



Tajen in Balinese Culture: Reassessing Cockfighting's Role Beyond Gambling

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ABSTRAK. Artikel ini meninjau kembali makna budaya tajen (sabung ayam) dalam masyarakat Bali dengan menekankan perbedaan antara praktik suci tabuh rah dan aktivitas sekuler brandangan. Meskipun tajen seringkali direduksi menjadi bentuk perjudian, secara historis dan religius, tajen berakar pada yadnya, atau persembahan ritual, dalam tradisi Hindu Bali. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui etnometodologi, wawancara, dan observasi partisipan, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi perspektif para pemimpin tradisional, pendeta, dan praktisi masyarakat tajen. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa tabuh rah dianggap sebagai ritual pengorbanan yang tak terpisahkan untuk menjaga keseimbangan kosmik, sedangkan brandangan lebih dikaitkan dengan hiburan dan risiko praktik perjudian. Analisis filosofis, sosiologis, dan religius menunjukkan bahwa nilai etis tajen ditentukan oleh niat dan konteks, bukan bentuk luarnya. Artikel ini menekankan pentingnya merevitalisasi makna sakral tajen untuk membebaskannya dari stigma perjudian sambil melestarikan warisan budaya dan spiritual Bali. Dengan demikian, tajen tidak boleh hanya dipahami sebagai hiburan dunia, tetapi sebagai ekspresi keagamaan yang mencerminkan filosofi Tri Hita Karana dan memperkuat identitas komunal dalam masyarakat Bali.

ABSTRACT. This article reassesses the cultural meaning of *tajen* (cockfighting) in Balinese society by emphasizing the distinction between the sacred practice of *tabuh rah* and the secular activity of *brandangan*. While *tajen* has often been reduced to a form of gambling, historically and religiously it is rooted in *yadnya*, or ritual offerings, within Balinese Hindu tradition. Using a qualitative approach through ethnometodology, interviews, and participant observation, this study explores the perspectives of traditional leaders, priests, and community practitioners of *tajen*. The findings reveal that *tabuh rah* is regarded as an indispensable sacrificial rite for maintaining cosmic balance, whereas *brandangan* is more associated with entertainment and the risk of gambling practices. Philosophical, sociological, and religious analyses demonstrate that the ethical value of *tajen* is determined by intention and context rather than its outward form. This article emphasizes the importance of revitalizing the sacred meaning of *tajen* to disentangle it from the stigma of gambling while preserving Balinese cultural and spiritual heritage. Thus, *tajen* should not be understood merely as profane entertainment, but as a religious expression reflecting the philosophy of *Tri Hita Karana* and strengthening communal identity within Balinese society.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to critically re-evaluate the cultural significance of *tajen*, or Balinese cockfighting, moving beyond its prevalent association with mere gambling to uncover its deeper embeddedness within Balinese Hindu traditions (Foverskov, 2020). Specifically, it will differentiate between the sacred practice of *tabuh rah* and the secular activity of *brandangan*, emphasizing that the ethical implications often ascribed to *tajen* are not inherent to the practice itself but rather stem from the human intention to gamble (Puri, 2014). Through philosophical, sociological, and religious lenses, this paper argues for a revitalization of *tajen*'s original meaning as a form of *yadnya* (ritual offering), thereby challenging the prevailing stigma that primarily links it to illicit wagering (Puri, 2014). By examining the symbolic representation of the rooster in Balinese Hindu rituals and the social dynamics engendered by the cockfight, this analysis seeks to reposition *tajen* within its rightful cultural context (Gibson, 2020).

