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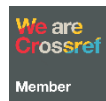
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Cross-cultural communication and symbolic commodification in Ubud: A Barthesian analysis of tourism myths and identity negotiation

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural communication in Ubud represents a critical friction point where high-context local traditions clash with low-context tourist expectations. This study investigates how cultural symbols are negotiated and transformed into tourism myths within this ecosystem. Employing an interpretive qualitative approach, data was collected through in-depth interviews with six key informants representing local and tourist perspectives, alongside participant observation in ritual and commercial spaces. The analysis was operationalized using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to trace the shift from denotation to myth. Findings reveal a systematic recoding of signifiers where local denotations, such as dance as a sacred offering or yoga as a modern lifestyle, are overwritten by tourist connotations of exotic magic and ancient spirituality. These individual perceptions coalesce into a second-order signification system, producing the global "Myth of Paradise." This myth functions to naturalize the commodification of culture, where authenticity becomes a negotiated service rather than an inherent quality. The study concludes that the "Paradise" narrative actively masks sustainability challenges, suggesting that future tourism management must prioritize cultural literacy over myth-making to ensure community resilience.



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Introduction

The tourism phenomenon in Ubud is deeply rooted in its cultural and social appeal which initially enabled tourists to participate directly in local activities. However, increasing investment has triggered a fundamental transformation of the socioeconomic landscape where a majority of the Ubud community has shifted from the agrarian sector to service roles within the tourism industry. This economic shift has driven changes in settlement patterns with investors funding the development of formerly private residences into commercial accommodations. This transformation illustrates how

cultural values, specifically hospitality and communal spirit, are actively capitalized upon as economic assets for tourism interests (Suhendra, 2023).

While the economic impact is evident, the symbolic transformation of Ubud is equally profound. Ubud has long been recognized as a global center for art and spirituality, yet this reputation is not an inherent quality but a complex sociocultural construct. Local cultural symbols such as dances, temples, religious rituals, and the Balinese way of life gradually undergo a transformation of meaning when they encounter the perspectives and expectations of foreign tourists (Anggi et al., 2020). Through this process, Ubud is positioned not merely as a tourist destination but as a cultural text rich with meaning and open to interpretation. In this context, Roland Barthes' semiotic framework provides a relevant analytical lens to understand how Balinese cultural signs are constructed, reinterpreted, and ultimately transformed into a global scale myth (Talani et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, the construction of the image of Ubud as a cultural and spiritual paradise is not without semiotic friction. Cross-cultural interactions between the local community, originating from a high-context culture, and foreign tourists, typically from low-context cultures, create an arena where meanings sometimes align harmoniously but often clash. This difference is reflected not only in verbal communication but also in the interpretation of symbols, gestures, and rituals. Therefore, the study of cross-cultural communication becomes a crucial instrument for understanding how the Ubud community negotiates its cultural identity while participating in the production of a global myth about Ubud as a center of world spirituality (Sukmawati et al., 2019). While numerous studies have addressed tourism in Bali, a specific analysis that integrates cross-cultural communication with semiotics to deconstruct the mythologization process remains limited.

Building upon this identified gap, this research focuses on how cross-cultural communication within the tourism ecosystem of Ubud is practiced, interpreted, and renegotiated by local communities and foreign tourists. Specifically, the study investigates the dynamics of cross-cultural communication when local meanings clash with meanings constructed by tourists, the production of the global myth of Ubud through interactions and media representations, and the strategies local communities use to negotiate their identity amidst this process of mythologization. By integrating Barthesian semiotics with intercultural communication theory, this study aims to offer a robust theoretical contribution to understanding how cultural commodification operates at the level of the sign and the myth.

Method

This study employed an interpretive qualitative approach to deconstruct the dynamics of cross-cultural communication between the local community of Ubud and foreign tourists within the context of cultural tourism. This research design was selected not merely to describe interactions, but to uncover the latent meanings, symbols, and myths formed through social friction, rituals, and tourism media. Given that the research focuses on the mechanics of symbolic transformation, specifically the shift from cultural sign to tourism myth, an interpretive framework allows for the necessary depth to capture the complexity of communication which is textual, symbolic, and performative (Fadli, 2021; Yusanto, 2020).

