



Between mokṣa and nirvāṇa: Archaeological traces of Siwa–Buddha harmony in Bali and their eschatological worldview

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ABSTRACT

Background: This article examines the eschatological worldview underlying the archaeological heritage of Siwa–Buddha traditions in Bali, focusing on how concepts of life, death, and post-mortem liberation were articulated through religious material culture. Drawing on archaeological evidence such as temple layouts, ritual iconography, and mortuary-related symbols, the study argues that Balinese Siwa–Buddha syncretism represents not merely a historical coexistence of religious traditions, but a coherent theological negotiation between two soteriological paradigms: mokṣa and nirvāṇa. **Methods:** This study employs a qualitative interpretative approach with an archaeological-critical and historiographical framework to examine Shiva–Buddha relations in Bali as a process of religious-cultural transformation shaping eschatological understandings of life, death, and liberation. Data were collected through archaeological observation, textual and inscriptional analysis, and theoretical literature review, and analyzed using thematic, semiotic, and historiographical deconstruction to interpret artifacts, sacred spaces, and rituals as material expressions of eschatological meaning. **Findings:** The findings suggest that Siwa–Buddha harmony in Bali produced an eschatological framework in which life and death were understood as a continuous process of spiritual refinement rather than as oppositional states. Architectural orientations, ritual spaces, and symbolic representations indicate a shared concern with purification, release from cyclical existence, and ultimate union with a transcendent reality. **Conclusion:** This synthesis challenges rigid sectarian classifications and reveals a localized eschatology that accommodated multiple paths to liberation within a single religious landscape. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This study demonstrates that Southeast Asian religious heritage, particularly in Bali, offers an important case for understanding how plural religious traditions can converge in shaping shared conceptions of death, afterlife, and ultimate salvation.

KEYWORDS: archaeological heritage; eschatology; life and death; mokṣa and nirvāṇa; Siwa–Buddha.

1. Introduction

Bali's archaeological heritage has long occupied a central position in the study of religious history in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Bali is often positioned as a region that

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has maintained the continuity of Hindu traditions, but at the same time also shows strong traces of Buddhism in its sacred spaces, iconography, and ritual practices. Archaeological findings in the form of temples, hermitages, statues, inscriptions, and sacred landscapes show that the relationship between Shiva and Buddha was not a marginal phenomenon, but an integral part of the formation of ancient Balinese religiosity (Acri, 2021; Jacobsen, 2004). However, interpretations of this relationship are still dominated by old conceptual frameworks that emphasize syncretism or static coexistence, thus failing to explain its deeper meaning for the concepts of life, death, and the afterlife.

In the context of life and death studies and eschatology, the Shiva-Buddha archaeological heritage in Bali has a significance that far exceeds the issue of identity or religious pluralism. Sacred sites such as Gunung Kawi, Pegulingan, and Penataran Sasih not only function as centers of worship for the living community, but also as ritual spaces closely related to the veneration of kings, the glorification of ancestors, and the management of the transition between worldly life and transcendent reality. Thus, Balinese sacred architecture and spatial arrangements can be understood as material mediums for articulating views on death, purification of the soul, and ultimate liberation in both the horizons of mokṣa and nirvāṇa. However, Balinese religious historiography has not yet fully utilized the eschatological potential of this archaeological data. Many previous studies have emphasized the inventory of artifacts, iconographic classification, or the tracing of doctrinal influences, without asking fundamental questions about how the materiality of religion shapes understandings of life and death. The concept of syncretism inherited from the colonial philological tradition tends to assume the fusion of two religious systems into a new entity. The application of this concept to the case of Bali often simplifies historical dynamics that are actually much more complex, because the material evidence actually shows the continued symbolic differentiation of Shiva and Buddha within the same sacred landscape (Acri, 2018; Wahyudi et al., 2021).

Criticism of the syncretism framework has grown stronger in recent studies that emphasize the importance of a material religion approach and critical historiography. This perspective views religion not merely as a system of doctrine, but as a process of meaning production that works through objects, spaces, bodies, and ritual practices (Houlbrook, 2020; Abroskina et al., 2022). In the Balinese context, this approach allows for a reinterpretation of Siwa-Buddha relics as religious technologies that regulate human relations with death and the transcendent. In other words, temples, statues, and sacred landscapes not only represent beliefs about the end of life, but also shape the eschatological experience itself (Kiriana, 2021).

In line with these developments, a number of recent studies have proposed the concept of transformation as an epistemological alternative to syncretism. Transformation is understood as a change in the relational configuration between symbols, space, and religious authority, without erasing the basic identity of each tradition. Within this framework, the encounter between Shiva and Buddha in Bali is not understood as a fusion of doctrines, but rather as a historical negotiation process that gave birth to a new spiritual horizon that is pluralistic yet structured. This approach is more in line with archaeological and epigraphic data that indicate the existence of dual religious positions, reciprocal ritual practices, and the layered use of Shiva and Buddha symbols in one sacred space (Hunter, 2007; Houtman, 2020). From an eschatological perspective, the paradigm of transformation opens up a sharper analytical space for understanding how ancient Balinese society understood death and ultimate salvation. Rather than imposing a single concept of the ultimate goal, the data shows recognition of various coexisting paths to liberation. The practice of deifying kings as Shiva-Buddha, the use of sacred water across traditions, and ontological articulation in kakawin texts such as Sutasoma indicate that differences were not understood as contradictions, but rather as variations on the path to the highest reality.

Thus, ancient Balinese eschatology is relational and inclusive, rooted in material and institutional practices rather than doctrinal uniformity. Furthermore, an eschatological reading of the Siwa-Buddha archaeology in Bali also challenges the strict dichotomy between life and death (Purwanto et al., 2025). Bali's sacred landscape shows that death is

not understood as a severance, but as a stage in cosmic continuity. Temple shrines, hermitages, and symbols of holy water function as connectors between the human world, the ancestors, and the divine. Within this framework, life and death form a spectrum of spiritual transformation mediated by space and ritual. This view is in line with the life and death studies approach, which emphasizes continuity and process rather than binary opposition.

Against this background, this article aims to reconstruct the understanding of Shiva–Buddhist harmony in Bali through the lens of eschatology and material religion. The main focus of this research is not on religious classification, but on the archaeological and historiographical implications of how ancient Balinese society managed the meanings of life, death, and ultimate liberation. Using archaeological and epigraphic data, as well as the latest theoretical studies, this article attempts to show that the Shiva–Buddha relationship is a form of religio-cultural transformation that operates through materiality and sacred space.