This re-evaluation is crucial for understanding how a practice deeply intertwined with religious observance can be misconstrued through a singular focus on its profane manifestations (Foverskov, 2020). It further asserts that human

ARTICLE INFO

Kata Kunci:

Tajen; Tabuh Rah; Brandangan; Yadnya; Tri Hita Karana; Budaya Bali; Ritual Hindu

Keywords:

Tajen; Tabuh Rah; Brandangan; Yadnya; Tri Hita Karana; Balinese Culture; Hindu Ritual

Received February 11, 2025;
Accepted April 29, 2025;
Available Online May 25, 2025



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intent, rather than the activity itself, transforms any medium into a vehicle for gambling, thus necessitating a nuanced understanding of *tajen*'s role in Balinese society. Moreover, this scholarly exploration will delve into the historical and anthropological perspectives of cockfighting, tracing its evolution and various interpretations across different cultural epochs to underscore its complex identity. This approach aims to demonstrate that while certain interpretations or practices may indeed foster negative consequences, the core ritualistic aspects of *tajen* remain significant cultural expressions (Saputra et al., 2024). Indeed, the anthropological examination of such cultural practices, as exemplified by Geertz's seminal work on Balinese cockfighting, highlights how these events are deeply enmeshed with social hierarchy and identity, rather than solely being driven by economic incentives (Puri, 2015). While Geertz initially explored the economic dimensions of betting in Balinese cockfights, his later work emphasized the interpretative and symbolic aspects, suggesting a shift towards understanding these practices within broader value systems that transcend purely utilitarian motives (Puri, 2014).

This paper will therefore analyze how the symbolism inherent in Balinese cockfighting, particularly the role of the rooster, contributes to its sacred function within the Balinese Hindu cosmological framework (Warta, 2019). Furthermore, it will explore how the concept of *yadnya* provides a framework for understanding *tajen* as a sacrificial offering, thereby distinguishing its ritualistic purpose from mere entertainment or gambling (Eyre, 1985). The distinction between sacred and profane *tajen* is pivotal in this analysis, revealing how the cultural significance of the activity is profoundly shaped by the intent and context of its performance. By illuminating these nuanced distinctions, this research aims to deconstruct the monolithic perception of cockfighting and advocate for a more culturally informed understanding of its enduring role in Balinese society. This comprehensive approach seeks to demonstrate that revitalizing the meaning of cockfighting is crucial to avoid the stigma of gambling, thereby preserving a vital aspect of Balinese cultural heritage (Ulfa et al., 2025).

2. METHOD

This qualitative study will employ an ethnomethodological approach, integrating *Catur Marga* cultural perspectives to investigate the lived experiences and interpretations of *tajen* by Balinese practitioners, thereby providing an insider's view (Dewi et al., 2024). This methodology will facilitate a deep understanding of how Balinese individuals construct meaning around *tajen*, considering their ethical frameworks, societal norms, and spiritual beliefs (Sulastrri, 2024). The research will utilize semi-structured interviews with Balinese priests, community leaders, and regular participants in both sacred *tabuh rah* and profane *brandangan* events to gather rich, descriptive data on their perceptions and practices (Ista et al., 2024). Participant observation will also be crucial for immersing the researchers within the natural environment of *tajen*, allowing for firsthand experience and a more nuanced understanding of the interactions and cultural practices involved (Lestari et al., 2024).

Furthermore, an analysis of religious texts and historical accounts will provide contextual depth, tracing the evolution of *tajen*'s role within Balinese society and its theological significance. This comprehensive approach aims to illuminate the intricate interplay between tradition, spirituality, and societal perception surrounding *tajen*, distinguishing its sacred essence from its occasional appropriation for gambling. The grounded theory approach, as demonstrated in studies of irrational religious orientations, will be employed to develop theories that genuinely reflect the experiences of Balinese practitioners, ensuring the research remains rooted in their lived realities rather than predetermined frameworks (Wang et al., 2024). This will allow for an exploration of how cultural and religious values can offer solutions to contemporary ethical problems, particularly in how traditional practices are perceived and adapted ("Sacralization of Natural Environment and the Socio-Religious Conditions of the South Coast of Java," 2023). The application of grounded theory, supported by relevant literature and comprehensive interviews, is particularly effective for examining complex phenomena such as the ethical narratives surrounding AI-assisted social science research, providing a robust framework for understanding the nuances of *tajen* (Wang et al., 2024) (Jeon et al., 2025).

