*, and serves the people who come to seek protection and purification. This practice shows that female religious authority in Bali is not always formal-institutional in nature, but is built through spiritual performativity rooted in the body, rituals, and closeness to divine powers.

The concept of the body as an articulative space of transcendent power has become an important discussion in the theory of ritual embodiment. Williams (2023) states that the body not only expresses symbolic meaning but also becomes a field for the production and reproduction of religious meaning. In the context of Balinese Hindu women, the body becomes a site where *Śakti*, as a feminine cosmic power, is not only believed in but also lived through spiritual practices and services. Through the material religion approach (Houlbrook, 2020), we can see that the body, sacred objects, and ritual spaces are interrelated instruments in creating a tangible divine presence in everyday life.

However, women's authority in the ritual realm remains within a complex power relationship. As shown by Mukherjee et al. (2020), women's religious agency often cannot be understood within the binary framework of "oppression" and "liberation." Instead, agency can emerge in the form of active submission, spiritual discipline, closeness to sacred values, and performative piety that generates social and religious influence. In this context, women such as Jero Mangku Istri Batur do not necessarily explicitly oppose patriarchal structures, but build authority through spiritual depth, continuity of service, and charismatic recognition from the community.

The gap between theological concepts and social structures in Hindu tradition has also been highlighted in recent studies. Menon (2002), for example, notes that although the *Śakti* doctrine places women as the source of cosmic power, women's bodies are often controlled through narratives of impurity (such as menstruation) that place them in a subordinate position. However, in everyday practice, many female spiritual leaders have reversed this narrative, making their bodies the center of sacred power. In this case, *Śakti* is no longer just a metaphysical idea, but a social reality embodied through the bodies of women who live and serve. Studies of female spiritual leadership in India also show similar dynamics. DeNapoli (2023), in her study of female gurus, states that women can build religious authority through the performativity of purity, closeness to rituals, and spiritual charisma. However, this phenomenon remains relatively understudied in the Balinese context, especially in local traditions with unique customary structures and belief systems deeply rooted in agrarian cosmology and multispecies relationships with nature.

Therefore, this study seeks to answer important questions: How do women's bodies in Balinese Hindu tradition become sacred mediums that mediate *Śakti*'s power and generate ritual authority? How is their agency negotiated in a patriarchal space, and to what extent do these religious representations reshape our understanding of leadership and spirituality in Hinduism? To answer these questions, this article focuses on a case study of female priestly practices in the Kintamani region, using it as an ethnographic lens to read the dynamics between gender, the body, and sacredness. Through this approach, this article contributes to the discourse on religious feminist subjectivity. It opens up a new space for understanding the encounter between transcendence and immanence in women's religious experiences. Furthermore, this study challenges the dominant constructions of religious authority associated with masculinity, rationality, and formal-institutional leadership.

By focusing on bodily experiences and rituals, and using the theoretical frameworks of ritual embodiment, material religion, and religious gender activism, this article not only

unravels the dynamics of gender representation in Balinese Hinduism, but also affirms that the divine is not only present in mantras or scriptures, but also in the bodies, soil, water, and breath of the women who lead the prayers.

2. Methods

This study uses a religious ethnographic approach within an interpretive qualitative framework to explore how women's bodies in Balinese Hindu tradition are interpreted as a medium for divine power (*Śakti*) and how their ritual authority is materialized through practices, spaces, and symbols. The main location of the research is the Kintamani area, Bangli Regency, specifically around Lake Batur, which is the center of worship of Dewi Danu and Bhatari Batur. This area was chosen because it demonstrates the distinctive ritual practices of the Bali Aga community, which still maintains a strong spiritual and ecological structure, and features active and charismatic female religious leadership.

In addition, comparisons were made with a number of traditional areas and urban phenomena related to female spiritual leadership in Bali. The main case studies in this research were a number of Jero Mangku Istri who, since childhood, have been believed to be mediums for the power of the goddess and actively lead piodalan, melukat, and nunas tirta rituals. In addition, several other female figures were also involved as supporting informants, including petirtan guardians, female Jro Balian, and traditional figures who understand the role of women in village rituals. Informants were selected purposively, based on the depth of their spiritual experience and their active role in religious rituals.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews to explore narratives of spiritual experiences and the construction of the sacred body, as well as through participatory observation in the implementation of various ceremonies, such as piodalan, mebayuh, and daily services at the temple. In addition, visual and artifactual documentation was carried out on the arrangement of banten, the structure of the sacred kitchen, the pelinggih Dewi, and the management of sacred water. This data collection technique was accompanied by reflective field notes to capture social dynamics, the atmosphere of the rites, and the relationships between the actors.

