



Exploring the Rāmāyana relief as a pillar supporting cultural tourism identity at the Bali international convention center

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study explores the presence of 20 Rāmāyana relief panels at the Bali International Convention Centre (BICC) in Nusa Dua, serving as pillars of Balinese cultural tourism identity. The reliefs represent the Kakawin Rāmāyana narrative, which has been adapted into Balinese carving aesthetics through the technique of multiple-layer carving, integrating local flora and fauna symbols, Balinese Hindu cosmological principles, and the spiritual values of dharma, satya, and bhakti. **Methods:** Using a descriptive qualitative method with an interpretive approach, this research involved field observations, in-depth interviews with managers, and visual analysis. **Findings:** The results show that the relief serves as an aesthetic representation that constructs the spiritual and visual image of a world-class cultural destination; as an educational medium that facilitates the transfer of moral values, cross-cultural learning, and visual cultural diplomacy; and as a reinforcement of the socio-economic dimension through the empowerment of local artists, the preservation of traditional carving techniques, and the increase in the economic value of creativity in the premium tourism industry. **Conclusion:** This study confirms that the Rāmāyana relief is a strategic instrument for preserving Balinese cultural identity amid globalization, but it remains limited to a single location. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** Therefore, further research with a comparative, quantitative approach is recommended to broaden the generalizability of the findings.

KEYWORDS: Rāmāyana relief; cultural identity; cultural tourism; cultural aesthetics.

1. Introduction

Bali tourism is one of the world's most powerful examples of how tradition, aesthetics, and cultural identity can be transformed into economic, symbolic, and diplomatic power without losing their spiritual roots. Bali is not only seen as a natural tourist destination but is better known for its unique Hindu-Balinese culture, passed down from generation to generation (Geria et al., 2023). This cultural identity continues to evolve in line with global dynamics, yet retains its essence through symbols embedded in art, rituals, architecture, and epic narratives (Ardika, 2018; Vickers, 2012). In this context, the existence of the Rāmāyana relief at the Bali International Convention Center (BICC) in Nusa Dua is a tangible representation of how traditional cultural elements can survive and, at the same time, serve as a pillar of cultural tourism identity in a modern, international-standard region.

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The Rāmāyana, as an epic, holds a very special place in the Hindu-Balinese tradition. The narrative of moral steadfastness, the struggle of truth against evil, loyalty, and cosmic balance forms the philosophical foundation of Balinese society. In the arts, the Rāmāyana story appears in the form of dance performances such as Kecak, Rāmāyana dance dramas, wayang kulit (shadow puppets), gong dramas, Kamasan classical paintings, and temple carvings. Therefore, the Rāmāyana is not just a story, but an ethical guideline, a value system, and a collective identity for the Balinese people. By incorporating Rāmāyana reliefs into the architectural design of the BICC, this modern tourist area symbolically unites two worlds: the traditional world full of spirituality and the modern world full of technology, global diplomacy, and international convention management.

Historically, the Nusa Dua area was developed by the Indonesian Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC) as an international-standard premium tourism area in the early 1970s. The planning of this area was based on the concept of integrating local culture into modern architecture as a destination branding strategy. BICC has become one of the most prominent MICE venues in Bali and Indonesia. This building complex hosts various prestigious international events, ranging from ASEAN summits and IMF–World Bank conferences to global diplomatic and cultural events (Zeng, 2024). Thus, the BICC environment is a space where Balinese cultural identity is displayed before the international community. The Rāmāyana reliefs that adorn the lobby pillars, ballroom walls, and transition areas are visual icons that reinforce this cultural narrative. From the perspective of destination identity studies, architectural and visual art elements play an important role in shaping tourists' perceptions of a destination's character. Recent tourism studies argue that destination image is constructed through cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions that shape tourists' perceptions, emotional attachment, and behavioural intentions toward destinations (Yang et al., 2022). The Rāmāyana reliefs are symbolic components that not only beautify the space but also foster tourists' positive perceptions of Bali's spiritual depth, aesthetic refinement, and cultural uniqueness.

Thus, its existence becomes a very effective branding strategy, especially in the context of cultural tourism and experience-oriented MICE tourism (Martín-Rojo & Gaspar-González, 2025). Modernization and globalization often threaten the existence of local cultures. Many tourist destinations around the world have changed their traditional identities into standardized commercial products for the sake of industry (Candra et al, 2025). However, Bali has chosen a different path. In various tourism development policies, the local government and traditional leaders emphasize the importance of cultural preservation as the basis for development. This is reflected in the Tri Hita Karana philosophy, which emphasizes harmony between humans and God (*parhyangan*), humans and fellow humans (*pawongan*), and humans and nature (*palemahan*) (Windia & Dewi, 2011). This philosophy is translated into spatial planning, art, and the social function of buildings. The Rāmāyana relief is a concrete representation of how these values are blended into modern architectural design.

On a semiotic level, the Rāmāyana reliefs not only convey a story, but also philosophical symbols with multiple meanings. Rama and Sita symbolize purity, Hanuman represents loyalty, Rahwana depicts ego and power, while the carved forest landscape, birds, and flora reflect the sacred nature of Bali. The way the artist carved the relief using multiple-layer carving techniques, smooth curves, and traditional ornamental motifs demonstrates the Balinese carving aesthetic that combines spiritual function and visual beauty. Thus, this relief is a “visual text” that can be read, understood, and interpreted by visitors through a deep aesthetic experience. Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach is particularly relevant in analyzing these visual elements, as the reliefs are not merely physical objects but vehicles for transferring meaning from Balinese culture to the international community.

In addition to their aesthetic and symbolic functions, the Rāmāyana reliefs also serve an educational purpose. The reliefs serve as an introduction for tourists to understand Hindu-Balinese values without having to read history books or watch art performances directly (Raya et al., 2023). The presence of reliefs in public spaces allows tourists to engage in visual contemplation, read epic narratives non-verbally, and delve into the moral values

contained within them. Some international tourists even use these reliefs as photo backgrounds, which are then widely shared on social media. Thus, the Rāmāyana reliefs have become part of visual-based cultural diplomacy, spreading the image of Bali as a spiritual destination that promotes harmony and kindness.