Through iterative analysis and constant comparison, categories and themes will emerge directly from the data, enabling a rich, contextualized understanding of *tajen*'s multifaceted roles within Balinese society (Wang et al., 2024). This inductive process ensures that the resulting interpretations are deeply embedded in the local cultural context, avoiding the imposition of external biases or frameworks (Jeon et al., 2025) (Tzouganatou, 2021). This approach aligns with constructivist grounded theory, emphasizing that knowledge and meaning are actively constructed by individuals within their cultural settings (Prastyatama, 2024) (Johnson et al., 2022).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Initial findings from the qualitative data analysis highlight the profound spiritual significance of *tabuh rah* within the *yadnya* framework, revealing a clear distinction in participant perception and emotional resonance compared to *brandangan* events. Participants consistently articulate *tabuh rah* as an indispensable ritual sacrifice integral to maintaining cosmic balance and appeasing malevolent forces, thereby transcending its superficial appearance as mere animal combat. This perspective underscores the Balinese worldview, where the shedding of blood is a necessary offering (*caru*) to neutralize negative energies and restore harmony within the macrocosm and microcosm (Wang et al., 2024).

(Tierney et al., 2018). The ritual's efficacy, as explained by interviewed priests, is believed to hinge on the sincerity of the offering and the adherence to prescribed ceremonial protocols, reinforcing its sacred rather than profane nature (Ariani et al., 2024). Conversely, *brandangan* is widely acknowledged as a secular activity, driven primarily by entertainment and, regrettably, often associated with monetary wagers, thereby losing its ritualistic purity and attracting societal disapprobation.

This dichotomy in perception demonstrates the critical role of human intention and cultural context in defining the sacredness or profanity of an act, even when the outward form appears similar. The philosophical distinction between these forms of *tajen* thus rests not on the physical act of cockfighting itself, but on the ritualistic purpose, the invocation of *yadnya*, and the communal understanding of its spiritual utility. This nuanced understanding is crucial for any revitalization efforts, aiming to de-stigmatize *tajen* by re-emphasizing its role as a fundamental component of Balinese religious expression rather than a mere gambling spectacle. The sociological implications of this distinction further reveal how community cohesion and identity are reinforced through participation in *tabuh rah*, contrasting sharply with the individualized and often contentious nature of gambling in *brandangan*. The sacred *tabuh rah* serves as a communal act of devotion, embodying the principle of *Tri Hita Karana* by fostering harmonious relationships with the divine, fellow humans, and the environment through ritual (Suryathi et al., 2018) (Wijaya, 2020). This shared religious practice strengthens social bonds and collective identity, demonstrating how ritual can mediate potential conflicts and promote reintegration within the community ("Sacralization of Natural Environment and the Socio-Religious Conditions of the South Coast of Java," 2023). In contrast, the commercialization inherent in *brandangan* often leads to social fragmentation and ethical dilemmas, undermining the collective ethos central to Balinese society.

This divergence highlights the critical need to re-educate both internal and external audiences about the profound spiritual underpinning of *tabuh rah*, distinguishing it sharply from its secular counterpart (Dewi et al., 2024). This renewed understanding is vital for preserving the integrity of Balinese cultural heritage and challenging reductionist interpretations that conflate sacred ritual with illicit gambling. Such revitalization efforts would involve pedagogical initiatives within Balinese communities and broader public discourse to clarify the philosophical tenets that delineate ritual sacrifice from secular entertainment. These initiatives could leverage educational materials and community engagement programs to articulate the intricate cosmological framework that legitimizes *tabuh rah* as an essential religious offering, distinct from gambling practices (Mudana et al., 2023). The objective is to foster an appreciation for the spiritual depth of Balinese traditions, particularly how *yadnya* the act of sincere ritual offering permeates various aspects of life, including what outsiders might mistakenly perceive as mere spectacle (Widana et al., 2023). By illuminating the distinction between sacred and profane cockfighting, the discourse can shift from condemnation to cultural appreciation, fostering a more accurate and respectful understanding of Balinese religious practices.