Data analysis was conducted inductively through thematic analysis, highlighting three major themes: first, the body as a place of manifestation of sacred power; second, the performativity of ritual authority; and third, the negotiation of patriarchal norms through spiritual experience. The theoretical framework used includes the concept of ritual embodiment (Strudwick, 2022), which views the body as a field of religious meaning production; the theory of material religion (Kerekes, 2020), which emphasizes the importance of the body, space, and objects as media for divine presence; and the theory of female religious agency (DeNapoli, 2023), which interprets female religious practices as a form of spiritual performativity that builds authority through piety, closeness to sacredness, and dharma practices.

To maintain the validity and credibility of the data, method triangulation was carried out, including cross-verification between observations, narratives, and visual documentation. Member-checking techniques were used to confirm findings with key informants, and researcher position reflection was conducted as an ethical effort to recognize the influence of the researcher's subjectivity, who has a spiritual closeness to the Balinese Hindu tradition. Thus, this approach not only seeks to understand the symbolic structure from the outside but also captures the deeper meaning from within the lived religious experience.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Women's bodies as sacred mediums and embodied authority

Field research in the Kintamani region shows that women, through their bodies and ritual practices, function as active intermediaries between divine powers and local

communities. The central figure in this study, a Jero Mangku Istri (name withheld for ethical reasons), has been trusted by the community as a recipient of spiritual power since childhood. Symptoms such as trans mediumship (*kerauhan*), symbolic visions, and the ability to recite mantras without formal learning are signs of divine selection (*pawisik*), which in local interpretation is a manifestation of *Śakti*.

Jero Istri's body is socially accepted as a vessel for the power of the goddess, specifically Dewi Danu or Bhatari Batur. She leads piodalan, provides tirta, and performs melukat without the assistance of male priests. These findings support Karasiński's (2021) view that the body in ritual is not merely a representation, but an incarnative process of sacred meaning. Jero's body becomes the site of the ritual itself; she is not only present in the ritual but is performatively the ritual. This reinforces the concept of ritual embodiment, which explains how the body is not only an instrument for performing rituals but also a material and symbolic location where religious power is embodied and negotiated (Ohaja & Anyim, 2021). Jero istri perform rituals not as a form of passive service, but as an active process of embodying sacredness into social space, arranging offerings, lighting sacred fires, and touching water as a form of transferring divine power.

In the context of Hindu women's spiritual leadership in Bali, the representation of *Śakti* not only appears in the form of iconographically worshipped goddesses, but also manifests in the bodies of women who perform ritual and healing roles. As McDaniel (2023) asserts, *Śakti*'s power in rural India is often not present in formal religious forms, but rather through women called sadhika, witches, or bonga girls, who become intermediaries between the spirit world and society through embodied experiences, ecstasy, and community-based spiritual service. This model shows that women in the local context have spiritual capacities that are not determined by formal patriarchal structures, but rather by social recognition, mystical experiences, and relationships with divine powers.

These findings parallel cases in Bali, where women such as Jro Mangku Istri or Jro Balian gain legitimacy through transcendental experiences from childhood, spiritual practices, or spiritual inheritance from ancestors, as do the women in India described by McDaniel who "become Shakti not through textual learning, but through ritual embodiment and community recognition" (McDaniel, 2023). This perspective reinforces the argument that women's religious authority is built not only on doctrine, but also on lived experiences and spiritual performativity within the community.

3.2 Materiality, space, and women's agency in rituals

Sacred spaces maintained and activated by women in Balinese Hindu religious practices are not merely locations for physical activities, but affective and symbolic fields where divine powers are mediated, experienced, and reconstructed. One of the most powerful representations of this can be seen in the sacred kitchen (*paon*) and spring (*petirtan*) managed by female figures such as Jero istri in Kintamani. These spaces are concrete evidence that spiritual authority does not always come from institutional structures or formal customary positions, but rather from the continuity of the relationship between the body, objects, and sacredness that is interpreted and lived out in everyday spirituality.

The concept of material religion as described by Kerekes (2020) is an important analytical tool for understanding how objects, bodies, aromas, textures, and spaces can become intermediaries for the presence of divine power. In this case, the kitchen managed by women is not only a functional place for cooking, but also acts as a domestic altar that produces *prasadam* (sacred food), *tirtha* (holy water), and incense ash, which are then circulated to the congregation in the form of blessings.

A similar thing happens in *petirtan*, where water is not only seen as a physical element, but also as a sacred substance that contains ritual memories and spiritual resonance. In other words, the authority of Jero istri does not come from texts, hierarchies, or institutions, but from embodied practices that are consistent and affectively recognized by the community. This is in line with the idea of the performativity of piety (Bordeaux, 2024),

which sees women's agency not in the form of direct opposition to patriarchy, but in the form of the formation of spiritual subjectivity through discipline, service, and the internalization of sacred values. Women's agency as Jero Istri arises not because she 'opposes' patriarchal structures, but because she builds an organic form of spiritual leadership based on her relationship with space, natural elements, and her appreciation of the goddess's presence in her daily activities.