From a socio-economic perspective, the existence of these reliefs also encourages the participation of local artists. The creation of reliefs requires high skills, so carving artists from Ubud, Gianyar, and Tabanan are involved in the production process. This collaboration not only creates economic opportunities but also strengthens the sustainability of traditional Balinese carving art in the modern era. Carving art has not lost its context, but has gained a new, broader space in star-rated hotels and international convention facilities. This process shows how tradition remains alive through adaptation, not just passive preservation.

This introduction emphasizes that the presence of the Rāmāyana relief at the Bali International Convention Center is evidence of the integration between local culture and modern spaces. The relief serves as a representation of Balinese cultural identity, a means of visual education, an element of destination branding, and a medium for cultural diplomacy on the international stage. This research is important because it analyzes how traditional art survives in a global space, how cultural identity is preserved, and how aesthetic elements can become pillars supporting sustainable cultural tourism in Bali.

2. Methods

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with an interpretive paradigm to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning, symbolism, and function of the Rāmāyana relief at the Bali International Convention Center (BICC) Nusa Dua as part of cultural tourism identity. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on interpreting the aesthetic, spiritual, and socio-cultural values contained in the reliefs as visual artifacts, as well as the responses of stakeholders to their existence. Data were collected over a three-month period, from May to July 2025, using three main techniques: direct observation, namely visual observation of the structure, composition, carving technique, placement of the relief, and visitor interaction with the object; in-depth interviews with BICC management; and documentation, including photographs of the relief, architectural notes, hotel brochures, and social media posts featuring the relief. Observations were conducted repeatedly at various times throughout this period to obtain a more holistic perspective on the function of the reliefs in the context of public space and cultural tourism dynamics.

This study uses the theoretical framework of Balinese aesthetics, cultural semiotics, and sustainable cultural tourism as an analytical basis for understanding the position of Rāmāyana reliefs in building the cultural identity of international tourism areas. The data were analyzed using three interpretive methods: cultural semiotic analysis to examine signs and symbolic meanings, analysis of Balinese aesthetics to understand visual techniques and Hindu-Balinese cosmology, and narrative analysis to examine the continuity of the 20 panels as an epic storyline. Data validity was strengthened through triangulation of sources and methods. This approach enables a holistic understanding of the role of reliefs as educational, aesthetic, and cultural diplomacy media in the context of international tourism.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Aesthetic representation: Visuality, symbolism, and cosmology in the Rāmāyana relief

The Rāmāyana relief that adorns the main lobby area and ballroom walls of the Bali International Convention Center (BICC) in Nusa Dua is one of the most tangible examples of the successful integration of Balinese Hindu aesthetics with modern architectural design. On a visual level, these reliefs not only offer ornamental beauty but also present the entirety of the epic narrative in a symbolic form that is rich in meaning. These reliefs were created

using a red brick carving technique with a multiple-layer carving pattern that gives visual depth to each scene. This technique creates a three-dimensional effect that brings the figures of Rama, Sita, Hanuman, Laksmana, and other characters to life. The finesse of the carving technique and the precision of the composition demonstrate the high level of skill of the Balinese artists involved in its creation.

A total of 20 relief panels are installed, depicting the main narrative fragments of the Kakawin Rāmāyana. These panels are arranged chronologically, starting with Sita's beauty contest, Sita's abduction by Ravana, the battle of Jatayu, the Sugriwa-Rama alliance, Hanuman's infiltration of Alengka, the construction of a bridge to Alengka, the great war, and the purification of Sita through the trial by fire. This chronological arrangement reinforces the epic narrative and makes it easier for visitors to read the story through the sequence of panels.



Fig. 1. Carving on the Rāmāyana relief at BICC Nusa Dua

The 20 Rāmāyana reliefs at the Bali International Convention Center (BICC) in Nusa Dua form a complete visual narrative, constituting what can be called continuous cultural storytelling. The chronologically arranged reliefs present an experience of reading the epic story through a visual medium, creating the sensation that visitors are entering an open-air museum that systematically and structurally displays the complex journey of Sri Rama. This visual approach aligns with the character of the Kakawin Rāmāyana, the longest and most narrative kakawin in the Ancient Javanese tradition (Zoetmulder, 1983). Thus, the reliefs at BICC are not only decorative but also serve as a cultural text that can be "read" and "interpreted" by audiences from various backgrounds.

The first panel opens with the Mantili Contest, in which Prince Rama wins an archery competition to marry Sita. This scene marks the initial theme: the victory of virtue through moral excellence. The next panel depicts the journey of Rama, Sita, and Laksamana to the Dandaka Forest, introducing the context of spirituality and wandering that underlies many Hindu epic stories. The visualization of the golden deer Marica in the next panel emphasizes the aspect of illusion (*maya*) as a moral and spiritual test for Rama. In the fourth panel, Laksamana's protective circle symbolizes sacred protection and moral boundaries that must not be violated.

The fifth to seventh panels show a series of increasingly climactic dramas: Sita's abduction, the battle between Jatayu and Ravana, and Rama and Laksamana discovering

traces of Sita's disappearance. These scenes not only display heroic actions but also reinforce the themes of loyalty, devotion, and sacrifice that are central to the Rāmâyana Nusantara tradition. These panels show how the artist combines epic iconography with Balinese visual style, for example, through Jatayu's dynamic expression or the detailed ornamentation of Ravana's wings and weapons.

The next series of visuals, depicting the battle between Sugriwa and Subali and Rama's help to Sugriwa, presents aspects of leadership ethics and loyalty among friends. The story continues in panels ten to thirteen, which depict Hanuman's mission: being sent to Alengka, finding Sita in the Argasoka garden, being captured by Indrajit, and burning Alengka. The scenes featuring Hanuman become the center of energetic heroism, showing agility, strength, and purity of devotion. The visualization of Hanuman burning Alengka is one of the most dramatic climaxes of the relief. Panels fourteen to twenty show the climax and resolution of the epic. From Hanuman's report to Rama, the construction of the bridge to Alengka, to the great war (Mahawrata), each scene is arranged in such a way as to produce a strong visual rhythm. The deaths of important figures such as Kumbhakarna and Indrajit are depicted in dramatic compositions that emphasize the battle between dharma and adharma. The nineteenth and twentieth panels depict Ravana's defeat and Sita's trial by fire, culminating in a moral victory and the restoration of cosmic balance.

