



A Theological Study of the Concept of Divinity in the Lontar Tutar Aji Saraswati in Bali



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Abstract

The Lontar Tutar Aji Saraswati is a sacred manuscript written in the Kawi-Balinese script and language, containing theological, philosophical, and spiritual teachings of the Balinese Hindu community. This manuscript does not merely outline the rituals for worshipping Goddess Saraswati on Saraswati Day; it also preserves profound concepts regarding the nature of God (Brahman/Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa), His manifestations within the Tri Murti, and the relationship between sacred syllables, the divine word (sabda), and the creation of the universe. This study aims to examine the theological concept of divinity in the Lontar Tutar Aji Saraswati through a qualitative approach that employs textual hermeneutics and library research. Primary data consisting of the transliteration and translation of the Tutar Aji Saraswati text were analyzed alongside secondary data from various philological and Hindu theological studies. The findings indicate that the concept of divinity in this manuscript is characterized by transcendent-immanent monotheism (panentheism): The One God (Ekam Sat) exists as Nirguna Brahman (formless/attributeless) while simultaneously manifesting as Saguna Brahman (with attributes/form) through the Tri Murti (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva) and other deities including Goddess Saraswati, who serves as the Shakti or manifestation of the widya (knowledge) aspect of God. The concepts of Dasaksara, Pañca Aksara, and Ongkara within the text demonstrate how sacred syllables function as theological media for invoking and uniting with the divine essence. This study contributes to the understanding of Balinese Hindu theology rooted in local textual wisdom (local genius) and highlights its relevance to contemporary religious life.

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1 Introduction

Bali is widely recognized as a major center for the preservation of traditional manuscripts from the Indonesian archipelago specifically lontar (palm-leaf manuscripts) which encompass diverse fields of knowledge ranging from literature, customary law, and medicine to religious teachings (tattwa). These manuscripts serve as repositories for Balinese cultural heritage and constitute a vital reference for understanding the diversity of Hindu teachings; this is underscored by Yuliana (2023) in her study of the Tutar Aji Saraswati text, which she identifies as both a vessel for Balinese cultural heritage and a source of inspiration for the island's diverse Hindu traditions. A manuscript of significant importance within the corpus of Balinese Hindu theology is the Lontar Tutar Aji Saraswati a *tutur* (didactic) text authored by Ida Bagus Made Jlantik of Griya Kacancang, copies of which are held in collections such as the Gedong Kirtya Library (Putra, 2021). Broadly speaking, the Tutar Aji Saraswati contains teachings on physical and spiritual well-being, rituals for worshipping the Goddess Saraswati observed on the day of Saniscara Umanis within the wuku (week) of *Watugunung* and knowledge regarding the afterlife. The manuscript begins by expounding on the symbolic meanings of various Balinese scripts such as *swalalita*, *wrěsastra*, and *modré* as explicitly stated in its opening lines (Putra, 2021). This discussion of sacred scripts is not isolated; rather, it is inextricably linked to concepts of divinity, for in the Balinese Hindu worldview, script, sabda (sound), and the creation of the universe form a unified whole originating from the Divine.

A theological analysis of such oral texts is significant because the concept of the Divine in Balinese Hinduism possesses unique characteristics compared to the concept of Brahman in the Hindu tradition of India. In India, the concept of Brahman evolved in a highly philosophical and abstract manner representing the formless, ultimate reality and the source of all things, as articulated in the Vedanta tradition (Kompasiana, 2025a). Meanwhile, Balinese Hindu society encapsulates this concept within the local term *Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa*, reflecting a process of acculturation between Indian Hindu teachings and local culture that has unfolded over centuries (Kompasiana, 2025b). Within the teachings of *Siwa Tattwa*, the concept of *Ista Dewata* affirms *Widhi Tattwa* the belief in Brahman (or *Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa*) as the creator, preserver, and dissolver of the universe. This belief is encapsulated in the sloka "*Ekam Sad Viprāḥ Bahudhā Vadanti*," which signifies that there is but one God, whom the wise address by various names (Directorate General of Hindu Community Guidance, Ministry of Religious Affairs RI, 2021). This Hindu conception of the Divine is further articulated through two approaches: the monistic-absolute concept (*Nirguna Brahman*) and the concept of the Divine manifesting in various forms and attributes (*Saguna Brahman*) (Directorate General of Hindu Community Guidance, Ministry of Religious Affairs RI, 2021). It is the *Saguna Brahman* aspect that is recognized in the worship of deities, including the Tri Murti concept: Brahma as the creator (*utpeti*), Vishnu as the preserver (*sthiti*), and Shiva as the dissolver (*pralina*) (Yuliana, 2023). Previous studies of the *Tutar Aji Sasaraswati* text have demonstrated that the manuscript specifically delineates the fundamental roles of the *Tri Murti* within the Hindu theological system it presents (Yuliana, 2023).