Data was collected through purposive sampling, selecting informants based on their capacity to represent distinct cultural vantage points rather than statistical representativeness. The sample consisted of six key informants divided into two distinct groups (Nasir et al., 2023). The first group represented the local high-context culture, comprising three community members deeply embedded in the tourism-tradition interface: a 45 year old ritual guide and artist, a 38-year old homestay owner, and a 29 year old craftswoman and yoga instructor. The second group represented the low-context tourist perspective, consisting of a 32 year old American spiritual tourist, a 27 year old German academic tourist, and a 34 year old Singaporean digital nomad. While numerically small, this sample size of six participants was deemed sufficient for semiotic analysis, where the objective is the depth of the cultural text and the saturation of symbolic patterns.

The data collection process utilized three triangulated techniques to ensure validity. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes each, focusing on the divergence between intended meaning by locals and received meaning by tourists. Second,

participatory observation was conducted in key cultural arenas including ritual processions such as Galungan, commercial spiritual spaces like Yoga classes, and economic exchanges at the Ubud Art Market. Here, the researcher acted as a participant-as-observer to capture non-verbal cues and spatial usage. Third, a semiotic analysis of promotional media, such as Instagram hashtags and tourist brochures, was performed to identify how local symbols are visually commodified.

Data analysis was operationalized using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, proceeding through a systematic four-stage coding process. The analysis began with Denotative Coding to identify physical symbols, followed by Connotative Interpretation to analyze associative meanings attached by tourists versus locals, and culminating in Myth Construction to identify the ideological narratives that naturalize these meanings. To ensure research integrity, an emic perspective was utilized to interpret local nuances, while the researcher practiced reflexivity to separate personal cultural bias from the tourists' interpretations. Ethical protocols were strictly followed, with all participants anonymized during the data collection and reporting phases.

Results and Discussions

The findings reveal that cross-cultural interaction in Ubud generates a significant divergence in meaning between the local community and international tourists. This disparity is not merely linguistic but semiotic, where cultural symbols undergo a negotiation of meaning. The research identifies a specific process where local symbols shift from their original sacred context, or denotation, to a new meaning constructed within the global tourism landscape, or connotation. The core of this divergence is evident in the commodification of ritual performance. A local dance artist and ritual guide articulates the friction between the internal sacred meaning and the external tourist gaze. He stated that for the community, the dance in the temple is part of a ceremony and not for entertainment, yet he noted that tourists often photograph it and caption it as a magical performance on social media. This interaction illustrates a shift in signification. For the local high-context culture, the dance denotes a ritual offering to deities. However, the tourist gaze recodes this signifier into a connotation of exotic entertainment. The informant expressed a complex ambivalence, feeling both pride in the appreciation and anxiety that the sacred meaning might be diluted by the visual consumption of the tourist.

A similar displacement of meaning occurs in the practice of Yoga. A local yoga instructor highlighted the invention of tradition within the tourism space. She revealed that while Yoga is originally from India and not a Balinese tradition, it has become a tourist icon in Ubud where visitors view it as a mystical experience. This testimony highlights a disconnection between historical reality and tourist perception. For the local community, Yoga is a modern lifestyle adoption or health activity. In contrast, international tourists view it through a mythological lens, perceiving it as an ancient, authentic practice inherent to the spiritual landscape of Ubud. This creates a feedback loop where local service providers adapt to these expectations, reinforcing the foreign connotation over the local denotation. The key perceptual disparities identified in these interactions are summarized in Table 1.

To understand these findings systematically, a semiotic deconstruction reveals how these individual perceptual disparities solidify into a global Myth. According to Barthes, myth acts as a second-order signification system that naturalizes cultural history into something that appears eternal or natural. The analysis identifies three layers of this transformation in Ubud. First is the Denotative Layer, which includes the literal meanings intrinsically tied to Balinese life, such as the dance as an offering, the Galungan ceremony as a cosmic balancing ritual, and the smile as a sign of *rwa bhineda*, representing politeness and harmony. Second is the Connotative Layer, where these signs are stripped of their complex social obligations and reloaded with new associations through the lens of tourist expectations. The complex ritual becomes a "festival of paradise," and the polite smile is interpreted as exclusive tropical hospitality. An American spiritual tourist exemplifies this when he explains that he came to Ubud believing it to be the spiritual center of the world, finding a sense of authenticity lacking in his home country. His experience confirms that the physical reality of Ubud is filtered through a pre-existing narrative of spiritual healing. Finally, these connotations coalesce into the Mythological Layer, creating the grand narrative of "Ubud as a Global Spiritual Paradise." This myth simplifies the reality of

Ubud, masking modern economic struggles and commercialization behind a veil of timeless spirituality. This semiotic shift is visualized in Table 2.