Overall, these 20 Rāmâyana relief panels form a cohesive, complete narrative that is easy for visitors to follow without written text. This visual representation not only narrates the epic linearly but also brings to life the philosophical values it contains, thereby strengthening the educational and spiritual functions of the reliefs. The long narrative constructed through these panels becomes an interpretive bridge connecting the Kakawin Rāmâyana, a monumental work of ancient Javanese literature-with the aesthetics, cosmology, and local wisdom of Bali.

Thus, the reliefs at the BICC serve as an important device for preserving cultural memory, strengthening local identity, and providing a profound experience for the global community visiting the international convention center. The aesthetics of these reliefs blend classic Balinese carving styles featuring flora and fauna motifs with narrative compositions from the South Indian tradition, the root of the Rāmâyana epic.

The presence of lotus motifs, palm leaves, and small birds marks the influence of local Balinese aesthetics integrated with narratives sourced from the Walmiki scriptures. Balinese artists consistently display a local aesthetic philosophy that prioritizes balance, harmony, and visual rhythm (Gaonkar & Sukthankar, 2025). This harmony is reflected through the symmetrical arrangement of the panels, the proportional placement of the leading figures, and the continuous relationship between the fragments of the story. This kind of aesthetics demonstrates the cultural syncretism characteristic of Balinese art: foreign cultures are incorporated into new visual forms adapted to the local cosmology and aesthetics.

Table 1. Semiotic analysis of the Rāmâyana relief at BICC

Visual Elements	Signifier	Signified	Semiotic Interpretation
Golden deer	Sparkle, soft shape	Illusion, temptation	Maya as a moral trap
Protective circle	Closed line	Purity of space	Sacred boundary in Balinese cosmology
Alengka fire	tongue of flame	Transformation	Purification, cosmic cleansing
Bridge	Horizontal structure	Connector between worlds	Path to dharma

From a visual semiotic perspective, these reliefs function as structured visual signs that communicate layered cultural meanings to observers. Visual elements such as figures, gestures, spatial composition, forests, arrows, and battle scenes do not merely represent narrative episodes but also construct cultural meaning, identity, and moral values through visual grammar. In the Rāmâyana reliefs, Rama symbolizes dharma and moral order, Sita represents purity and loyalty, Hanuman reflects devotion and courage, while Ravana

signifies ego, ambition, and destructive power. At a mythological level, the Rāmāyana narrative portrays the eternal tension between harmony and chaos, which also forms an important foundation of Hindu-Balinese cosmology (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

A semiotic analysis of the visual elements in the Rāmāyana relief at BICC shows that each carved object is not merely a representation of the story, but also a system of signs containing philosophical meaning. Through visual semiotic interpretation, the relief conveys moral, spiritual, and cosmological messages that form the foundation of Hindu-Balinese cultural identity. At the denotative level, the panel depicting the golden deer illustrates the moment when Marica transforms into a beautiful creature to lure Rama away. Connotatively, however, the golden deer symbolizes *maya*, an illusion that appears attractive yet leads to suffering and moral imbalance. In the Hindu-Balinese worldview, *maya* obscures true knowledge and spiritual awareness, making humans vulnerable to false desires. The use of golden colors, curved lines, and soft visual forms reinforces the seductive quality of this symbol and demonstrates how visual aesthetics construct deeper cultural meaning through symbolic representation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). In the Hindu-Balinese mythological framework, *maya* is a force that obscures true knowledge (Kramadharmā), making humans easily captivated by false beauty. The golden deer in the relief serves as a moral warning that uncontrolled desires can lead to disharmony.

The protective circle drawn by Laksmana represents another important symbolic element in the Rāmāyana narrative. Beyond functioning as a spatial boundary, the circle can be interpreted as a mandala symbolizing purity, cosmic protection, and sacred order. In Balinese cosmology, spatial orientation reflects sacred principles distinguishing pure and impure realms within ritual and social life (Samadhi, 2005; Jemiwi & Dharma, 2025). Laksmana's circle therefore symbolizes spiritual protection against the forces of *adharma*. When Sita steps outside the boundary, the act signifies the violation of moral and spiritual order, leading to chaos and suffering.

The fire of Alengka symbolizes transformation, purification, and cosmic balance. In Hindu cosmology, fire (*Agni*) functions not only as a physical force but also as a sacred medium connecting the human and divine worlds. The destruction of Alengka therefore represents a ritual purification of evil and disorder rather than mere violence. The repeated carving lines and vertical visual composition reinforce the symbolic interpretation of rising sacred energy and spiritual cleansing (Lansing, 2012).

The bridge constructed by Rama and the monkey army symbolizes more than physical infrastructure connecting two territories. Connotatively, the bridge represents the spiritual path toward truth, harmony, and enlightenment. In Balinese cultural landscapes, transitional spaces and spatial orientation symbolize movement toward sacred balance and cosmological harmony within community life (Bharuna & Aritama, 2025). The horizontal structure of the bridge in the BICC relief also conveys stability, cooperation, and collective devotion in upholding *dharma*.

Through four main visual elements, the golden deer, the protective circle, the Alengka fire, and the Rāmāyana relief bridge, the BICC reveals a depth of meaning that not only reinforces the epic narrative but also serves as a means of moral and cosmological learning. Each panel functions as a cultural sign that works on three levels: depicting stories, communicating values, and constructing the myth of modern Balinese identity. In the context of cultural tourism, this sign system enriches the visitor experience through open visual interpretation, making the relief a practical and relevant educational medium.