This article makes a twofold contribution. Theoretically, it offers an epistemological correction to the use of syncretism in Shiva–Buddha studies by asserting transformation as a more precise analytical category, particularly in the study of eschatology. Empirically, it positions Balinese archaeological remains as a primary source for understanding how pre-modern societies formulated pluralistic and harmonious views of death and the afterlife. Thus, Bali is not only treated as a regional study location, but as a conceptual field that contributes to the global discourse on eschatology, material religion, and the history of Southeast Asian religions.

2. Methods

This study uses a qualitative-interpretative approach with an archaeological-critical and historiographical framework, designed to interpret the relationship between Shiva and Buddha in Bali as a process of religious-cultural transformation that has direct implications for the understanding of life, death, and the afterlife. This approach was chosen because the main objective of the research was not to test causal relationships or measure the frequency of phenomena, but rather to reconstruct the eschatological meanings materialized in artifacts, sacred spaces, and ritual practices of Ancient Bali (Bryda & Costa, 2023; Surpi et al., 2021).

2.1 Types and sources of data

The research data consists of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through direct observation of archaeological sites that show Shiva-Buddha configurations, particularly the Gunung Kawi Temple complex, Pegulingan Temple, Penataran Sasih Temple, and sacred water spaces that function in purification and cremation rituals. These sites were selected because they have a strong connection to the practices of death, ancestor worship, and the concept of the release of the soul from worldly attachments, which are relevant to the study of eschatology.

Secondary data includes, (1) ancient Balinese inscriptions containing religious terminology such as *bhikṣu*, *śaiwasogata*, *sogata māheśwara*, and the formula of double reverence (*namo śiwāya namo buddhāya*); (2) old Javanese literary texts, especially Kakawin Sutasoma, which contain ontological articulations about the equality of Shiva and Buddha in the horizon of salvation; and (3) archaeological research reports and recent academic studies discussing the Shiva-Buddha transformation in the context of Bali and East Java (Acri, 2018; Wahyudi et al., 2021). The selection of these data sources is based on the principle that an understanding of life and death in pre-modern societies cannot be separated from the relationship between texts, objects, and sacred spaces.

2.2 Data collection techniques

Data collection was carried out using three main techniques. First, archaeological observation, with visual documentation of building structures, spatial orientation, iconography, and the sacred landscape context. This observation focused on elements related to worship, asceticism, and purification rites, as material indicators of eschatological views. Second, document studies, including analysis of inscriptions, kakawin, as well as excavation reports and previous research. Document analysis was carried out critically, taking into account the historical context, ritual functions, and religious terminology used in these sources. Third, a review of theoretical literature, particularly works discussing material religion, religious historiography, and critiques of the concept of syncretism. This literature is used not as a supplement, but as an analytical tool to reinterpret empirical data within the framework of eschatology and religious transformation (Mwita & Mwilongo 2025).

2.3 Data analysis techniques

Data analysis was conducted using thematic and semiotic analysis with a step-by-step procedure. The first stage is data reduction, which is the grouping of data based on the main themes, sacred space and death, iconography and symbols of liberation, cross-traditional ritual practices, and textual articulation of ultimate salvation. The second stage is contextual interpretation, linking empirical findings with theories of material religion and critical historiography (Liu, 2023). At this stage, artifacts and spaces are understood as material agents that shape religious experiences of life and death, rather than merely symbolic representations (Humble & Mozelius, 2022; Abroskina et al., 2022). The third stage is historiographical deconstruction, which reexamines the use of the categories of syncretism, parallelism, and coalition in reading Shiva-Buddhist data. This analysis aims to show that these categories are inadequate in explaining the eschatological dynamics evident in the archaeological evidence of Ancient Bali, and to assert transformation as a more appropriate analytical category (Beltramini, 2024; Weidner, 2021).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Bali's sacred landscape as an eschatological arena

Analysis of archaeological data shows that the sacred landscape of Ancient Bali cannot be understood solely as a religious ritual space for worldly life, but rather as an eschatological arena that actively manages the relationship between life, death, and the continuity of post-mortem existence. Sites such as Gunung Kawi Temple, Pegulingan Temple, and Penataran Sasih reveal spatial configurations that function as deathscapes, namely religious landscapes that regulate the ontological transition from profane life to transcendent reality.

Candi Gunung Kawi, for example, is not only a royal memorial complex, but also a hermitage that integrates memorial, ascetic, and cosmological functions. The existence of cliff temples permanently carved into river walls signifies an attempt to materialize eternity, a symbolic strategy to place death within the framework of cosmic continuity. In this context, death is not represented as a disconnected end, but as a transitional stage towards liberation, both in the Shaivite and Buddhist horizons. The landscape shows that sacred space acts as a mediator between the human world, ancestors, and the highest principle, thus forming an eschatological experience that is spatial and material, not merely conceptual (Laksmi, 2017; Wahyuni, 2015).

Similar findings are evident at Pura Pegulingan, which features a Buddhist stupa in a space that is also used in Balinese Hindu rituals. The presence of this stupa cannot be reduced to a decorative "Buddhist influence," but must be understood as part of a system of

meaning related to the release of the soul and the attainment of an ideal post-mortem condition.

The co-presence of Shiva and Buddha symbols in one sacred landscape shows that Ancient Bali developed a plural and relational model of eschatology, in which more than one horizon of salvation could be presented simultaneously without negating religious identity differentiation. From the perspective of life and death studies, this kind of landscape configuration confirms that the boundary between life and death in Ancient Bali was permeable.

Sacred spaces not only served the interests of the living community, but also became a place for ongoing negotiation with the deceased. The practice of deifying kings as Shiva-Buddha shows that the death of the political elite was not merely interpreted as a biological event, but as an ontological transformation from worldly rulers to sacred entities that continue to be present in the cosmic and social order. This shows that Ancient Balinese eschatology was articulated through space and materiality, not only through texts or doctrines (Surpi et al., 2025; Rüpke, 2021).