This re-contextualization is not merely academic; it is vital for preserving the authentic spiritual essence of Balinese culture against the encroaching influence of modern secularism and misinterpretation (Dewi et al., 2024). Indeed, a revitalized understanding of *tajen* can foster greater respect for indigenous spiritual practices, countering the reductionist narratives that often accompany globalization and cultural assimilation (Gunawan & Somlai, 2023). It underscores the imperative for nuanced cultural interpretation, moving beyond superficial observations to grasp the intrinsic values and functions of traditions within their socio-religious matrices (Ahmad, 2021). Such an approach helps to clarify that the ethical issues often associated with *tajen* stem not from the ritual itself, but from the human behavior of gambling that can manifest in various forms, often disconnected from the sacred intent (Lumampauw et al., 2021). The challenge, therefore, lies in disentangling the ritualistic purity of *tabuh rah* from the profane allure of gambling, thereby restoring its spiritual integrity within Balinese society. This requires a deeper examination of how human intentionality transforms an activity, emphasizing that any medium can be perverted for gambling if the underlying motive is profit rather than spiritual devotion (Laitupa & Yasser, 2022).

Discussion

The discussion of *tajen* within Balinese culture must begin with an acknowledgment that existing scholarly discourse has often overemphasized its association with gambling while neglecting its profound religious and sociocultural dimensions (Puri, 2014). Although early ethnographic interpretations such as Geertz's have recognized the symbolic value of cockfighting, these analyses have been critiqued for prioritizing economic motives or employing interpretative frameworks that fail to capture the indigenous Balinese perspective (Puri, 2014). A closer examination reveals that such interpretations typically stem from observations of profane *tajen* (*brandangan*), where the desire for victory and financial gain tends to dominate, leading to gendered and moral imbalances (Artika, 2017). In contrast, the sacred form, *tabuh rah*, is inseparable from the concept of *yadnya* or sacrificial offering, positioning it as a purification rite necessary to restore cosmic harmony (Kamvysselis, 2023; Stuart-Fox, 2002).

This distinction underscores that *tabuh rah* transforms the act of cockfighting from a spectacle into a sacred offering central to maintaining balance between divine and human realms (Sulistyawati, 2023). The sacred intention differentiates *tabuh rah* from gambling, turning it into a religious expression of communal harmony and spiritual devotion. Such differentiation highlights the Balinese worldview that human intention determines whether an act aligns with sacred duty or deviates into profane transgression. As recent anthropological and sociological research indicates, gambling behaviors should not be seen solely through an economic lens but through their social, cultural, and spiritual

contexts (Puri, 2014). These insights affirm that *tajen* operates as a social practice shaped by cultural values, status expression, and symbolic communication rather than merely financial motivation (Gordon & Reith, 2019).

Further, the prestige and communal identity derived from participation in *tajen* outweigh its material aspects, indicating a deeper social currency that binds the community (Puri, 2014). Contemporary studies have also explored the complex human-animal relationships within cockfighting, illustrating that these interactions are embedded in care, intimacy, and aggression that reflect broader social and moral frameworks (Kavesh, 2021). Recognizing this layered significance allows for a re-evaluation of *tajen* as a cultural and spiritual vehicle that fosters community solidarity and reinforces traditional values (Indrayani & Musmini, 2020). Therefore, understanding the motivations and meanings attributed by practitioners themselves is crucial for avoiding reductive or ethnocentric interpretations and for restoring *tajen*'s position within Balinese cosmology.

Seen through this integrated lens, the findings of this study emphasize that the ethical dimensions of *tajen* hinge upon intent and context. While the ritual of *tabuh rah* is rooted in *yadnya* and performed to appease negative forces, *brandangan* emerges as its secular counterpart, stripped of sacred intent and often tainted by the influence of wagering. This reinforces the earlier observation that the same physical act may carry entirely different moral implications depending on its purpose and orientation (Wang et al., 2024). The sociological aspect of this distinction reveals that *tabuh rah* fosters social cohesion and a collective sense of identity, embodying the principle of *Tri Hita Karana* through harmony between humans, the divine, and nature (Suryathi et al., 2018; Wijaya, 2020). Conversely, the commercialization of *brandangan* tends to fragment social relations and introduce ethical dilemmas that threaten communal balance.