While various philological and theological studies on Balinese lontar manuscripts have flourished as evidenced by research on the theo-ecology of the *Lontar Sri Purana Tattwa* (Suwena, 2021), Hindu cosmology in the Ganapati Tattwa (Sena, 2021), and the contextualization of Hindu theology in the *Ādiparwa* (Suwena, 2022) in-depth, specific analyses of the concept of the Divine within the Lontar *Tutar Aji Saraswati* remain limited. This manuscript is unique, however, as it integrates theological, epistemological (knowledge/widya), and soteriological (the path to liberation) dimensions into a unified body of teachings. Consequently, this study seeks to address this gap by systematically examining how the concept of the Divine encompassing the nature of God, His manifestations, and His relationship with sacred scripts and knowledge is constructed and transmitted through the *Tutar Aji Saraswati* text. Based on this background, the study aims to outline the general overview and structural teachings of the Lontar Tutar Aji Saraswati, to understand how the concept of the Divine is formulated and expounded within the text, and to determine the theological relevance of this concept for contemporary Hindu religious life in Bali.

2 Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing descriptive-analytical library research. The primary data consists of the text of the Lontar Tutar Aji Saraswati in both transliterated and translated forms sourced from the Gedong Kirtya manuscript collection and digital documentation of Balinese manuscripts (Putra, 2021; Palmleaf, n.d.). Secondary data were obtained from scholarly journal articles, findings from philological and Hindu theological

research, and supporting literature regarding the concept of divinity in Balinese Hinduism. Data collection was conducted through documentary study, involving the examination, reading, and recording of text segments relevant to the theme of divinity. Data analysis utilized a textual hermeneutics approach an interpretive method that seeks to understand a text's meaning not merely literally, but also within its underlying cosmological and spiritual contexts. The hermeneutic approach is commonly employed in theological studies of Balinese lontar manuscripts as seen in research on the *Sri Purana Tattwa* text, which utilized hermeneutic and interpretive theories to elucidate the *tattwa* values contained therein (Suwena, 2021). The analyzed data are presented using a descriptive-qualitative approach, linking textual findings to broader Hindu theological concepts such as *Panca Sradha*, *Tri Murti*, and the concepts of *Nirguna* and *Saguna Brahman*.

Thematically, the contents of Lontar Tuter Aji Saraswati can be grouped into several large sections, namely: explanation of the types and functions of sacred script; the reduction of *Dasaksara* to *Pañca Aksara*, *Pañca Brahma*, *Tri Aksara*, *Rwa Bhinéda*, to *Ekaksara (Ongkara)*; teachings about *Rwa Bhinéda* between *bhuwana Agung* (macrocosm) and *bhuwana alit* (microcosm); as well as procedures for worshiping and using mantras in the Saraswati Holy Day ceremony (Putra, 2021). This hierarchical teaching structure from compound letters to single characters (*Ongkara*) theologically reflects the process of uniting the human self with the essence of God Almighty, from diversity of forms (*Saguna*) to absolute oneness (*Nirguna*). A philological-theological study of a similar text, namely Tuter Aji Sasaraswati, confirms that this text belongs to the group of *Siwaistis* texts which contribute to the diversity of Hindu teachings in Bali (Yuliana, 2023). The various teachings contained in it are the result of contemplation on habits, thoughts, literature and values passed down from generation to generation, so that they function like a guiding compass in individual and collective life (Yuliana, 2023).

3 Results and Discussions

The Nature of Divinity: Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman

The concept of divinity in the Lontar Tuter Aji Saraswati cannot be separated from the broader framework of Hindu theology, which affirms the oneness of God as encapsulated in the phrase *Ekam Sad Viprāḥ Bahudhā Vadanti*: there is only one God (the essence of truth), yet sages call Him by various names (Directorate General of Hindu Community Guidance, Ministry of Religious Affairs RI, 2021). This principle serves as the theological foundation explaining why the Tuter Aji Saraswati frequently mentions the names of various deities (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Saraswati, etc.) without negating the oneness of God Himself.