Furthermore, the sacred landscape of Bali shows that the concepts of life and death were organized within a spectrum of spiritual transformation. The existence of hermitages alongside cremation buildings reflects the continuity between the asceticism of life and the ideal of liberation after death. Thus, the landscape is not static, but functions as a machine of transformation, continuously producing meanings about death, purification, and liberation. This reading is in line with the material religion approach, which places space and objects as active agents in the formation of religious and eschatological experiences (Abroskina et al., 2022).

This finding also reveals the limitations of the syncretism approach in interpreting Bali's sacred landscape. While syncretism assumes the fusion of two systems into a new form, archaeological data actually shows the continuation of symbolic differentiation within the same space. Bali's sacred landscape does not show the loss of Shiva or Buddha's identity, but rather the transformation of how both are presented and operationalized in managing the meaning of life and death. Therefore, Bali's ancient sacred landscape is better understood as an arena of eschatological transformation, not as evidence of doctrinal fusion.

Thus, the results of the analysis in this subchapter show that the harmony between Shiva and Buddha in Bali is most clearly materialized at the level of the sacred landscape. These spaces function as the main medium for uniting the dimensions of life, death, and the afterlife in an inclusive yet structured cosmic order. This finding is an important basis for the following discussion, which will further examine how materiality and ritual specifically transform the meaning of death in Ancient Balinese religious practices.

3.2 Materiality, ritual, and the transformation of the meaning of death

The results of the analysis show that the transformation of the meaning of death in the context of Shiva–Buddha in Ancient Bali took place primarily through materiality and ritual, rather than through the formulation of abstract doctrines. Archaeological artifacts such as statues, temple structures, hermitages, and sacred water units functioned as material agents that shaped religious experiences of death and liberation. Thus, death was treated as a religious event that was actively managed through practices and objects, rather than simply as a biological fact that was given symbolic meaning afterwards.

Within the framework of material religion, sacred objects are not understood as passive representations of beliefs, but as mediums that produce relationships between humans, ancestors, and the divine (Abroskina et al., 2022). Archaeological findings in Bali show that statues representing kings, *lingga-yoni* alongside Buddhist symbols, and stupas placed in the context of Balinese Hindu rituals, are material devices that regulate how death is interpreted and experienced. These objects enable continuity between worldly life and post-mortem existence, while providing visual and ritual means to imagine ultimate liberation.

Ritual plays a central role in activating the eschatological function of this materiality. The practice of using holy water across traditions, as noted in studies on the role of Shiva and Buddhist priests in Bali, shows that the purification of the soul after death is not limited by rigid doctrinal boundaries. Holy water from Buddhist priests is used in rites related to death in the Balinese Hindu tradition, and vice versa, signifying practical recognition of the validity of more than one path to salvation (Widnya, 2008; Wahyudi et al., 2021). In this context, rituals function as a space for eschatological negotiation that allows for the co-presence of mokṣa and nirvāṇa without the demand for conceptual unification.

The transformation of the meaning of death is also evident in the way the body and space are treated in religious practices. The body of the deceased is not understood as an entity that must be radically separated from the sacred world, but rather as part of a cosmic process that requires purification and ontological repositioning. Ritual spaces, both in temples and sacred water sources, function as transitional locations, places where bodies, spirits, and symbols meet in a series of actions that guide the soul toward liberation (Viladesau, 2025). Thus, death becomes a performative event that is realized through a series of material and spatial practices. This data shows that the change in the meaning of death in Ancient Bali cannot be explained through the category of syncretism. Syncretism assumes the mixing or merging of belief systems, while the material evidence shows that ritual practices maintain symbolic differentiation while allowing for functional interaction. The transformation that occurred was a change in the mode of operation of death: from an individual event to a collective religious process mediated by objects, spaces, and rites (McDaniel, 2020). In this case, death is no longer interpreted as an absolute end, but as a phase in a cycle of spiritual transformation that is open to more than one horizon of salvation.

Furthermore, these findings confirm that Ancient Balinese eschatology is practical and material, not speculative-dogmatic. The meaning of liberation is not formulated in a single theological narrative, but is presented through practices that are accessible and experienced by the community. Materiality allows eschatology to become something that can be seen, touched, and practiced, so that the concept of life and death is firmly embedded in the daily religious experience of the Ancient Balinese society. Thus, the results and discussion in this subsection show that the harmony between Shiva and Buddha in the context of death does not lie in the unity of teachings, but in the transformation of the meaning of death through materiality and ritual. Objects and practices became the main means of managing the transition from life to death and imagining ultimate liberation in a pluralistic manner. These findings form an important basis for further discussion, which will examine more specifically how the negotiation between mokṣa and nirvāṇa is manifested in the archaeological and institutional practices of Ancient Bali as presented in Table 1.

All of the archaeological, epigraphic, ritual, and textual data analyzed in this study reveal a consistent epistemic pattern: the relationship between Shiva and Buddha in Ancient Bali did not operate within a logic of doctrinal fusion, but rather through the transformation of how death, liberation, and the continuity of existence were understood and managed in material terms (Munandar, 2018a). In other words, the harmony between Shiva and Buddha in Bali was not the result of a unification of teachings, but rather the result of an eschatological reorganization that worked through space, objects, rituals, and institutions.

The enshrinement of kings at sites such as Gunung Kawi Temple shows that death was understood as a change in ontological status, not as the termination of existence. The deceased king is not positioned as a “lost” entity, but is transferred into the cosmic order through the medium of permanent sacred architecture. The carving of temples on rock cliffs signifies an effort to materialize eternity, which binds memory, power, and the salvation of the soul into a single spatial unity. In this context, death is a transformational phase that bridges worldly life with post-mortem spiritual continuity.