In ethnographic observations, the body of Jero Istri is not only an instrument but also a medium that affirms divine power through small rituals that are continuously performed, such as preparing offerings with hands full of flowers and rice, sprinkling the kitchen fire with mantras, and chanting prayers before water is distributed to the *pemedek* (pilgrims). These practices form a kind of domestic spiritual ecology that extends the sacred space from the temple to the kitchen, from the altar to the body, from text to praxis.

Using Lange's (2023) approach to embodiment, it can be said that Jero Istri not only "performs" spirituality but "becomes" spirituality itself. Her body becomes the locus of the transformation of divine experience in a form that can be seen, touched, and felt by the community. Here, materiality does not reduce spiritual value; on the contrary, it deepens religiosity because it can be reached, shared, and passed on.

Theoretically, this finding enriches the discourse of religious feminism by showing that domestic and non-institutional spaces should not be reduced to merely "women's private domains," but rather become arenas for the expansion of symbolic power and embodied spirituality. A jero istri bridges the profane and the sacred, showing that in the Balinese Hindu context, the kitchen and *petirtan* are no less important than the *merajan* or village temple. Such agency needs to be understood as a regenerative and reconstructive practice, not only as a response to patriarchy, but as part of cosmological continuity and respect for the living principle of *Śakti*.

Sacred springs (*petirtan*) demonstrate the importance of materiality in divine presence. The concept of material religion emphasizes that religious experience is mediated not only by narratives or doctrines, but also by objects, bodies, and spaces that are full of affective meaning. Through these spaces, the authority of Jero istri is not supported by formal patriarchal structures, but is built through affective relationships with the sacred environment and spiritual recognition from the community. This is the form of female religious agency in the sense of Vemuri & Krishnamurti (2022), not as explicit structural resistance, but as the performativity of piety that builds legitimacy from within the space of spiritual experience. The presence of Jero Istri shows how women's bodies and spaces can become symbolic forces that shape authority through service, spiritual depth, and the continuity of ritual practice.

Following Puett (2020), ritual is not merely a religious "expression," but a mode of thinking that shapes habitus and relationships, a theory enacted by the body. Williams (2023) adds that ritual is a phenomenological construction of the world, that religious reality is shaped through rhythm, gestures, and bodily affect. Della Costa (2022) clarifies that rituals function as living metaphors, connecting the domains of sacred/profane experience, gender/authority, suffering/redemption, rather than merely representing them. From this, embodying the divine in Bali can be read as a theoretical-practical configuration: that the ritual body (mudra movements, ceremonial attire, spatial arrangement, and offerings) becomes an epistemic medium and affective infrastructure for the presence of the divine.

Through Connelly's (2021) lens, the experience of divine presence in Bali appears as a method of linking spiritual discipline with precise bodily praxis. Patel et al. (2020) provide a material foundation, architecture, and spatial choreography (circulation patterns, orientation, thresholds, and altars) that are not passive backdrops, but co-actors that channel divine power. In Balinese practice, clothing, fragrances, the texture of offerings, and the sound of gamelan form a sensory ecology that mediates "presence"; this is in line with the idea of mediation of presence that emphasizes materiality as a transcendent conduit. The dimension of gender emerges when certain bodies (women, female priests, or performers of specific ritual sequences) are given ritual mandates, not merely to

“represent,” but to produce legitimacy. At this point, Bali shows that ritual authority is the result of negotiations between bodies, space, and community, not merely a derivative of text.

3.3 *The articulation of Śakti in the complexity of gender and balinese cosmology*

In Balinese cosmology, divine power is not solely masculine, but is composed of the dualistic principle of *purusha-pradhana*, or in popular form: Siwa-Śakti. The Kintamani community, especially around Lake Batur, has a strong tradition of worshiping goddesses such as Dewi Danu, Bhatari Batur, Dewi Sri, and Durga. The female priests who serve the goddesses do not merely maintain the altars, but function as living representations of divine feminine energy. One important aspect found in this study is the body as a place of negotiation between the sacred and the profane. Female priests often face the view that menstruation makes them “impure,” even though in practice, they remain the guardians of the kitchen fire and daily altar attendants. Menon (2002) explains that the paradox between natural impurity and cultural power becomes the main field of contestation in the articulation of Śakti. Jero istri and other priestesses do not verbally reject this norm, but rather negotiate it through consistent praxis and growing symbolic influence.

In community discussions, believers often assess the “strength of the water” of a priest not by their gender or title, but by the spiritual vibrations they experience, what DeNapoli (2023) calls charismatic religious presence. Thus, women operate within an embodied charismatic logic, not within an institutional structural framework like male village priests. Field findings show that the agency of religious women in Bali cannot be read within the dominant institutional logic, but must be interpreted as a form of embodied religiosity articulated from the grassroots (grassroots religious activism) and rooted in relationships with the goddess, the community, and the sacred environment. This is where the epistemic power of the body, space, and experience becomes important as a source of alternative religious knowledge that is not always formally documented but lives in rituals and practices. By reading the body of Jero istri as a sacred site and her activities as rituals themselves, this article offers a redefinition of women's religious leadership that is not based on position but on the ability to embody divine power in community life. This also opens a new path in understanding the concept of Śakti not as abstract metaphysics, but as a real and embodied cultural praxis.