Hindu teachings on divinity recognize two fundamental concepts: *Nirguna Brahman* a monistic, absolute conception of the Divine as formless, attribute-less, and beyond personification and *Saguna Brahman*, the manifestation of God possessing attributes and personal forms, such as the deities worshipped at sacred sites (Directorate General of Hindu Community Guidance, Ministry of Religious Affairs RI, 2021; Kompasiana, 2022). In the Balinese context as also outlined in theological studies of the *Sri Purana Tattwa* text God is manifested as *Saguna Brahman* through deities who preside over various aspects of life and the universe (Suwena, 2022). This line of thought is evident in the structure of the *Tuter Aji Saraswati* teachings, which progress from an explanation of compound syllables (representing the diversity of forms or *Saguna*) toward the *Ekaksara Ongkara* (the single syllable Om), representing the oneness of God (*Nirguna*) (Putra, 2021).

Unlike the concept of Brahman in India which tends to be highly abstract and philosophical, serving as the ultimate goal of spiritual seeking through contemplative paths like meditation and yoga (Kompasiana, 2025c) in Bali, this concept is integrated with a more concrete and symbolic approach embodied in the term *Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa*, signifying the God who governs and holds dominion over all things (Kompasiana, 2025b, 2025c). It is this process of acculturation between Indian Hindu teachings and Balinese local wisdom that gave rise to a concept of divinity that remains monotheistic yet is characterized by a wealth of symbols and distinctive forms of worship, as reflected in various oral tradition texts, including the Tuter Aji Saraswati. The monotheistic nature of Balinese Hinduism is further affirmed by studies explaining that the invocation of various deities during worship does not constitute polytheism, but rather represents reverence for different aspects of the same Supreme God (Kompasiana, 2022).

The Tri Murti as a Functional Manifestation of Divinity

One of the central concepts contained in the Aji Saraswati text is the doctrine of the Tri Murti the three fundamental functions of divinity comprising Lord Brahma as the creator of the universe (*utpeti*), Lord Vishnu as the preserver (*sthiti*), and Lord Shiva as the dissolver (*pralina*) (Yuliana, 2023). These three functions do not represent separate divine entities but rather three functional aspects of the same singular God, aligning with the previously outlined principle of *Ekam Sad Viprāḥ Bahudhā Vadanti*. Studies of similar texts indicate that the concept of the Tri Murti evolved alongside the historical development of *Siwa Agama* (Shaivism) in Bali. This includes the influence of the era of King Udayana Warmadewa in the 10th century CE, a period when the divine concepts of Tri Sakti and Tri Murti began to crystallize as the primary theological framework for Balinese Hindu society (Yuliana, 2023). Within this *Siwa Agama* framework, Lord Shiva holds a privileged position; He is understood to pervade the entire universe while simultaneously serving as the source of Brahma and Vishnu, all without diminishing the essential oneness of Brahman itself (Yuliana, 2023).

The theological function of the Tri Murti is also found in various other Balinese tattwa texts. For instance, the Ganapati Tattwa featuring a dialogue between Lord Shiva and his son, Sang Hyang Ganapati explicitly delineates the concepts of the creation (*utpati*), preservation (*sthiti*), and dissolution (*pralina*) of the universe (Sena, 2021). This demonstrates that the Tri Murti framework is not merely mythology, but a coherent cosmological-theological system widely embraced within the corpus of Balinese Hindu religious manuscripts. In the context of the Tutar Aji Saraswati, this Tri Murti framework serves as a crucial backdrop for understanding the relationship between God, the universe (*bhuwana agung*), and the human self (*bhuwana alit*), as explained through the *Rwa Bhinéda* teachings found in the manuscript (Putra, 2021).