Table 1. Material-ritual matrix of Śaiva-Buddhist evidence and eschatological implications in ancient Bali

Type of Evidence	Site / Source	Core Empirical Findings	Life-Death Dimension	Eschatological Implications	Analytical Interpretation
Royal mortuary architecture	Gunung Kawi Temple Complex	Rock-cut shrines serving as royal <i>dharmma</i> monuments	Death of political elites	Death as ontological transformation	Royal death is materially reconfigured as a transition from mortal authority to enduring sacral presence, indicating an eschatology of continuity rather than finality
Buddhist iconography	Pegulingan Temple	Presence of a Buddhist stūpa within a Hindu ritual landscape	Post-mortem liberation	Co-presence of <i>mokṣa</i> and <i>nirvāṇa</i>	The stūpa functions as an operative symbol of Buddhist soteriology without dissolving Śaiva symbolic identity
Śaiva ritual symbols	Penataran Sasih	Lingga and cosmic Śaiva symbols embedded in communal sacred space	Regeneration and continuity	Cyclical eschatology	Death is framed as part of cosmic regeneration, reinforcing a non-terminal conception of existence
Ritual praxis	Śaiva-Buddhist priestly practice in Bali	Reciprocal use of holy water in death-related rites	Purification of the soul	Plural paths to salvation	Ritual practice operates as an eschatological technology that transcends doctrinal exclusivity
Epigraphic terminology	Old Balinese inscriptions	Use of the term <i>bhikṣu</i> for Śaiva ritual specialists	Ritual authority over life and death	Institutionalized eschatology	The state regulates eschatological functions through adaptive religious terminology rather than doctrinal fusion
Religious institutions	Inscriptions (Udayana-Jayapangus period)	Offices of <i>mpungku śaiwasogata</i> alongside <i>kasogatan</i> and <i>kasaiwan</i>	Legitimation of mortuary rites	Structured co-presence	Eschatological plurality is formally organized through parallel ritual authorities
Literary articulation	<i>Kakawin Sutasoma</i>	Statement of ontological equivalence between Buddha and Śiva	Ultimate post-mortem goal	Ontological convergence	The text legitimizes plural soteriological horizons without erasing theological distinction

The co-presence of Shiva and Buddha symbols in one sacred landscape, such as the existence of Buddhist stupas at Pura Pegulingan, reinforces this interpretation. The stupa cannot be reduced to a decorative element or evidence of “outside influence,” but must be understood as a material marker of the Buddhist horizon of liberation (*nirvāṇa*) presented alongside the Shivaistic horizon (*mokṣa*). It is important to note that these two horizons are not merged into a new concept. The symbolic identity of each is maintained, but they are operated within the same ritual system and space. This is where the eschatology of Ancient

Bali reveals its pluralistic yet structured plurality in the path to salvation, structured in material mediums and rituals.

The transformation of the meaning of death becomes clearer when analyzed through ritual practices, particularly the use of sacred water across traditions. The fact that sacred water from Buddhist priests is used in Balinese Hindu death rites, and vice versa, is highly significant empirical data. This practice shows that post-mortem salvation is not monopolized by a single exclusive theological system. Instead, salvation is managed functionally through rites that recognize the validity of more than one path to liberation (Widnya, 2008; Wahyudi et al., 2021). From an eschatological perspective, these rituals function as a technology of transition, allowing the soul to move from a profane state to a transcendent state without having to submit to a single claim to truth.

Epigraphic data from ancient Balinese inscriptions show that this eschatological transformation did not take place sporadically or individually, but was institutionalized by the state. The use of the term *bhikṣu* for religious figures who performed Siwaistic functions, as well as the existence of the *mpungku śaiwasogata* position alongside *kasogatan* and *kasaiwan*, shows that the kingdom consciously regulated the co-presence of two horizons of salvation in its administrative-ritual structure.

Death, in this context, was not only a personal or family matter, but part of a cosmic and political order whose continuity had to be ensured through institutions. Conceptual legitimization of these material and institutional configurations is found in the *Kakawin Sutasoma*.

The statement “*hyang Buddha tan pahi lawan Siwa rajadewa*” does not declare a unification of teachings, but rather an ontological recognition that the highest reality can be accessed through more than one theological language (Astra, 2008). This text does not create a new doctrine, but reflects and affirms eschatological practices that have existed within the landscape, rituals, and institutions. Thus, text and materiality work simultaneously in shaping an eschatology of Ancient Bali that is relational, not reductionist.

If all of this data is read through the framework of syncretism, then an epistemic distortion will occur. Syncretism assumes a fusion of belief systems that leads to the loss of original identities, while the data actually shows a very consistent continuation of symbolic differentiation. What has changed is not the identity of Shiva or Buddha, but the way in which both are presented to manage death and liberation. Therefore, religio-cultural transformation is a much more precise analytical category, as it is able to explain changes in *modus operandi* without assuming doctrinal fusion. Eschatologically, this finding has important implications.

Ancient Bali displays an eschatological model that is not built on claims of exclusivity of truth, but rather on the co-presence of paths to salvation mediated by materiality and ritual. Life and death are understood as part of a spectrum of cosmic transformation, in which liberation is not the result of adherence to a single system of teachings, but rather the result of participation in an intertwined network of rituals, spaces, and symbols.

Thus, the harmony between Shiva and Buddha in Bali cannot be reduced to passive tolerance or theological compromise, but must be understood as a conscious and structured eschatological architecture. This is the most significant contribution of Ancient Bali to the study of life and death and eschatology: a religious model in which the plurality of paths to liberation is not a problem to be solved through fusion, but a condition to be creatively managed through material, ritual, and institutional transformation.

3.3 *Negotiating mokṣa and nirvāṇa: Eschatological pluralism in śaiva–buddhist practice*

The results of this study indicate that the most distinctive feature of Śaiva–Buddhist interaction in Ancient Bali lies in the negotiation of ultimate liberation, rather than in the unification of doctrinal systems. Archaeological, ritual, and textual data consistently demonstrate that *mokṣa* and *nirvāṇa* functioned as co-present eschatological horizons, each retaining its theological integrity while operating within a shared material and institutional

framework. This configuration suggests an eschatological pluralism grounded in practice, not in abstract reconciliation of doctrines.

Royal mortuary practices provide a crucial entry point for understanding this negotiation. The phenomenon of royal dharmma where rulers were commemorated and ritually reconstituted as sacred beings reveals that liberation after death was conceived in more than one soteriological language. In East Java, kings such as Kṛtanagara were explicitly dharmmakān as Śiva–Buddha figures; in Bali, however, the evidence points to a subtler but no less systematic arrangement. Rather than naming a fused identity, Balinese archaeological contexts emphasize layered material expressions, shrines, spatial hierarchies, and ritual zones that allowed multiple interpretive horizons of liberation to coexist.

This layered configuration becomes particularly evident in sacred architecture. Sites such as Gunung Kawi and Pegunungan do not present a single symbolic grammar of salvation. Instead, Śaiva and Buddhist elements are arranged relationally: rock-cut shrines associated with royal ancestors coexist with ascetic and monastic features linked to Buddhist ideals of release (Munandar, 2016; Munandar, 2018a). The spatial logic of these complexes suggests that liberation was not monopolized by one path but distributed across complementary religious technologies. In this sense, architecture itself becomes an eschatological device, structuring how different modes of post-mortem transcendence could be accessed and imagined.