3.4 *Śakti as the epicenter of spirituality and feminine leadership*

Female leadership in the context of Balinese Hinduism is not an anomaly, but a cosmological reality rooted in the doctrine of Śakti. In many local narratives, such as those found in interviews with ritual figures in Kintamani, it is mentioned that women's spiritual power does not come from formal education or the patriarchal line, but from “*titah*” or *pawisik*, a divine calling marked by transpersonal symptoms from an early age. This concept is in line with what DeNapoli (2023) refers to as religious feminist charisma, where spiritual authority arises from transcendent affinity and spiritual performativity, rather than from patriarchal institutions.

In this context, Śakti is not only a cosmic feminine force, but also an embodied mode of religious agency, working through the body, space, and ritual. The theory of material religion (Shtyrkov, 2022) reinforces this argument by stating that the divine is present and operates through material mediums such as the body, water, flowers, kitchen fire, and the sound of mantras. Thus, the bodies of Jero istri and other female custodians function as the epicenter of the sacred force field, not merely as peripheral actors.

In every melukat ritual, for example, the female priest's body becomes the interface between holy water, mantra sounds, and the intentions of the congregation. It becomes a spiritual space that unites the niskala and sekala dimensions, with water as the conduit for taksu or divine power. This practice not only shows that women's bodies have symbolic value, but also the active transformational ability to create and channel sacred power. As

described by Padhi (2024), the body is the main location of religious experience, not merely a passive vessel of belief.

In the Balinese Hindu tradition, the concept of *Śakti* is not only understood as a feminine cosmic force that animates the universe, but also as an active principle in shaping women's spiritual authority. *Śakti* lives in the body, rituals, and daily practices, making women not merely performers of ceremonies, but the center of the community's spiritual dynamics. Female leadership in the form of Jero Mangku Istri, Guru Ma, or Pedanda Kania shows that spirituality is not always built on formal structures, but on transcendent experiences that are lived and manifested through acts of service, healing, and teaching.

This concept of *Śakti* enriches our understanding of feminine religious authority, which is not always based on institutions, but on embodied capacity as described by the theory of ritual embodiment (Williams, 2023), in which the body becomes a sacred medium that presents divine power through the rhythm of life lived spiritually. Within this framework, women's leadership is not opposed to existing religious systems, but rather becomes an important layer in the cosmological continuity of indigenous communities.

These findings are in line with Ghafournia's (2022) study on Muslim women's religious leadership in Australia. She shows that although many women have strong theological and spiritual competence, their involvement in mosque leadership is often hampered by patriarchal structures and exclusion from religious public spaces. Ghafournia emphasizes the importance of re-reading female spiritual authority through an approach that is not only structural, but also cultural and performative.

This shows that in both Islam and Hinduism, female spiritual agency requires a deeper understanding of how the body, practices, and community recognition contribute to the formation of religious authority (Ghafournia, 2022). Thus, in the context of Balinese Hinduism, *Śakti* is not only a metaphysical foundation, but also a practical principle that allows women to play a key role in preserving Dharma values. She is present in the form of ecological leadership, spiritual teaching, and community strengthening. The existence of women as ritual leaders and guardians of taksu not only reflects the continuity of tradition but also reflects a cultural renewal rooted in the understanding of the body as a divine locus.

The integration between *Śakti* and feminine leadership practices shows that women's spirituality in Bali moves beyond the domestic-public dichotomy and instead affirms a third space that is sacred, flexible, and open to value transformation. In this space, women are not only preservers but also creators of new directions for the spiritual sustainability of society.

Recent studies enrich our understanding of the relationship between body, gender, and ritual in the context of South Asia. McDaniel (2023) shows how female figures in Indian villages, from priestesses to witches, represent a spectrum of sacred authority that reflects the diversity of Śakta praxis while challenging the dichotomy between the religious and the "folk." Meanwhile, Gairola (2023), through a review of the Shaligram pilgrimage, highlights the material-sacred dimension in the Nepalese context, where fossilized stones are not only objects of devotion but also mediators of divine presence that transcend geographical and community boundaries. In the broader social sphere, Mukherjee et al. (2020) highlight the practice of menstrual restriction among young women in Nepal, showing how the body remains a field of religious and social regulation, while also opening up a space for debate about rights, health, and agency. Together, this literature affirms that women's bodies in South Asia are not only a locus of sacred representation, but also an arena for the negotiation of power, health, and identity, forming a complex network between ritual, materiality, and gender politics.