Table 1. Key Perceptual Disparities: Local vs. Tourist

| Informant | Symbol/Object | Denotative Meaning (Local/Tourist) |
|--|--|--|
| Made (45, local dance artist) | Balinese Dance at the temple | Local: part of a sacred ceremony. Tourist: a visual performance for photos. |
| John (32, American tourist) | Yoga in Ubud | Local: a modern lifestyle, a physical practice. Tourist: an authentic spiritual practice. |
| Ayu (29, local yoga instructor) | Yoga Practice | Local: yoga is not a Balinese tradition, but has become embedded in tourism. |
| Anna (27, German tourist) | Ubud as a destination | Local: an everyday living space with customs and rituals. Tourist: an exotic destination full of attractions. |
| Wayan (38, local homestay owner) | Homestay & local hospitality | Local: receiving guests as part of the menyama braya tradition (kinship). Tourist: accommodation service with a hospitality value. |
| Mei Ling (34, Singaporean digital nomad) | Daily life in Ubud (market, lifestyle) | Local: economic activity and artistic expression. Tourist: a space for creative inspiration and a lifestyle hub. |

Table 2. Ubud Semiotic Matrix: Visualizing the Shift in Meaning

| Cultural Symbol | Local Meaning (Denotation) | Tourist Meaning (Connotation) | Global Myth (Second Order Signification) |
|---|--|--|---|
| Balinese Dance at Temple Galungan/Kuningan Ceremony | Part of a sacred ceremony, an offering to the gods. Hindu religious ritual for cosmic balance. | Artistic performance, exotic entertainment, magical performance. Unique, colorful festival, cultural spectacle. | Bali as a "living museum of spirituality." Bali as a "spiritual paradise." Ubud as a "global spiritual healing center." |
| Yoga in Ubud | Health activity, modern adoption from India. Adat value: polite, maintaining harmony (rwa bhineda). | Mystical experience, self discovery. Sign of hospitality. | Bali as "the island of eternal smile." Bali as an "authentic exotic marketplace." |
| Smile & Local Hospitality | Local economic space, selling traditional crafts. | Place to buy "authentic souvenirs." Tourist object with beautiful architecture, aesthetic photo background. | Bali as a "sacred paradise" for soul searching. |
| Art Market | Place of worship, center of spiritual life. | | |
| Pura (Hindu Temple) | | | |

The interplay between denotative and connotative meanings places the local community in a complex position of negotiation. They are not passive objects of this myth but active participants who must navigate the tension between preserving cultural identity and adapting to market demands. This negotiation is particularly challenging given the high-context nature of Balinese culture, which relies on implicit shared understandings, versus the low-context nature of Western tourism, which relies on explicit visual confirmation of authenticity. The research indicates that this adaptation is both cultural and economic. The familiar warmth once offered as a social value is now often part of the service quality sold by homestay owners, who note that hospitality is now an economic asset. Ironically, the "authentic experience" sought by tourists is often a simplified, filtered, and commercialized version of complex rituals. This paradox, where tourists seek authenticity but their presence drives the creation of a modified version, is central to the cultural dynamics in Ubud. Furthermore, the "Paradise" myth brings significant negative externalities. The romanticized narrative often obscures practical sustainability issues such as traffic congestion, waste management, and the conversion of agrarian land into

commercial properties. The slogan "tourism is for Bali, not Bali for tourism" often functions as an empty signifier, masking the reality that the myth of paradise requires the continuous commodification of local life to sustain the tourist fantasy.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that cross-cultural communication in Ubud operates as a complex semiotic production system where local cultural realities are continuously overwritten by global tourism narratives. The analysis confirms that the "Myth of Paradise" is not an organic byproduct of interaction but a structured outcome of second-order signification, where the sacred denotations of Balinese life are systematically stripped of their communal context to serve the spiritual and aesthetic expectations of the global market. Consequently, authenticity in Ubud is revealed to be a negotiated commodity rather than an inherent quality, constructed in the friction between high-context local preservation and low-context tourist consumption. This dynamic creates a fragile interdependence where the economic survival of the community relies on performing a version of culture that aligns with the tourist imagination, potentially alienating locals from the very traditions they perform.

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