Dewi Saraswati: Sakti Widya and the Manifestation of God's Aspect of Knowledge

The name Aji Saraswati the title of this manuscript refers to Dewi Saraswati. In the Hindu tradition, she is depicted as a graceful female figure with four arms, holding prayer beads (*genitri*) and a palm-leaf manuscript (*kropak or lontar*) as symbols of knowledge (Putra, 2021). The Saraswati festival is celebrated on Saniscara Umanis of the Watugunung week as the pawedalan (anniversary or "birthday") of Sang Hyang Aji Saraswati; on this day, Hindus particularly educators, students, and devotees of knowledge perform purification rituals for scriptures, lontar manuscripts, books, and other writing implements (Putra, 2021). Theologically, Goddess Saraswati is understood as the Shakti or manifestation of the Vidya (knowledge) aspect of the Divine. Within the framework of Saguna Brahman, the presence of deities such as Saraswati represents a personification of the infinite attributes and powers of the Divine, rendered accessible so that humans can comprehend and approach the Divine in a tangible manner (Directorate General of Hindu Community Guidance, Ministry of Religious Affairs RI, 2021; Kompasiana, 2022). Through the worship of Saraswati, Hindus essentially venerate Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa (the Supreme God) in His aspect as the source of all knowledge and wisdom (*Vidya*), which serves as a prerequisite for attaining the perfection of life and liberation (*Moksha*).

This theological significance explains why, in the Balinese Hindu tradition, references to Saraswati are invariably linked to Sanskrit scriptures specifically the *Catur Veda Samhita*, *Puranas*, and *Itihasas* as the ultimate sources of knowledge (Putra, 2021). The interconnection between Saraswati, sacred script, and the Vedas underscores the perspective found in the Tutar Aji Saraswati text: that the path to knowing the Divine (*Brahma Vidya*) is inseparable from the mastery of sacred knowledge. This aligns with the teachings of the Brahma Sutra (1.1.1), which affirm that the path to achieving Moksha lies in knowing Brahman accurately and correctly (Kompasiana, 2023).

Sacred Syllables as Theological Media: Dasaksara, Pañca Aksara, and Ongkara

The theological uniqueness of the Lontar Tutar Aji Saraswati lies in its positioning of sacred syllables as both a medium and a spiritual path toward understanding God. The teachings within this manuscript are expounded in a progressive sequence, beginning with the understanding of *Catur Dasaksara* and moving to *Dasaksara*, followed by *Pañca Aksara*, *Pañca Brahma*, *Tri Aksara*, and *Rwa Bhinéda*, before finally arriving at *Ekaksara* namely *Ongkara* (Putra, 2021). In this section, the text delineates the specific positions and colors of the *Dasaksara* syllables, which are believed to reside within both the human body and the universe, thereby reaffirming the principle of correspondence between the macrocosm (*bhuwana agung*) and the microcosm (*bhuwana alit*) (Putra, 2021). This

progression from composite syllables toward *Ongkara* the singular syllable serves as a theological visualization of the process by which the human self-unites with the essence of the One Supreme God: moving from a diversity of forms and names (*Saguna Brahman*) toward absolute oneness (*Nirguna Brahman*). In the Hindu tradition, *Ongkara* itself is believed to represent the primordial sound (*śabda*) that gave rise to creation; consequently, mastering this sacred syllable is a matter not merely of linguistics, but also of soteriology and theology.

The ritual dimension of these sacred script teachings is evident in the various mantras recited during the Saraswati holy day ceremonies. Offerings such as *peras daksina*, *bebanten* and *sesayut Saraswati*, *rayunan putih kuning* (white and yellow rice dishes), *canang*, *pasepan* (incense), *tepung tawar*, flowers, holy water, and *bija* (yellow rice) are each accompanied by specific mantras invoking Sang Hyang Ratih as the deity of knowledge (Putra, 2021). Each of these ritual elements and mantras represents a concrete manifestation of the theological concept regarding the unity of the divine word (*sabda*), sacred script (*aksara*), and worship the core essence of the Tutar Aji Saraswati teachings.

The Contextual Theological Relevance for Religious Life

The concept of the Divine found in the Lontar Tutar Aji Saraswati holds significant relevance for strengthening the understanding of Hindu theology amidst the challenges of the modern era. First, the principle of the oneness of God manifested through a diversity of forms (such as the Tri Murti and various deities) serves as a theological foundation for tolerance and respect regarding diverse religious expressions. This applies both within the Hindu community and in broader interfaith relations, as demonstrated by comparative studies contrasting the concept of Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa with divine concepts in other religious traditions in Bali (UKDW, n.d.). Second, the emphasis on the relationship between knowledge (*widya*/Saraswati) and the Divine affirms that, from the Balinese Hindu perspective, advancements in science and technology should remain oriented toward spiritual values and sanctity, rather than mere material achievement. Delving into the symbolic meaning of Saraswati remains relevant and necessary amidst contemporary scientific and technological progress, ensuring that society does not become uprooted from its spiritual foundations (Putra, 2021). Third, the teaching regarding the parallelism between the *bhuwana agung* (macrocosm) and *bhuwana alit* (microcosm) in the Tutar Aji Saraswati provides a theological-ecological foundation for the awareness of the interconnectedness between humanity, the universe, and God an awareness also found in other Balinese *tattwa* texts, such as the Hindu theo-ecological concept in the Lontar Sri Purana *Tattwa*, which frames human professions and daily activities as a means to draw closer to God while simultaneously preserving nature (Suwena, 2021, 2022). Thus, a theological study of the Lontar Tutar Aji Saraswati holds not only historical and philological value but also offers a relevant ethical-spiritual basis for the lives of contemporary Balinese Hindus.