3.5 Gender representation and the politics of sacredness

The negotiation of women's authority in the patriarchal system of traditional Bali does not take the form of explicit protest, but rather through the reconstruction of the meaning of ritual roles. In discussions with traditional leaders and followers, a narrative emerged stating that "the power of the goddess knows no caste or gender." However, at the same time, there are still structural restrictions on the formal recognition of women as pedanda

or *sulinggih*. In this situation, women's authority moves through symbolic channels and ritual practices that are confirmed by the community, not by formal religious institutions.

This illustrates the dynamics described by Lucia (2020) in the framework of pious subjectivity, that the agency of religious women often operates in the spaces of piety, self-discipline, and devotion, which in turn produces spiritual legitimacy that is independent of masculine structures. In the context of Balinese Hinduism, this is evident in how female priests build authority through continuous service, spiritual power (*taksu*), and a reputation for purity recognized by the community. Thus, women's bodies are not only controlled spaces, but also fields of symbolic resistance and alternative articulations against patriarchal authority. This theory of religious performativity is important for dismantling the old dichotomies between sacred and profane, active and passive, masculine and feminine, in the study of religious leadership.

The findings of this study show that women's bodies in the Balinese Hindu tradition function as incarnative mediums of divine power, not merely as symbols or complements in rituals. Female priests such as Jero Istri are concrete examples of how *Śakti* is not only worshipped but also embodied through the body and concrete spiritual practices. Their leadership is not shaped by formal patriarchal structures, but rather by transcendent experiences, community recognition, and the continuity of ritual performance.

Using the frameworks of ritual embodiment, material religion, and religious feminist activism, this article asserts that the sacred representation of women in Bali is not an exception, but rather part of a living cosmology that is continuously negotiated through the body, water, earth, and voice. This study also shows that religious leadership is not always determined by institutional position, but by the ability to embody the divine in the lives of the people. Through this analysis, we are invited to reconsider the definitions of religious authority, gender, and sacredness in complex local contexts, as well as to open space for alternative epistemologies based on the body, experience, and rituals that are lived rather than merely interpreted. For comparison, in addition to Jero Istri, who is the agency of female spirituality in the mula group, the diversity and transformation of forms of female religious authority in Bali are listed in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Diversity and transformation of forms of female religious authority in Bali

Aspect	Traditional Female Healer (Kintamani)	Traditional Female Healer (Kintamani)	Traditional Female Healer (Kintamani)
Ritual Location	Petirtan Temple, Alas/Forest Temple	Bale Balian, home yard	Ashram, meditation room, digital platform
Worshipped Goddesses	Dewi Danu, Bhatari Batur	Durga, <i>Ratu Ayu</i>	Sarasvati, Durga, Gayatri
Basis of Authority	<i>Pawisik</i> since childhood, local charisma	Spiritual inheritance, <i>kerauhan</i>	Yoga education, bhakti experience
Primary Ritual Functions	<i>Melukat</i> , <i>nunas tirta</i> , <i>piodalan</i>	Treatment, <i>nunas bawos</i> (seeking supernatural guidance), spirit medium	<i>Tirta yatra</i> , meditation, spiritual guidance
Relationships with the Community	Bound to the traditional village system	Networks of communities in need of assistance and fellow healers	Student relationships, global yoga community
Forms of Agency	Embodied <i>Śakti</i> , daily ritual service	Trans-mediumship, body healing	Personal transformation, devotional sermon
Gender Challenges	Menstrual restrictions and traditional spaces	Mystical stigma/black magic	The challenge of credibility in urban spaces

The table above shows the diversity and transformation of forms of female religious authority in Bali. On the one hand, female priests such as those in Kintamani obtain spiritual legitimacy from their relationship with the goddess and the traditional community through embodied practices and consistency in local rituals. On the other hand, female balian and yoga teachers demonstrate a more expansive and flexible form of religious agency, reaching into the realms of spiritual healing and transnationalism through education and digital platforms.

Despite their diversity in form and context, all of these figures show that women's bodies are not merely subjects of patriarchal interpretation, but active actors in shaping rituals, divine presence, and spiritual social networks. This difference in the locus of authority shows that *Śakti* can operate in formal and informal, traditional and contemporary spaces, and still produce spiritual legitimacy outside of institutional frameworks. In general, there are three main trajectories of Hindu women's spiritual leadership in Bali, as shown in the following Figure 1.