In the context of cultural tourism, the visibility of the Rāmāyana reliefs plays a strategic role in shaping the aesthetic identity of the destination. Strong visual representations contribute to the formation of destination image and cultural imagery that attract tourists and influence their perceptions of place (Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Richards, 2021). Tourists not only enjoy the artistic scenery, but also internalize Balinese cultural values through visual and emotional experiences. Contemporary tourism studies explain that the "tourist gaze" is socially constructed through visual expectations, symbolic consumption, photography, and digital representation of destinations (Urry & Larsen, 2011). The Rāmāyana relief therefore becomes an object of visual consumption that reinforces Bali's

image as a spiritual and aesthetic tourism destination. The circulation of relief photographs through platforms such as Instagram and TripAdvisor further strengthens its role as a digital cultural icon, transforming the relief from a static artwork into a continuously reproduced visual performance in digital tourism spaces.

Furthermore, these reliefs play a cosmological role. Balinese Hindu cosmology views the world as a balance between *sekala* (the real world) and *niskala* (the spiritual world). The Rāmāyana reliefs depict scenes of war, forests, love, and quests, all of which illustrate humanity's spiritual journey in achieving balance in life. The placement of the relief in strategic areas such as the lobby and ballroom is no coincidence. The lobby is a reception area that symbolizes the entrance to the world of Bali, while the ballroom is a gathering space for formal international events. In these two spaces, the relief presents a symbolic narrative of harmony, morality, and honor, messages that are relevant to international cultural diplomacy. On an aesthetic level, the Rāmāyana reliefs at BICC showcase a visual integration of traditional Balinese carving, Hindu epic narratives, and modern design requirements. This harmonious and symbolic aesthetic reinforces Balinese cultural identity in the context of premium tourism that supports the spiritual, intellectual, and visual experiences of tourists.

Table 2. Aesthetic analysis of the Rāmāyana relief at BICC

Aesthetic Aspects	Description
Carving Style	Uses the Bali Klasik style with deep layering
Panel Composition	Continuous narrative, clear visual hierarchy
Ornamental Details	Local flora and fauna, Hindu-Balinese iconography
Character Expression	Emphasizes dramatic emotion and dynamic movement

The relief carving style at BICC adopts the aesthetics of *Bali Klasik* but is applied on a large scale using the multiple-layer carving technique, creating an effect of depth and dramatizing light and shadow. This layering approach not only provides visual dimension, but also establishes a narrative hierarchy: the main figures are placed on the front layer, the background scenes on the middle layer, and the environmental ornaments on the back layer. This technique is in line with the Balinese carving tradition that emphasizes balance between form and space (Geria et al, 2023), but is modified for cement/composite stone mediums so that it is weather-resistant and suitable for modern architectural functions. The application of this technique produces tonal contrasts that reinforce the reading of figures and scenes, especially from the perspective of visitor circulation.

The composition of the panels is arranged chronologically as a continuous narrative so that visitors can “read” the story linearly as they move through the space. This structure applies the principle of sequential art, in which the panels function like chapters in a narrative text. Visual hierarchy is achieved through the scale of the figures, the depth of the relief, and the repetitive rhythm of the motifs: the protagonist appears larger and with sharper facial details, while the army or background is treated with a shallower relief. The clarity of this hierarchy guides the visual attention, directing the eye from the main focus to supporting elements so that the moral message and climax of the story are conveyed without the need for written text.

The ornaments decorating each panel combine classical Hindu iconography (e.g., arrows, weapons, divine attributes) with local Balinese flora and fauna motifs such as lotus flowers, palm leaves, small garuda birds, and patra patterns. This combination affirms visual acculturation: Indian epics are localized through the linguistics of Nusantara ornamentation (Sutarya, 2023). The ornamental details are not merely decorative; they act as cosmological indices, such as the lotus signifying purity and the palm leaf signifying knowledge, so that each ornament becomes a semiotic unit that adds layers of meaning to the narrative. The execution of these details also demonstrates the technical ability of local craftsmen in combining micro motifs (fine ornamentation) and macro motifs (large compositions).

The depiction of the faces and poses of the characters (Rama, Sita, Hanuman, Rahwana, Jatayu) highlights emotional expressions ranging from sadness, anger, courage to

gentleness, achieved through the details of the eyes, lips, and body gestures. Dynamic movement is displayed through curved lines that capture momentum (e.g., Hanuman jumping, Rahwana swinging a weapon), giving the impression of time passing and continuous action. This approach is in line with the tradition of wayang performances, where emotions are communicated through poses and movements, so that the reliefs function as a “frozen dance” that still conveys a dramatic rhythm (Dibia & Ballinger, 2023). Dramatic expressions facilitate audience empathy, which is an important aspect.

The choice of material, usually high-quality red brick, determines the texture seen in the relief. The varied texture—smooth on the faces, rough on the stone background, enhances visual contrast and durability. Architectural lighting plays a key role: the angle of natural light or spotlights highlights the depth of the layers and shadows, reinforcing the 3-dimensional illusion. From a conservation perspective, modern materials require regular maintenance to prevent ornamental details from eroding and colors from fading; therefore, preventive conservation procedures are essential to maintain long-term aesthetic integrity (UNESCO, 2019).

Functionally, the aesthetics of relief do more than just please the eye: they become an element of experience design that enriches the sense of place and supports BICC's branding strategy as a culturally-minded venue. Instagrammable visuals increase the digital visibility of a destination, while narrative depth ensures that visits are not merely about taking selfies. Thus, aesthetics are also related to the economic and marketing value of a destination, where visual authenticity is packaged as a premium added value for cultural tourists.

3.2 Educational dimension: Knowledge transfer, cultural communication, and visual diplomacy

The educational dimension constitutes an important aspect of the Rāmāyana reliefs at BICC. As an international convention venue, BICC positions these reliefs as a medium for cross-cultural learning and intercultural communication. The reliefs function as a “visual museum” that can be interpreted by visitors regardless of linguistic background, enabling tourists, international delegates, government officials, and hotel guests to engage with Hindu-Balinese values through visual narratives and symbolic representation. Such visual heritage environments create non-formal learning spaces in which cultural understanding emerges through aesthetic, emotional, and experiential interaction with art and heritage objects (Richards, 2021; Bharuna & Aritama, 2025). The reliefs therefore function not merely as decorative elements, but also as educational media that transmit cultural memory, spiritual philosophy, and Balinese cultural identity within international tourism spaces.