The Position of Balinese Textual Theology within the Study of Archipelago Hinduism

The findings above reinforce the argument that Balinese Hindu theology cannot be adequately understood solely by reference to Sanskrit scriptures from India; rather, it must also be explored through the local corpus of Kawi-Balinese manuscripts known as *lontar*. As emphasized in various studies of Balinese philology, *lontar* function as *Nibandha* derivative texts that elaborate upon and contextualize Vedic teachings within local cultural and cosmological frameworks (Sena, 2021). It is within this framework that the Lontar Tutar Aji Saraswati can be positioned as an expression of Archipelago Hindu theology, blending universal divine teachings such as the oneness of God, the Tri Murti, and Brahma Vidya with idioms and religious symbols distinctive to Bali, including the sacred script system, the *wuku* (Watugunung) calendar system, and specific *banten* (ritual offerings) and mantras. This discussion also opens a space for critical reflection. First, since Tutar Aji Saraswati is a manuscript authored by a priest (Ida Bagus) from the *griya* (priestly household) milieu, it likely represents the theological tradition of the Shaiva Brahmin community specifically the Shaiva Siddhanta school consistent with the tendencies observed in Tutar Aji Sasaraswati texts, which are classified as Shaivite (Yuliana, 2023). It is crucial to note this distinction to avoid prematurely claiming that a concept of divinity derived from a single manuscript represents the entirety of Balinese Hindu theological variants, especially given the historical presence of other schools such as Bhairava, Pasupata, and Sogatta in Bali's religious history (Yuliana, 2023).

Second, a theological reading of such *tutar* manuscripts should ideally move beyond the descriptive-textual level; it needs to be linked to the lived religious practices of contemporary Balinese Hindus for instance, how the *Dasaksara* and *Ongkara* teachings found in Tutar Aji Saraswati manifest in meditation, traditional healing (*usada*),

and daily rituals. Further research connecting tutur texts with contemporary religious ethnography would enrich our understanding of how this textual theology remains alive and undergoes transformation across generations a perspective also suggested in studies regarding the revitalization of traditional Balinese literature within religious and character education (Antari, 2025).

4 Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the Lontar Tutur Aji Saraswati is a tutur text that presents a cohesive system of Balinese Hindu theology, simultaneously encompassing teachings on sacred scripts, the nature of the Divine, and knowledge. The concept of the Divine within this manuscript is monotheistic in character, uniting transcendent and immanent dimensions: God is understood as a single absolute essence (*Ekam Sat, Nirguna Brahman*) that simultaneously manifests in various forms and functions (*Saguna Brahman*), particularly through the Tri Murti Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva as the creator, preserver, and dissolver of the universe. In this manuscript, Goddess Saraswati is understood as the śakti or manifestation of the widya (knowledge) aspect of God; thus, her veneration is essentially an act of honoring Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa as the source of all knowledge and wisdom. The text's structural presentation of sacred script teachings ranging from the Dasaksara to the Ongkara serves as a theological medium guiding humans from an awareness of the diversity of God's forms toward an awareness of His absolute oneness. This study affirms that the Lontar Tutur Aji Saraswati holds significant contemporary theological relevance, serving as a foundation for tolerance amidst diversity, strengthening the relationship between knowledge and spirituality, and fostering an ecological-theological consciousness for Balinese Hindus facing the challenges of the modern era. Further research is recommended to examine the manuscript's philological aspects in greater depth by comparing various lontar copy versions found in different collections, thereby achieving a more comprehensive textual and theological understanding.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declared that they have no competing interest.

Statement of authorship

The authors have a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The authors have approved the final article.

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