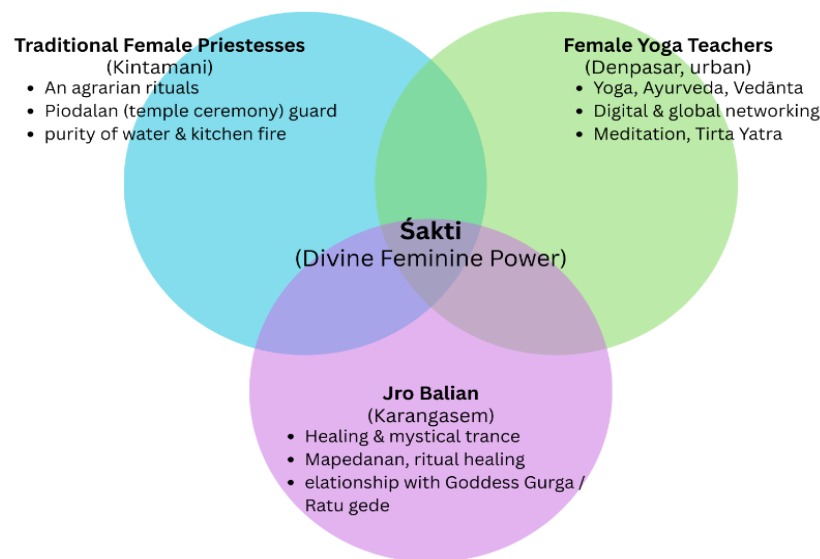


Fig. 1. Divine feminine power

This schematic diagram shows three main paths of Hindu female spiritual leadership in Bali: (1) Traditional Female Priestesses, (2) Jro Balian, and (3) Female Yoga Teachers. All three are in an intersecting configuration, with the intersectional center being *Śakti*, the divine feminine power that is the main source of spirituality and legitimacy. The left side of the circle shows Traditional Female Guardians, as found in the Kintamani region. Their leadership is rooted in ecological and cosmological relations with Dewi Danu or Bhatari Batur. They are guardians of agrarian rituals, serve the community in daily piodalan ceremonies, and maintain the sanctity of water and kitchen fire. Their authority is local, embodied, and sustainable.

The right side of the circle represents Female Yoga Teachers, who generally operate in urban areas such as Ubud and Denpasar. Their leadership stems from modern education (*yoga, Ayurveda, Vedānta* philosophy), as well as digital and international networks. Their practices include *tirta yatra*, meditation, and bhakti guidance, which are often oriented towards personal transformation and universal service.

Here, *Śakti* becomes a contemplative and transformative force that transcends cultures. Meanwhile, the bottom depicts Jro Balian, or female spiritual healers, who are active in various regions such as Karangasem. Their bodies become a medium for healing through processes of *kerauhan*, *nunas bawos* (seeking supernatural guidance), and ritualistic treatments based on transpersonal experiences. Their relationship with *Śakti* is more therapeutic and oracular in nature, and is often associated with the goddess Durga or Ratu Gede. In this case, the body becomes a locus of mystical and protective power.

The meeting point of the three in the center of the diagram is the power of *Śakti* as the center of sacredness and female agency. Whether as ritual guardians, healers, or spiritual teachers, all of these paths affirm that women's bodies are not only seen but respected as a field of divine power. They become the link between the human and *niskala* worlds, between local traditions and global dynamics, between the cosmos and the everyday body. Thus, this diagram shows that women's leadership in Balinese Hinduism is not merely a response to patriarchy, but an integral part of the local spiritual ecology rooted in reverence for the Goddess and the principle of sacred balance. *Śakti* is not just a theological metaphor, but a living reality articulated through the body, ritual, and devotion.

Finally, through the reading of women's bodies as a locus of sacredness, as well as rituals as practices of divine incarnation, we are invited to understand that the divine does not only reside in texts, myths, or institutions, but also in bodies that care for water, light fires, and recite mantras. Hindu women in Bali do not merely represent *Śakti*, they embody *Śakti* herself in the silence of service, the vibration of *taksu*, and the continuity of sacred practices that are passed down through life. In a world that often ignores women's bodily knowledge and voices in religion, this study affirms that the path to restoring holistic spirituality must begin with the recognition that the body is not only part of the profane world, but also a living altar for the divine.

This research reveals that women's bodies in the Balinese Hindu tradition do not merely play a role as ritual performers, but are active mediums of divine power (*Śakti*) manifested in social, cultural, and spiritual spaces. This study found that women not only carry out religious duties, but also produce religious authority through embodied practices rooted in experience, spiritual inheritance, and community legitimacy.

Overall, this study affirms that women's spiritual leadership in Balinese Hinduism cannot be understood merely as a complement to the patriarchal religious structure, but rather as a dynamic field in which the body, ritual, and power are intertwined. First, through embodied authority, women's bodies appear as the center of sacred experience as well as a channel of spiritual legitimacy that transcends the customary norms that often limit their public roles. The body is not only a symbol but also a locus of power that brings divine presence into everyday practices, whether in the context of *piodalan*, *kerauhan*, or ritual healing. Second, the dimensions of ritual performance and spatial power show that women are able to control and reinterpret sacred spaces, from temples and household kitchens to springs and digital platforms, as arenas for the construction of power that is both symbolic and affective.