The moral and spiritual values embedded in the Rāmāyana narrative are also highly relevant within contemporary global ethical discourse. Rama represents ethical leadership and moral responsibility, Sita symbolizes loyalty and integrity, Laksmana reflects selfless devotion, while Hanuman embodies courage and commitment to truth. These values correspond to the concept of *dharma* as a foundation for ethical leadership, social harmony, and responsible governance in multicultural societies (Chatterjee, 2022). Through visual storytelling, the reliefs communicate universal ethical principles that remain relevant in the contexts of global tourism, diplomacy, and intercultural engagement.

BICC consistently utilizes the reliefs as part of its interpretive cultural experience program. Management provides digital information through QR codes that visitors can scan. The information that appears includes explanations of the characters in the Rāmāyana, the meaning of the scenes, and the influence of this epic on Balinese culture. In this way, the reliefs become a technology-based educational medium, in line with the trend of digital tourism. This approach shows the interaction between tradition and innovation: traditional art is preserved but conveyed through a modern platform.



Fig. 2. Scanning the QR code on the Rāmāyana relief at BICC

From a hermeneutic perspective, the Rāmāyana relief creates a dynamic “circle of understanding” in which visitors interpret meaning through visual signs, cultural symbols, and narrative representations embedded in the relief panels. Interpretation is strongly influenced by the cultural background and symbolic horizon of the viewer. Visitors from India may perceive the relief as a spiritual representation of Hindu tradition and sacred epic heritage, while European tourists may interpret it as an exotic artistic expression reflecting Asian mythology and aesthetics. Japanese visitors may relate the narrative structure to their own visual storytelling and epic traditions. Contemporary hermeneutic studies argue that cultural heritage interpretation is dialogical and culturally situated, allowing symbols to generate multiple meanings depending on the interpretive background of the observer (Ablett & Dyer, 2009; Zimmermann, 2015)

The educational dimension is also reflected in the involvement of local artists in the relief creation process. Artists from Gianyar, Ubud, and Tabanan were intensively involved in designing and carving the relief panels. The relief work became a learning space for the younger generation through the transfer of carving techniques, motifs, philosophy, and epic narratives. This supports the sustainability of traditional carving techniques that are beginning to be eroded by the changing times. Cultural education in this form is in line with the concept of cultural sustainability emphasized by UNESCO (2019): culture must be kept alive through practice, not just preserved as dead artifacts.

In addition, the existence of the Rāmāyana relief at the BICC is a form of visual cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy is a process in which the values and identity of a nation are introduced to the international community through the medium of art, tradition, and symbols (Nye, 2004). The Rāmāyana relief has consistently been the visual backdrop for various world conferences held at the BICC, from the 2018 IMF and World Bank meetings to the 2022 G20 summit. Thus, this relief is not only aesthetically functional but also has geopolitical value. It has become the “cultural face of Indonesia” that is displayed to the international community.

The presence of the Rāmāyana relief in the Bali International Convention Center (BICC), both carved on the walls of the main lobby pillars and on the pillars of the meeting rooms and ballroom, has an educational function that far exceeds its decorative role. In an academic context, this relief operates as a multidimensional learning medium that connects religious knowledge, aesthetics, Balinese fine arts, and international cultural diplomacy.

The following five educational areas illustrate the intellectual and cultural contribution of the Rāmāyana reliefs to strengthening the cultural tourism identity of the Bali International Convention Centre. As an epic narrative laden with religious symbolism, the Rāmāyana serves as a source of ethical pedagogy for tourists and international conference participants passing through the BICC area.

Scenes in the reliefs, such as Rama's loyalty to the principle of dharma, Sita's steadfastness to purity, and Hanuman's devotion, create a space for reflection on Hindu-

Balinese moral-spiritual values that emphasize the balance between truth, loyalty, sacrifice, and cosmic harmony.

In the Balinese context, these values are related to the concept of Tri Hita Karana, which is harmony between humans and God (*parhyangan*), fellow humans (*pawongan*), and nature (*palemahan*). The Rāmāyana reliefs at the BICC serve as a visual tool to communicate this philosophy without language barriers, making it effective in reaching global tourists. Each figure, gesture, and heroic scene carved on the pillars of the lobby and ballroom serves as a “moral text” that can be read by anyone, making the hotel area an educational spiritual space.

The most complex educational dimension of the Rāmāyana relief is its nature as a space for multi-meaning interpretation, which allows tourists from different countries, religions, and cultural backgrounds to give different interpretations. The Rāmāyana relief is an open text, a work that allows for multi-meaning readings. Indian tourists interpret it as a spiritual expression; European tourists view it as exotic art; Japanese tourists associate it with the epic tradition in their country; while Indonesian tourists interpret it through the tradition of wayang and the Kakawin Rāmāyana. This space for interpretation creates a dialogue between cultures and makes the relief a vehicle for reflection that is relevant to the global context.

Table 3. Educational dimensions in the Rāmāyana relief at BICC

Educational Dimensions	Focus of Analysis	Field Evidence	Academic Contributions
Transfer of moral-spiritual values	Dharma, ethics, moral exemplars	Figures of Rama, Sita, Hanuman	Spreading ethical values across nations
Aesthetic learning & art techniques	Balinese carvings, symbols of flora and fauna	Multilayer technique, carved details	Preserving traditional arts
Visual cultural diplomacy	Soft power, visual communication	Relief as the backdrop for international conferences	Branding Indonesian culture
Cosmology & public awareness	Tri Hita Karana, cosmic harmony	Placement in the lobby & ballroom	Visualizing Hindu-Balinese teachings
Multi-meaning interpretation	Hermeneutics, cross-cultural meaning	Responses from tourists from various countries	Building cultural dialogue

The Rāmāyana reliefs that adorn the public areas of the Bali International Convention Center (BICC) serve not only as decorative artworks, but also as educational mediums that connect tradition, aesthetics, and cultural diplomacy in the context of modern tourism. This analysis reveals four main dimensions that illustrate how these reliefs serve as learning tools for tourists, international delegates, and the local community.