Ritual practice further reinforces this interpretation. The reciprocal use of holy water by Śaiva and Buddhist priests in death-related rites is not a marginal detail, but a decisive indicator of how mokṣa and nirvāṇa were operationalized. Holy water functions as a material mediator of purification and transition; its cross-traditional use implies that ritual efficacy outweighed doctrinal exclusivity. Liberation was thus enacted through performative convergence, not through theological synthesis. The soul's passage after death was secured by ritual competence and legitimacy, rather than by exclusive adherence to a single metaphysical system (Widnya, 2008; Wahyudi et al., 2021).

Epigraphic evidence strengthens this reading by revealing the institutional management of eschatological plurality. The appearance of titles such as bhikṣu applied to Śaiva ritual specialists, alongside offices like mpungku śaiwasogata, kasogatan, and kasaiwan, indicates that the Balinese polity deliberately structured religious authority to accommodate multiple salvific frameworks. Importantly, the persistence of separate offices for Śaiva-only and Buddhist-only leaders demonstrates that this was not a move toward fusion. Instead, it was an administrative strategy that ensured that different soteriological competencies remained available and legitimate within the same political-religious order (Wahyudi, 2021; Purwanto et al., 2025).

At the textual level, Kakawin Sutasoma provides a conceptual articulation that mirrors these material and institutional arrangements. The well-known assertion that “the Buddha is not different from Śiva, the king of the gods” does not collapse the two traditions into a single doctrine. Rather, it affirms ontological convergence without doctrinal erasure. The ultimate reality may be one, but the paths toward it remain plural and irreducible. In eschatological terms, this means that liberation is understood as a shared horizon that can be approached through distinct religious grammars, each retaining its internal coherence.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern challenges linear or exclusivist models of eschatology. In many doctrinal traditions, the question of ultimate destiny is resolved through claims of singular truth and correct belief. The Balinese Śaiva–Buddhist case, by contrast, demonstrates an operative eschatology in which the afterlife is negotiated through material practices, spatial arrangements, and institutional roles. Salvation is not primarily a matter of dogmatic correctness, but of participation in a relational system that integrates multiple traditions into a coherent ritual ecology (Ranganathan, 2022; Weidner, 2021).

This finding has important implications for the critique of syncretism. If syncretism presupposes the fusion of beliefs into a new, unified system, then the evidence from Bali does not support it. No new doctrine of liberation emerges that replaces mokṣa or nirvāṇa. Instead, both concepts continue to function side by side, recontextualized within a shared

cultural and political landscape. The appropriate analytical term, therefore, is transformation: a shift in how eschatological concepts are deployed, mediated, and institutionalized, rather than a redefinition of their doctrinal content.

In sum, the negotiation of mokṣa and nirvāṇa in Ancient Bali reveals a sophisticated eschatological configuration in which plurality is not a problem to be resolved but a condition to be managed. Material culture, ritual praxis, and institutional design work together to sustain multiple visions of ultimate liberation within a single religious ecosystem. This model not only deepens our understanding of Śaiva–Buddhist relations, but also contributes to broader debates in eschatology and life–death studies by demonstrating how societies can construct coherent frameworks of afterlife belief without enforcing doctrinal uniformity.

3.4 Institutionalizing eschatology: Power, ritual, and the governance of death

The evidence examined thus far indicates that Śaiva–Buddhist eschatological pluralism in Ancient Bali was not an incidental by-product of local religiosity, but a deliberately structured system sustained through institutions of power, ritual authority, and administrative language. The management of death and post-mortem destiny was embedded within the political order, revealing that eschatology functioned not only as a religious horizon but also as a technology of governance. Through inscriptions, offices, and ritual hierarchies, the Balinese polity institutionalized multiple paths of liberation while maintaining social and cosmological coherence.

Epigraphic data provide the clearest insight into this institutional dimension. Old Balinese inscriptions repeatedly mention religious authorities occupying formal positions within royal councils, notably the pakirakiran i jro makabehan. These councils were not symbolic bodies; they held juridical and ritual authority, including the validation of grants, the witnessing of royal decrees, and the supervision of sacred endowments. The presence of Śaiva and Buddhist leaders within the same institutional framework indicates that the state actively coordinated religious authority in matters that extended to mortuary rites and posthumous legitimation (Munandar, 2019; Zhang, 2025). Death, therefore, was not left to private devotion but was administered through a recognized public-religious order.

The use of terminological crossover in inscriptions further reinforces this interpretation. The application of the term bhikṣu, traditionally associated with Buddhist monasticism to figures performing Śaiva ascetic and ritual functions cannot be explained as semantic confusion. Rather, it reflects an administrative rationality that prioritized functional competence over doctrinal purity. By mobilizing shared ascetic vocabulary, the state created a flexible institutional language capable of accommodating multiple eschatological competencies (Astra, 2008; Munandar, 1999). This linguistic strategy allowed Śaiva and Buddhist specialists to operate within overlapping ritual domains, particularly those concerned with purification, renunciation, and preparation for death, without forcing doctrinal convergence.

An even more explicit form of institutionalized eschatological pluralism appears in the titles mpungku śaiwasogata or sogata māheśwara, which occur alongside offices such as mpungku kasogatan (Buddhist-only) and mpungku kasaiwan (Śaiva-only). The coexistence of these titles within the same administrative corpus demonstrates a stratified organization of salvific authority. Rather than collapsing religious identities, the polity recognized distinct lines of ritual legitimacy while also designating hybrid or dual-function authorities capable of mediating between traditions. This arrangement ensured that no single soteriological framework monopolized access to post-mortem rites or claims of ultimate liberation (French, 2022).

From an eschatological perspective, this institutional configuration is highly significant. It suggests that liberation after death was understood as a matter requiring authorized mediation, not merely personal belief. The state's role was to guarantee that appropriate ritual channels remained available, thereby stabilizing the transition between life and death at both individual and collective levels. Royal and elite deaths, in particular, demanded

carefully regulated rites to secure continuity between political authority and cosmic order. By institutionalizing Śaiva–Buddhist plurality, the Balinese kingdom ensured that competing religious grammars of liberation could coexist without destabilizing social hierarchy or cosmological legitimacy.