This mastery of space shows that women's agency is not limited to one domain, but extends to the domestic, communal, and transnational spheres. Third, through negotiating patriarchy and reconfiguring *Śakti*, Balinese women have developed strategies for negotiating customary norms and masculine discourse, while offering new interpretations of *Śakti* as a life force inherent in their bodies, rituals, and voices. Thus, the spiritual leadership of Balinese Hindu women presents a model of religiosity that not only affirms the role of women in sacred structures but also reconfigures the understanding of authority, spirituality, and power in the contemporary Hindu horizon. The dimensions of Balinese women's leadership are illustrated below. Diagram of the dimensions of Balinese Hindu women's spiritual leadership in Figure 2.

The conceptual diagram maps three main dimensions that shape women's spiritual leadership in the context of Balinese Hinduism, namely Embodied Authority, Ritual and Spatial Power, and Negotiating Patriarchy and Reconfiguring *Śakti*. These three dimensions are intertwined and make women's bodies not merely passive subjects of traditional structures, but the epicenter of active and dynamic religious authority.

The first dimension, Embodied Authority, shows that women's bodies are not only biological vessels, but also epistemological and sacred spaces where spiritual experiences are manifested. Women such as *Jro Mangku Istri* or *Jro Balian* obtain legitimacy not from formal systems, but from *pawisik*, religious dreams, and initiation processes that are integrated with the body (Bell, 1992; Csordas, 1994). Here, the body becomes an arena of

sacralization and is no longer a symbol of impurity as in common patriarchal narratives (Menon, 2002).

The second dimension, Ritual and Spatial Power, shows how women navigate ritual spaces such as temples, sacred kitchens, springs, and ashrams to lead, guide, and connect the community with divine powers. Practices such as *melukat*, *piodalan*, or spiritual healing through the body in *kerauhan* make women divine mediums who activate *Śakti* power in the daily context of the community (Meyer, 2012; Morgan, 2010). Women are not merely part of the ritual; they enliven and articulate the meaning of the ritual through deep emotional and spiritual involvement.

The third dimension, Negotiating Patriarchy and Reconfiguring *Śakti*, reflects how religious women in Bali do not always confront patriarchal norms head-on, but rather negotiate them through charisma, continuous service, and embodied spirituality. Female yoga teachers, ashram leaders, and guardians of agrarian rituals use their positions to reshape narratives about feminine power as active, life-giving, and nurturing, rather than subordinate (DeNapoli, 2023). In this context, *Śakti* is not only a metaphysical concept, but an ethical and practical principle that shapes the spiritual and social landscape of the Balinese Hindu community.

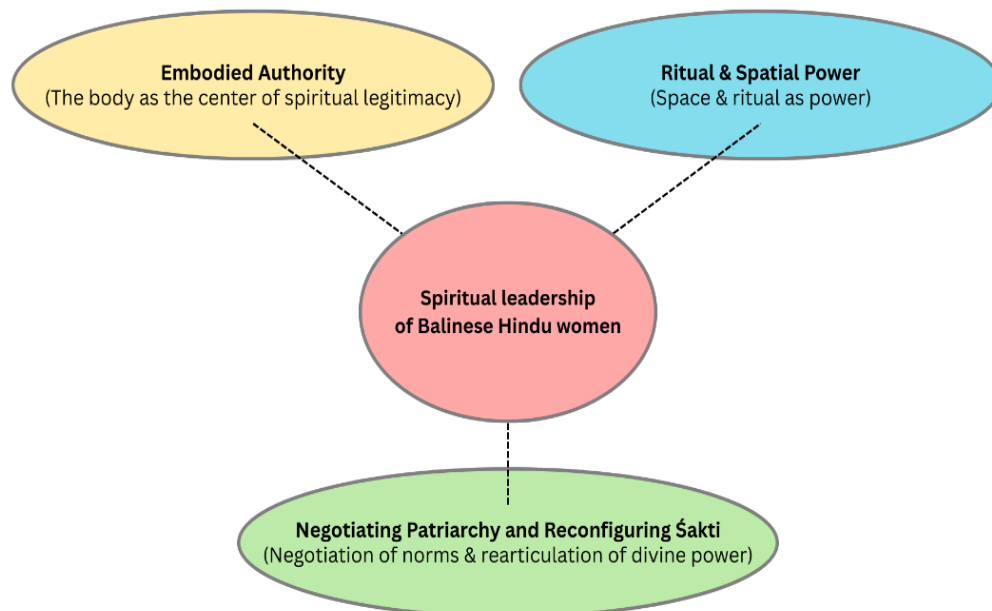


Fig. 2. Dimensions of spiritual leadership of Balinese Hindu women

Thus, this diagram is not only a visual representation of the structure of female spiritual leadership, but also offers a theoretical framework that can be used to analyze female religious agency in various local contexts. These three dimensions challenge the binary separation between sacred-profane, masculine-feminine, and text-ritual, and encourage an intersectional approach to the study of religion, gender, and power.