The first educational dimension is evident in how the Rāmāyana relief visualizes the moral and spiritual values that form the core of Hindu teachings, particularly dharma (truth), satya (honesty), and bhakti (devotion). The figure of Rama symbolizes an ideal leader who upholds ethics; Sita represents purity, steadfastness, and loyalty; while Hanuman conveys a message of courage, dedication, and selfless sincerity. Field observations show that many visitors ask about the meaning of certain scenes, especially the abduction of Sita, the sacrifice of Jatayu, and the devotion of Hanuman. The visualization of moral values in these reliefs supports the dissemination of ethics across nations. Tourists from various cultures can understand the universal message conveyed through visual narratives even if they do not understand the language or original text of the Kakawin Rāmāyana. This is in line with Richards (2021) view that Balinese art has a unique ability to teach spiritual values through symbols and aesthetics.

Thus, the Rāmāyana reliefs at BICC serve as a “moral curriculum” presented in a visual medium, reinforcing global ethical understanding in the context of tourism. The second dimension emphasizes that the Rāmāyana reliefs are a means of learning about aesthetics

and traditional Balinese carving techniques. The multilayer technique used by the craftsmen demonstrates a deep understanding of form, lighting, and visual depth.

Local flora and fauna ornaments such as lotus, patra punggol, small birds, and lontar leaf motifs show the consistency of Balinese aesthetics combined with Indian epic narratives. The creation of these reliefs involved a number of local artists from Gianyar and Ubud who worked collaboratively.

Their work process became a form of learning by doing for young craftsmen who studied carving techniques, pattern philosophy, and panel composition. This is in line with UNESCO's concept of cultural sustainability (2019), which states that culture is not only preserved through the conservation of objects, but through living artistic practices. The third dimension shows the strategic role of reliefs as instruments of visual cultural diplomacy.

The BICC is an international meeting space, so its visual backdrop automatically becomes a representation of Indonesian culture in the eyes of the world. The Rāmāyana panels regularly appear as a backdrop for international events, state speeches, and inter-country meetings. From a soft power perspective (Nye, 2004), cultural representation through art can build a positive image of a nation without verbal narration. The Rāmāyana reliefs at BICC introduce the international community to Balinese aesthetics, Hindu-Balinese values, and local artistic abilities in a subtle and elegant manner. This reinforces the study of visual cultural diplomacy as a form of effective non-verbal communication, showing how art can be a tool for negotiating national identity in a global context. BICC is a real-world example of the application of cultural branding through artistically rich artifacts.

The fourth dimension relates to Hindu-Balinese cosmology, particularly the principle of Tri Hita Karana: harmony between humans and God (*parahyangan*), humans and humans (*pawongan*), and humans and nature (*palemahan*). The placement of the relief in the main lobby area, which is the entrance for guests, creates a "visual ritual" experience, as if visitors are entering a sacred space that depicts the moral journey of the Rāmāyana. In the context of Balinese architecture, public spaces decorated with symbols from sacred stories serve as reminders of spiritual values, while also educating visitors about the philosophy of life of the Balinese people (Samadhi, 2005). In the ballroom, the reliefs function as "guardians of harmony," presenting a cosmic narrative that balances formal and diplomatic activities with a spiritual atmosphere. The visualization of cosmology in these reliefs enriches the study of how Balinese society integrates art, religion, and space into a single way of life. The reliefs serve as a medium for raising public awareness of the importance of cosmic harmony, especially for tourists who are unfamiliar with Hindu-Balinese teachings.

From a hermeneutic perspective, the Rāmāyana relief creates a "circle of understanding" in which visitors interpret meaning through the visual signs presented. This interpretation is influenced by visitors' cultural backgrounds. Visitors from India, for example, may see this relief as a spiritual and historical representation of Hindu tradition. Meanwhile, European tourists view it as an exotic work of art that reflects Asian mythology. Japanese visitors may see it as part of an epic tradition similar to stories in their own culture. This is what Zimmermann (2015) refers to as multiple layers of meaning; a symbol can have many meanings depending on the cultural context of the interpreter.

The educational dimension is also reflected in the involvement of local artists in the relief creation process. Artists from Gianyar, Ubud, and Tabanan were intensively involved in designing and carving the relief panels. The relief work became a learning space for the younger generation through the transfer of carving techniques, motifs, philosophy, and epic narratives. This supports the sustainability of traditional carving techniques that are beginning to be eroded. This conceptual model illustrates how the Rāmāyana relief at BICC functions not only as a decorative aesthetic element but also as a medium for cultural tourism education that has a multidimensional impact. At the center, the Rāmāyana relief is understood as a source of visual knowledge that brings together values, artistic techniques, cultural diplomacy, cosmology, and cross-cultural interpretation in a single narrative. From this center, five main branches emerge, representing the educational dimensions: transfer of moral-spiritual values, learning aesthetics and art techniques, visual cultural diplomacy,

Balinese cosmology, and multi-meaning interpretation space (Rosalina et al., 2023). Each dimension has a specific contribution to the formation of the educational experience of visitors, including domestic and foreign tourists, academics, and local communities.