This pattern also reframes the relationship between power and eschatology. Rather than instrumentalizing religion in a reductive sense, the Balinese polity operated within a worldview in which cosmic order, political order, and post-mortem destiny were inseparable. Governance extended beyond the management of the living to include the proper transformation of the dead. In this context, the state did not impose a single eschatological doctrine but curated a ritual ecology in which multiple traditions could function complementarily. Such an approach minimized sectarian tension while maximizing ritual efficacy and social integration.

The institutionalization of eschatology in Bali thus challenges modern assumptions that pluralism necessarily implies privatization of belief or fragmentation of authority. On the contrary, the Balinese case demonstrates that eschatological plurality can be centrally organized and publicly regulated. What unified the system was not doctrinal agreement, but shared participation in a material–ritual infrastructure that governed death, remembrance, and liberation. This insight further undermines syncretism as an explanatory model, since syncretism cannot account for the persistence of differentiated offices, terminologies, and ritual jurisdictions within a single political framework.

In analytical terms, the evidence supports the conclusion that Śaiva–Buddhist relations in Ancient Bali exemplify institutional transformation rather than theological fusion. Eschatological concepts were recontextualized within administrative practices, ritual hierarchies, and state-sponsored sacred spaces. Transformation occurred at the level of organization and mediation how salvation was accessed, authorized, and enacted while the core symbolic and doctrinal identities of Śaivism and Buddhism remained intact.

In sum, the institutionalization of eschatology in Ancient Bali reveals a sophisticated model in which death and the afterlife were governed through coordinated religious authority. By embedding multiple paths of liberation within the structures of power, the Balinese polity produced a stable yet plural eschatological order. This model contributes significantly to life–death studies and the historiography of religion by demonstrating how societies can manage ultimate existential questions through institutional design rather than doctrinal homogenization.

3.5 From syncretism to transformation: An eschatological reassessment

The cumulative findings of this study necessitate a critical reassessment of syncretism as the dominant explanatory model for Śaiva–Buddhist relations in Bali, particularly when the focus shifts to questions of life, death, and post-mortem destiny. While syncretism has long been used to describe religious encounters in Southeast Asia, the Balinese evidence demonstrates that this concept is analytically insufficient and epistemologically misleading when applied to eschatological phenomena (Segara, 2021; Acri & Wenta, 2022). The archaeological, ritual, institutional, and textual data examined in this article consistently point not to doctrinal fusion, but to a transformational reconfiguration of how eschatological meanings were produced, mediated, and sustained.

Syncretism presupposes that two or more religious systems merge to form a new, hybrid doctrine, often implying the erosion or dissolution of prior identities. If such a process had occurred in Bali, one would expect to find clear evidence of a new, unified soteriological doctrine replacing *mokṣa* and *nirvāṇa*. Yet no such evidence emerges. Instead, both concepts remain intact, operational, and symbolically differentiated across material culture, ritual practice, and institutional organization. What changes is not the content of eschatological belief, but the mode of its articulation from exclusive doctrinal systems to a shared ritual–material ecology (Munandar, 2018b).

The inadequacy of syncretism becomes especially evident when examining death-related practices. Mortuary architecture, pendharmaan rites, and purification rituals do not

display signs of theological amalgamation. Rather, they reveal functional convergence without conceptual collapse. Śaiva and Buddhist elements operate side by side, each mobilized according to its own symbolic logic, yet coordinated within the same sacred landscape. Syncretism cannot adequately explain how differentiation persists so consistently at precisely those points death and salvation where doctrinal integrity would matter most.

Parallelism, often proposed as a corrective to syncretism, is likewise insufficient. While it acknowledges the coexistence of distinct traditions, it assumes that these traditions operate independently, merely sharing a common space or ultimate goal. The Balinese evidence contradicts this assumption. Ritual reciprocity, terminological crossover, and shared institutional frameworks demonstrate sustained interaction and mutual intelligibility. Śaiva and Buddhist eschatologies in Bali are not parallel tracks that never intersect; they are relationally entangled through material practices and ritual authority, even as their symbolic identities remain distinct.

The paradigm of religio-cultural transformation offers a more precise analytical lens. Transformation does not describe an outcome (a new religion), but a historical mechanism a process through which religious traditions reorganize their modes of operation in response to social, political, and cosmological demands (Viladesau, 2025; Dolezal & Novelli, M. 2020). In Bali, transformation occurred at the level of material mediation, ritual praxis, and institutional design. Eschatological concepts were not rewritten, but repositioned within a system that allowed multiple salvific horizons to function coherently within a single religious order.

From an eschatological standpoint, this shift in paradigm is crucial. Eschatology concerns ultimate destiny, and as such, it is one of the most resistant domains to doctrinal compromise. The fact that Śaiva and Buddhist traditions in Bali retained distinct visions of liberation while participating in shared mortuary and purification practices indicates that the society developed a non-reductionist solution to the problem of plural ultimate ends. Transformation, rather than syncretism, names this solution: a reconfiguration of religious life in which plurality is stabilized through material and institutional means.

This reassessment also has historiographical implications. The persistence of syncretism as a category owes much to colonial-era assumptions that treated religions as bounded, internally homogeneous systems. Under such assumptions, any overlap appears anomalous and must be explained as mixture or degeneration. The Balinese case exposes the limitations of this epistemic framework. Religion here functions not as a closed doctrinal system, but as a set of practices distributed across space, objects, bodies, and authority structures (Verheijen & Putra, 2019). Writing its history therefore requires categories that can capture relational dynamics rather than categorical purity.

By adopting transformation as the central analytical concept, this study aligns Balinese Śaiva-Buddhist evidence with broader theoretical developments in material religion and critical historiography. More importantly, it demonstrates that eschatological plurality need not result in fragmentation or incoherence. On the contrary, Bali illustrates how multiple visions of life after death can be institutionally coordinated and ritually enacted within a stable religious ecosystem. This challenges universalist assumptions in eschatology that posit a single, normative model of ultimate destiny.

In conclusion, moving from syncretism to transformation is not a mere terminological adjustment, but an epistemological correction. It allows scholars to recognize that the harmony between Śaiva and Buddhist traditions in Bali was achieved not by dissolving differences, but by transforming the conditions under which those differences operated. Eschatology, in this context, becomes a shared field of practice rather than a contested field of doctrine. Such a perspective not only does greater justice to the empirical data, but also expands the conceptual horizons of life-death studies and the comparative study of religions.