Thus, these findings not only reconstruct women's roles within the framework of Balinese Hindu rituals, but also expand our understanding of how spiritual power is mediated, negotiated, and exercised by women in complex religious systems, while offering important contributions to the discourse of religious feminism, embodied spirituality, and the politics of representation in contemporary religious studies.

In the Indian context, Perkins (2022) shows how *Śākta* narratives of healing and transformation frame the body as the locus of change, where suffering, redemption, and glorification take place as highly material processes. Burley (2021) highlights the embodied theology of the Divine Mother, revealing the ontological logic in which the *dayā* (power) of the Goddess is embodied in devotional practices. Craddock (2024) on *Tirunaṅkai* in Tamil Nadu shows the fluidity of gender in rituals, with the body becoming an arena of spiritual and political negotiation, challenging standard categorizations and opening up new

configurations of authority. In this framework, Harrison & Gayle (2020) are useful for reading transformational exemplars (spiritual exemplars) as moral-affective productions that transmit authority born of repetitive bodily practices, not just discursive claims. Winfield (2021) adds ethical depth through embodied theodicy, namely engagement with suffering carried out by the body (fasting, *tapasyā*, processions), so that the issue of theodicy does not stop at conceptual arguments. While Bali emphasizes sensory-spatial ecology, India displays the embodied spectrum from goddess theology to gender-queer politics, establishing authority through asceticism, performativity, and public relations.

4. Conclusions

This study has shown that women's bodies in Balinese Hindu tradition are not only the locus of spiritual experience but also the articulative space of divine power embodied in rituals, social relations, and community service. Through case studies in Kintamani, particularly figures such as Jero Mangku Istri, who is believed to represent the power of Dewi Danu or Bhatari Batur, we understand that women's religious authority is not built through formal patriarchal structures, but rather through affective legitimacy, transcendental experiences, and the continuity of embodied practices recognized by the community.

By applying the theories of ritual embodiment, material religion, and religious feminist activism, this article argues that women's spiritual leadership is an alternative form of articulation against structural domination and a path toward the production of religious meaning grounded in the body, space, and sacred voice. Women's practices in performing *melukat*, preparing offerings, maintaining the holy fire, and mediating water as *tirta* are not just ordinary ritual activities, but spiritual acts that transform social space and enliven sacredness in the daily lives of the faithful.

These findings not only enrich our understanding of women's roles in Balinese Hinduism but also challenge the old dichotomies between the sacred and the profane, the institutional and the personal, and the text and the body. Religious female leadership rooted in *Śakti* power opens up new possibilities for building a more inclusive, dialogical paradigm of spirituality that favors embodied experiences that have long been marginalized.

Finally, through the reading of women's bodies as a locus of sacredness, as well as rituals as practices of incarnating divine power, we are invited to understand that the sacred does not only reside in texts, myths, or institutions, but also in bodies that care for water, light fires, and recite mantras. Hindu women in Bali do not merely represent *Śakti*; they embody *Śakti* herself in the silence of service, the vibration of *taksu*, and the continuity of sacred practices passed down through generations. In a world that often ignores women's bodily knowledge and voices in religion, this study affirms that the path to restoring holistic spirituality must begin with the recognition that the body is not only part of the profane world but also a living altar for the divine.

This article has explored how the bodies and ritual practices of Hindu women in Bali become sites of articulation of divine power, particularly *Śakti*, within a social context often dominated by patriarchal structures. Case studies from Kintamani, featuring figures such as Jero Istri and Jero Balian as female guardians, show that women's spiritual leadership not only operates within the framework of custom but also transcends it through embodied power, charismatic relationships, and spiritual depth recognized socially and cosmologically.

This research also proposes that future religious studies pay greater attention to the epistemology of the body, lived religious experiences, and women's ritual spaces, which have been neglected in institutional analysis. Amidst the discourse of decolonization and diversification of religious studies, the religious experiences of Balinese women present a paradigmatic offer: that spiritual power does not always have to pass through institutions, titles, or formal discourse, but can live in the silence of the altar, the pulse of mantras, and the holy water touched by the hands of a mother-keeper. Thus, this article contributes to efforts to broaden the horizons of religious, gender, and materiality studies and positions

Bali not only as an object of ethnographic research but also as a source of theoretical and spiritual reflection relevant globally.

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Author Contribution

Conceptualization, N.W.J.J., & G.K.J.; Methodology, N.W.J.J.; Software, S.P.; Validation, N.W.J.J., G.K.J., and M.K.; Formal Analysis, S.P.; Investigation, N.W.J.J.; Resources, G.K.J.; Data Curation, S.P.; Writing–Original Draft Preparation, N.W.J.J.; Writing–Review & Editing, G.K.J., and M.K.; Visualization, S.P.; Supervision, G.K.J.; Project Administration, N.W.J.J.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. No publicly archived datasets were generated or analyzed during the current research

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used artificial intelligence (AI)-based tools to support the writing process in certain aspects. After using these tools, the authors reviewed, edited, and ensured the entire content of the manuscript, and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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