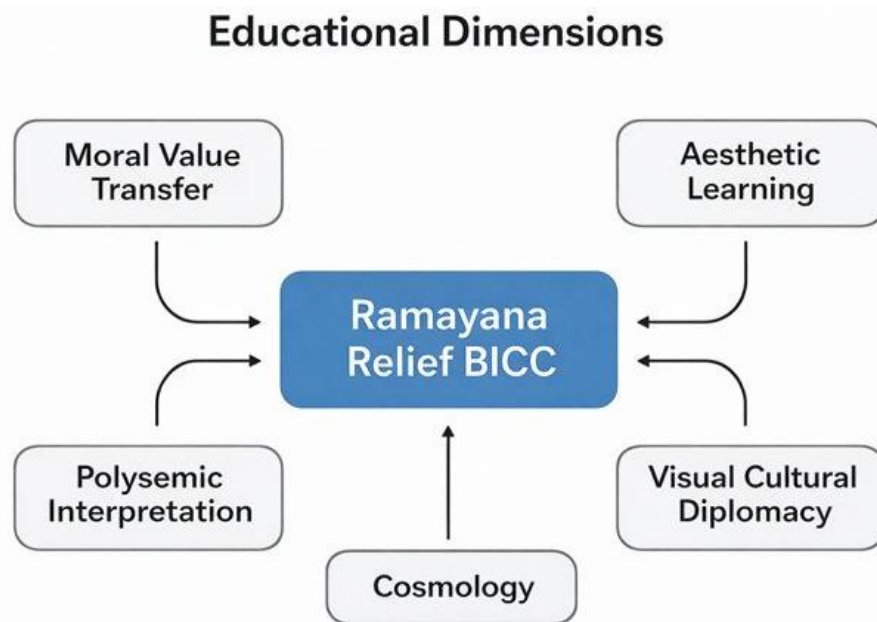


Fig. 3. Conceptual model of the educational dimension of the BICC Rāmāyana reliefs

The first dimension, transfer of moral-spiritual values, shows how the Rāmāyana narrative teaches universal values such as dharma (truth), loyalty, and devotion. The reliefs allow visitors to understand global ethics through the visualization of characters such as Rama, Sita, and Hanuman, who are symbols of universal morals. The second dimension, aesthetic and artistic technique learning, emphasizes that the Rāmāyana reliefs serve as a means of preserving traditional Balinese carving art. Visitors can learn about multiple-layer carving techniques, flora and fauna symbolism, and the principles of visual harmony as a form of sustainability of traditional art passed down from generation to generation. From this perspective, the reliefs serve as an open learning space that preserves Bali's artistic identity amid modernization.

The third dimension, visual cultural diplomacy, affirms the function of reliefs as a tool for cross-cultural communication. As the BICC is a venue for international conferences, the Rāmāyana reliefs indirectly serve as a visual representation of Indonesian culture to the world. Through the commonality of the Rāmāyana epic, which is known in many Asian countries, these reliefs facilitate intercultural relations and strengthen Indonesia's soft power in the context of tourism and global diplomacy. The fourth dimension is Balinese cosmology, which focuses on sacred harmony visualized through scenes of forests, war, and the spiritual journeys of Rāmāyana characters. The relief helps visitors understand the Tri Hita Karana principle of harmony between humans, God, nature, and fellow humans through easily grasped visual symbols.

The final dimension, multi-meaning interpretation, explains that the Rāmāyana relief is an open visual text that allows for intercultural dialogue. Tourists from different cultural backgrounds will interpret the relief according to their cultural experiences. This creates a space for cultural dialogue that brings together the perspectives of India, Bali, Java, Europe, and other Asian countries, enriching the dynamics of understanding this epic. Thus, this conceptual model shows that the Rāmāyana reliefs at BICC play a strategic role as a medium for cultural tourism education that not only enriches visitors' knowledge but also strengthens Balinese cultural identity in a global context.

3.3 Socio-economic dimension: Creative economy, artist empowerment, and community identity strengthening

The socio-economic contribution of the Rāmāyana reliefs at the Bali International Convention Centre (BICC) extends far beyond their decorative function. Within the framework of sustainable cultural tourism, the reliefs operate simultaneously as cultural assets, creative economic instruments, educational media, and symbols of collective identity. Contemporary tourism studies indicate that international tourists increasingly seek authentic cultural experiences, symbolic narratives, and emotionally meaningful destinations rather than merely recreational attractions (Richards, 2021; Zeng, 2024). Cultural tourists also demonstrate stronger destination attachment, longer lengths of stay, and higher spending tendencies when destinations successfully integrate heritage authenticity and local cultural identity into the tourism experience (Yang et al., 2022).

In this context, the Rāmāyana reliefs function as strategic visual branding elements that strengthen the cultural image of BICC as a convention venue rooted in Balinese identity. Field observations and interviews with BICC management demonstrate that the reliefs are positioned as a core component of the venue's culture-based branding strategy, integrating luxury hospitality with Balinese spiritual aesthetics. Such an approach reflects broader transformations in contemporary MICE tourism, in which destination competitiveness increasingly depends on visual identity, cultural embeddedness, and symbolic experience rather than solely on physical infrastructure (Martín-Rojo & Gaspar-González, 2025). The reliefs therefore transform convention and hospitality spaces into immersive cultural environments that communicate Balinese heritage through visual storytelling.

Economically, the existence of the Rāmāyana reliefs contributes directly to the strengthening of Bali's creative economy. The production and maintenance of the reliefs involve local carving artisans from Gianyar, Ubud, and Tegalalang, thereby sustaining traditional carving practices and supporting the intergenerational transmission of artistic knowledge. Research on Balinese creative industries demonstrates that tourism-based traditional arts significantly contribute to local economic resilience, artisan empowerment, and the sustainability of community-based cultural industries (Azhari et al., 2025). In addition, the regeneration of traditional carving techniques remains essential in preserving Balinese artistic heritage amid globalization and industrial tourism pressures. The reliefs thus function not merely as ornamental hotel elements, but as sustainable creative-economic infrastructures that preserve living artistic traditions while generating economic value for local communities.

On a social and cultural level, the Rāmāyana reliefs reinforce collective identity and strengthen the cultural legitimacy of Balinese traditional arts within global tourism spaces. For Balinese communities, the Rāmāyana narrative is not simply an epic story but part of a living ethical and spiritual system embedded within Hindu-Balinese cosmology. The visual representation of epic narratives in public tourism environments therefore generates emotional resonance and reinforces local attachment to cultural heritage. The involvement of local artisans further strengthens their role as custodians of cultural memory and guardians of Balinese carving traditions. Interviews conducted during field observation revealed that many artisans perceive the carving of Rāmāyana narratives not only as economic labor but also as a form of cultural and spiritual responsibility (dharma) toward ancestral heritage.