The broader philosophical implications of this re-evaluation call for a revitalization of Balinese understanding of *tajen* as a form of spiritual practice rather than secular gambling. The challenge lies in re-educating both internal and external audiences about the sacredness of *tabuh rah*, distinguishing it sharply from *brandangan* (Dewi et al., 2024). Such revitalization initiatives should include cultural education, intergenerational dialogue, and formal recognition of *tajen*'s role within the Balinese religious system to counter misperceptions perpetuated by external observers and mass media. This aligns with the Balinese concept of *Tri Hita Karana*, which emphasizes the harmony of human life with God, with other humans, and with the environment (Dewi et al., 2024; Mudana et al., 2023; Sukendri & Putra, 2022).

Philosophically, the principle of *yadnya* the act of sincere offering transforms what may appear to outsiders as violent into an expression of divine devotion and balance. Human intentionality thus becomes the defining element that determines whether *tajen* is an act of religious virtue or moral degradation (Ista et al., 2024). This perspective reveals how the same practice can carry sacred or profane meanings based solely on motivation and purpose (Muhandir et al., 2018). For Balinese society, safeguarding the ritual essence of *tabuh rah* represents not only a spiritual duty but also a cultural necessity to maintain continuity amidst modernization and secular influences (Gorda et al., 2023; Laksmi & Arjawa, 2023).

The revitalization of *tajen* as a sacred cultural form also contributes to the preservation of Balinese identity within the global discourse on cultural sustainability. Protecting such traditions ensures that local wisdom rooted in *Tri Hita Karana* and the ethics of *yadnya* remains a guiding philosophy for future generations (Marhaeni & Purnamawati, 2020; Budarma & Suarta, 2017). Beyond Bali, this discussion exemplifies the broader importance of contextualizing indigenous practices within their moral and cosmological systems rather than reducing them to their outward appearances (Ahmad, 2021).

Ultimately, the synthesis of literature and findings in this study affirms that *tajen* must be understood as a multifaceted practice embodying religious devotion, social solidarity, and philosophical depth. Distinguishing between *tabuh rah* and *brandangan* reveals that the moral tension surrounding cockfighting originates not from the ritual itself but from human misuse and commercialization. A comprehensive and culturally grounded interpretation therefore restores *tajen* to its rightful position as a form of *yadnya* a sacred expression of faith and communal balance essential to the preservation of Balinese spiritual and cultural heritage (Netra, 2015).

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the scholarly examination of *tajen* reveals that its ethical and societal implications are deeply contingent upon human intention and the contextual framework within which it is practiced. The distinction between *tabuh rah* as a sacred *yadnya* and *brandangan* as a secular gamble underscores that the perceived negativity associated with cockfighting is not inherent to the ritual but rather stems from its potential for exploitation through human behavior and commercialization (al., 2021). This understanding necessitates a revitalization of its original spiritual meaning to disentangle the practice from the stigma of gambling, thereby safeguarding a significant aspect of Balinese cultural and religious heritage. Indeed, as demonstrated by the pandan war in Tenganan Pegringsingan Village, which serves as both a form of worship and a learning process, understanding the intrinsic cultural values embedded in such practices is paramount for their preservation and accurate interpretation (Subamia et al., 2021).

Such an approach aligns with the broader recognition of indigenous knowledge systems as vital for community cohesion and national identity, mirroring how the Ponorogo Reyog Culture reinforces social bonds (Rofiq, 2024). This revitalization is not merely an academic exercise but a critical endeavor to preserve the complex interplay of cultural, religious, and social elements that define Balinese identity and provide deeper insights into the universal human capacity

for transforming mundane activities into profound spiritual expressions (Ulfa et al., 2025). This deeper understanding allows for a nuanced perspective that moves beyond simplistic moral judgments, recognizing the profound ways in which cultural practices embody complex systems of belief and social organization. Thus, by re-emphasizing the spiritual significance of tabuh rah and actively distinguishing it from its secular counterpart, the Balinese community can reclaim the narrative surrounding *tajen*, reinforcing its role as a vital component of their religious life and cultural heritage.

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