3.6 Theoretical implications for eschatology and life–death studies

The analysis of Śaiva–Buddhist archaeological heritage in Bali carries implications that extend beyond regional historiography, contributing substantively to theoretical debates in eschatology and life–death studies. By foregrounding materiality, ritual practice, and institutional design, this study challenges dominant assumptions that eschatological systems are primarily defined by doctrinal coherence or exclusive truth claims (Appiah, 2022; Cohen, & Isnart, 2021). Instead, the Balinese case demonstrates that societies may construct plural yet stable frameworks of ultimate destiny through transformation rather than synthesis.

First, this study redefines eschatology as a materially mediated process. Conventional eschatological discourse often privileges textual doctrine and metaphysical speculation, treating material culture as secondary or illustrative. The evidence from Bali reverses this hierarchy. Temples, mortuary architecture, water sanctuaries, ritual objects, and sacred landscapes function as primary sites where meanings of life, death, and liberation are produced and negotiated. Eschatology, in this sense, is not merely believed but performed and inhabited through space and practice (López-Alcalá, 2020; Jero et al., 2025). This insight aligns with and extends the material religion paradigm by demonstrating that ultimate concerns, traditionally considered the most abstract are deeply grounded in material regimes. Second, the Balinese evidence contributes to a reconceptualization of eschatological plurality. In much comparative religious scholarship, plurality in ultimate ends is assumed to generate tension, competition, or the need for doctrinal resolution. The Śaiva–Buddhist configuration in Bali offers an alternative model: multiple soteriological horizons (*mokṣa* and *nirvāṇa*) coexist without being hierarchically ordered or doctrinally fused. This coexistence is sustained through shared ritual technologies and institutional coordination rather than through philosophical reconciliation. For life–death studies, this suggests that pluralism in afterlife beliefs can function as a resource for social cohesion, not necessarily as a source of conflict.

Third, the findings foreground the role of institutions and power in shaping eschatological imagination. Life–death studies often focus on individual experience, grief, and belief, while eschatology is treated as a theological abstraction. The Balinese case demonstrates that conceptions of death and post-mortem destiny are also objects of governance. Through inscriptions, ritual offices, and royal councils, the state actively curated the conditions under which death was interpreted and managed (Deibl, 2020). This does not imply instrumental manipulation of religion, but rather reflects a worldview in which political order, cosmic order, and post-mortem transformation were mutually constitutive (Shinde, 2020; Hazard, 2021). For eschatological theory, this highlights the necessity of incorporating political and institutional analysis into the study of ultimate concerns. Fourth, this study challenges binary models of life and death. The archaeological and ritual evidence consistently portrays death not as an endpoint, but as a phase within a continuum of transformation. *Pendharmaan* practices, ancestor veneration, and purification rites blur the boundary between the living and the dead, situating both within an ongoing cosmological process. This perspective resonates strongly with contemporary life–death studies that critique biomedical or modernist conceptions of death as final cessation. The Balinese model underscores how pre-modern societies articulated continuity through ritualized material practices that sustained relationships across ontological thresholds.

Finally, the paradigm of religio-cultural transformation proposed in this article offers a transferable analytical framework for other contexts. Rather than asking whether religious traditions merged, remained separate, or competed, scholars can ask how traditions reconfigured their modes of operation in response to shared existential challenges, particularly those surrounding death and salvation. This approach shifts the analytical focus from doctrinal boundaries to relational dynamics, enabling more nuanced comparisons across cultures and historical periods. In sum, the Śaiva–Buddhist heritage of Bali provides a compelling case for rethinking eschatology as a lived, material, and institutional practice.

It demonstrates that ultimate questions about life and death need not be resolved through doctrinal uniformity, but can be managed through transformation that preserves difference while enabling coherence. For the *Journal of Eschatology* and the broader field of life–death studies, this case underscores the importance of integrating archaeology, material religion, and critical historiography into the study of humanity’s most enduring concerns.

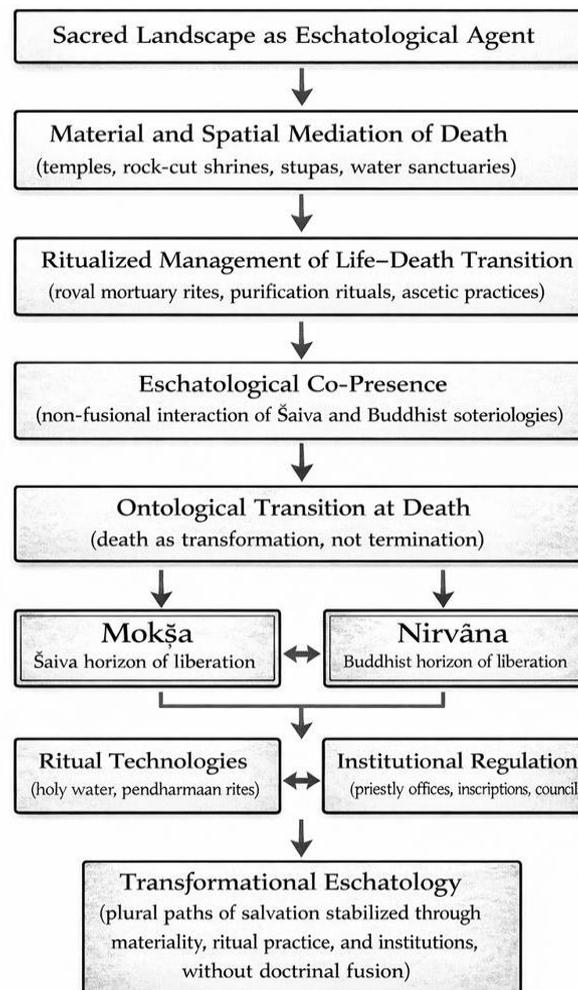


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of Śaiva–Buddhist relations and religious practice in Bali

The Figure 1 presented in this study visualizes a transformational model of eschatology derived from the Śaiva–Buddhist archaeological and ritual landscape of Ancient Bali. Rather than depicting a linear doctrinal development, the model conceptualizes eschatology as a processual system in which death, liberation, and transcendence are mediated through materiality, ritual practice, and institutional regulation. This interpretative framework departs fundamentally from syncretic or doctrinally integrative models commonly applied to Hindu–Buddhist interaction.