Nevertheless, the integration of sacred cultural narratives into luxury tourism environments also raises the issue of cultural commodification. Tourism scholars have long argued that commercialization may reduce sacred traditions into consumable visual products when tourism development prioritizes market value over cultural meaning (Picard, 1996; Ritzer, 2011). Recent studies on Balinese tourism architecture similarly warn that excessive commercialization can weaken the sacred dimensions of cultural representation when community participation and cultural safeguarding mechanisms are absent. To minimize this risk, BICC incorporates Balinese cultural protocols through collaboration with traditional communities, involvement of local artists, and ritual

purification ceremonies (*melaspas*) before the reliefs are publicly displayed. Such practices demonstrate that traditional art can remain spiritually meaningful while simultaneously functioning within global tourism systems. This approach aligns with UNESCO's concept of cultural sustainability, which emphasizes that culture must remain alive through continuous practice, interpretation, and community participation rather than merely preserved as static heritage objects (UNESCO, 2019).

From the perspective of visitor experience, the reliefs also function as catalysts for emotional engagement and destination loyalty. Studies on cultural tourism demonstrate that authentic aesthetic experiences significantly influence tourist satisfaction, emotional attachment, and revisit intention (Candra et al., 2025; Zeng, 2024). The Rāmāyana reliefs therefore contribute to the formation of memorable tourism experiences by integrating visual aesthetics, mythology, spirituality, and cultural symbolism within the hospitality environment. Their visual presence encourages tourists not only to consume Balinese culture visually, but also to engage emotionally with the ethical and philosophical narratives embedded within the relief panels.

Beyond their economic and cultural significance, the reliefs also function as instruments of visual cultural diplomacy. As BICC hosted major international events such as the IMF–World Bank Meeting and the G20 Summit, the Rāmāyana reliefs became symbolic representations of Indonesian cultural identity presented to global audiences. Through visual aesthetics, narrative symbolism, and Hindu-Balinese cosmological values, the reliefs communicate forms of soft cultural power that transcend linguistic boundaries. This reflects Nye's concept of soft power, which emphasizes culture as a strategic medium for international influence and intercultural understanding (Nye, 2004). At the same time, contemporary studies on visual diplomacy emphasize that artistic representation and cultural symbolism increasingly function as instruments for shaping international perception and strengthening national cultural branding within global public spaces (Grincheva, 2025).

The educational dimension of the Rāmāyana reliefs is equally significant. The reliefs function as non-formal learning media that communicate ethical, spiritual, and philosophical values through visual storytelling. Characters such as Rama, Sita, Laksmana, and Hanuman embody universal principles of ethical leadership, loyalty, sacrifice, and devotion to truth. In the Balinese context, these values are closely connected to the philosophy of *Tri Hita Karana*, which emphasizes harmony between humans and God (*parhyangan*), fellow humans (*pawongan*), and nature (*palemahan*). Because the reliefs communicate these values visually rather than textually, they are accessible to visitors from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, transforming the hotel environment into an intercultural educational space.

Finally, the Rāmāyana reliefs create a hermeneutic space of multiple interpretations. Visitors from India may interpret the reliefs as spiritual representations of Hindu epic tradition, while European tourists may perceive them as exotic artistic manifestations of Asian mythology. Japanese visitors may associate the narrative structure with their own visual storytelling traditions, whereas Indonesian tourists often interpret the reliefs through the cultural memory of *wayang* and the *Kakawin Rāmāyana* tradition. This plurality of interpretation demonstrates that the reliefs operate as open cultural texts that continuously generate new meanings according to the cultural horizon of the observer. Through this process, the Rāmāyana reliefs become not only aesthetic objects but also dynamic spaces of intercultural dialogue, cultural reflection, and global heritage communication.

4. Conclusions

This study confirms that the Rāmāyana reliefs at the Bali International Convention Center (BICC) serve a strategic function as a multidimensional medium for cultural tourism education and as an effective instrument of visual diplomacy in a global context. Based on aesthetic, semiotic, cultural education, and socio-economic analyses, this study shows that

the Rāmāyana reliefs do not only serve as architectural decorative elements, but also as a cultural knowledge system that integrates Hindu-Balinese moral-spiritual values, traditional carving techniques, Indian-Balinese epic narrative structures, and local cosmology rooted in the Tri Hita Karana principle. The five educational dimensions found, namely the transfer of moral values, aesthetic and carving technique learning, visual cultural diplomacy, cosmology and public awareness, and multi-meaning interpretation space, form the conceptual basis that shows how the reliefs function as a center of non-formal learning for global tourists, international conference delegates, academics, and the local community. Each panel presents a visual narrative that facilitates the internalization of universal values such as dharma, loyalty, devotion, courage, and cosmic harmony, thereby supporting the formation of cross-cultural understanding.

The research findings also show the relief's significant contribution to the socio-economic dimension, including the empowerment of Balinese carving artists, the sustainability of the creative economy, the increased social legitimacy of craftsmen, and the strengthening of community identity through a sense of cultural ownership; these results are in line with recent research on culture-based tourism and the creative economy. The Rāmāyana reliefs have proven to be an important element of BICC's cultural branding in attracting cultural tourists and strengthening Indonesia's image in the eyes of the world, especially as they appear as visual backgrounds in various international forums. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of a conceptual model that combines aesthetic analysis, semiotics, cultural education, and creative economic empowerment into a single interpretive framework that explains how traditional art artifacts can function sustainably in the international tourism ecosystem. Furthermore, this research provides a new understanding that the Rāmāyana reliefs at BICC are not only a visual representation of a classical epic, but also a medium for dynamic cultural dialogue, enabling cross-cultural readings by visitors from different nations with different religious, aesthetic, and historical backgrounds. Overall, this research concludes that the Rāmāyana relief is a living cultural artifact that plays an important role in strengthening Bali's tourism identity, empowering local art communities, and connecting Bali's cultural heritage with the global cultural arena through education, aesthetics, diplomacy, and the creative economy.

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Author Contribution

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Ethical Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to its non-invasive nature and the use of qualitative cultural data that did not involve sensitive personal information or pose risk to participants. The research adhered to ethical principles, including informed consent and confidentiality.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study

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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