At the apex of the model, the sacred landscape functions as an eschatological agent. Temples, rock-cut shrines, stupas, and water sanctuaries are not passive backdrops for religious activity but active mediators that structure how death is experienced and interpreted. Archaeological spaces such as Gunung Kawi and Pegulingan materialize cosmological assumptions about continuity between the living and the dead, situating death within a spatially organized sacred order. In this configuration, eschatology is grounded in place and material form rather than abstract theological speculation (Surpi, Virgiastuti, & Purwanto, 2026).

The model then moves to material and spatial mediation of death, emphasizing that death is managed through architectural permanence and ritualized spatial arrangements. Mortuary monuments, ascetic spaces, and water infrastructures function as interfaces

between the human and the transcendent. This mediation enables death to be understood as a transitional condition, rather than a definitive rupture, thereby framing post-mortem destiny as a process rather than an endpoint.

Central to the model is the ritualized management of the life–death transition. Royal mortuary rites, purification ceremonies, and ascetic practices operate as ritual technologies that actively transform ontological status at death. These practices do not privilege a single soteriological doctrine; instead, they create a shared ritual grammar through which multiple paths of liberation can be enacted. Ritual efficacy, rather than doctrinal exclusivity, becomes the primary criterion for managing post-mortem transformation.

This ritual and material configuration produces what the model defines as eschatological co-presence. Śaiva and Buddhist soteriologies mokṣa and nirvāṇa, coexist as parallel but interacting horizons of liberation. Crucially, this co-presence is non-fusional: neither concept is subordinated, merged, or redefined through the other. The model thus rejects syncretism as an explanatory framework and instead demonstrates how plural ultimate destinies can be sustained within a single religious ecosystem.

The notion of ontological transition at death marks a key theoretical contribution of the model. Death is conceptualized not as termination but as transformation, a threshold through which different soteriological trajectories may unfold. From this threshold, mokṣa and nirvāṇa emerge as distinct yet equally legitimate outcomes, reflecting a plural eschatological imagination stabilized through practice rather than doctrine.

At the lower level of the model, ritual technologies and institutional regulation function as stabilizing mechanisms. The reciprocal use of holy water, *pendharmaan* rites, priestly offices, inscriptions, and royal councils collectively regulate access to post-mortem salvation. These mechanisms demonstrate that eschatology in Ancient Bali was not purely personal or speculative but institutionally governed. The state and religious authorities jointly curated the conditions under which plural paths of liberation remained valid and socially coherent.

The culmination of the flowchart is transformational eschatology, defined as a system in which multiple salvific horizons are maintained through the transformation of religious operations rather than through doctrinal synthesis (Hunter, 2007; Hazard, 2021). Transformation occurs at the level of mediation how salvation is accessed, authorized, and enacted while theological identities remain intact. This model offers a significant theoretical advance for eschatology and life–death studies by demonstrating that plural ultimate ends need not be resolved through theological unification.

In sum, the flowchart articulates a novel eschatological paradigm in which material culture, ritual practice, and institutional authority jointly manage death and afterlife in a plural religious context. By foregrounding transformation rather than fusion, this model reframes Śaiva–Buddhist harmony in Bali as a historically grounded solution to one of religion’s most fundamental challenges: how to accommodate multiple visions of ultimate destiny without sacrificing coherence or legitimacy.

4. Conclusions

This study shows that the harmony between Shiva and Buddha in Ancient Bali cannot be adequately understood through a syncretic framework that emphasizes the fusion of teachings or doctrinal mixing. Instead, based on archaeological, ritual, epigraphic, and textual analysis, this article asserts that this relationship operated through a transformational eschatological model, namely a religio-cultural mechanism that managed the meaning of life, death, and ultimate liberation through materiality, ritual practices, and religious-political institutions without erasing theological identity differentiation.

The main novelty of this research lies in the epistemological shift from questions about “doctrinal unity” to an understanding of how death and post-mortem salvation were managed historically and materially. The findings show that mokṣa and nirvāṇa function as legitimate and parallel horizons of liberation, presented co-presently in sacred landscapes, purification rites, and institutional structures. Death, in this context, becomes the main

meeting point of the Siwa–Buddha relationship, not a realm of theological conflict, but a field of transformation stabilized through ritual technology and institutional authority.

Through the development of a conceptual model and flow chart of transformational eschatology, this study also shows that archaeology not only provides historical data, but also acts as the main medium for the production of eschatological meaning. Sacred landscapes, funerary architecture, and ritual artifacts function as active agents that shape the experience of life and death and connect the human world with transcendent reality. Thus, ancient Balinese eschatology appears as an embodied practice, not merely an abstract belief system.

The theoretical contribution of this research is significant for the study of life and death studies and eschatology across traditions. The transformational eschatology model offered enriches global discourse by showing that plurality of ultimate goals does not always require doctrinal resolution or the dominance of a single belief system. Instead, plurality can be managed stably through the transformation of the operational mode of religion. In this framework, Ancient Bali becomes not only a regional object of study, but also a conceptual laboratory for the development of theories about death, liberation, and religious harmony in pre-modern societies.

By directly linking empirical findings and conceptual novelty, this research is expected to open up new space for the study of religious archaeology and eschatology, while encouraging the use of material and transdisciplinary approaches in understanding the most fundamental issues in human life: the relationship between life, death, and the meaning of ultimate liberation.

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Author Contribution

Conceptualization: M. A. D. I. V., and A. P.; Methodology: M. A. D. I. V., and H. P.; Data Collection: N. W. J. J., and H. P.; Data Analysis and Interpretation: M. A. D. I. V., and A. P.; Writing-Original Draft Preparation: M. A. D. I. V.; Writing-Review & Editing: A. P., H. P., N. W. J. J.; Supervision: A. P.; Project Administration: H. P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Ethical Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards for social sciences and humanities research and was approved by the Ethics Committee for Social Sciences and Humanities, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), under Ethical Clearance Approval on Social Studies and Humanities Research (Approval No. 688/KE.01/SK/07/2025).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely to assist in language editing and refinement of academic expression. After using this tool, the author(s) critically reviewed and revised the manuscript and took full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the content.

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