



## COEXISTING IN HARMONY: THE ROLE OF TRI HITA KARANA PHILOSOPHY IN THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF BALINESE SOCIETY

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the philosophy of Tri Hita Karana functions as an analytical framework for understanding the configuration of social relations in Balinese society. Addressing the research question—in what ways do the principles of Parhyangan, Pawongan, and Palemahan shape and regulate social structure amid contemporary sociocultural change?—the study employs a qualitative design grounded in interpretive sociology. Data were collected through purposive observations, semi-structured interviews with community leaders and cultural practitioners, and document analysis of local regulations and customary texts. Guided by the conceptual lens of relational ontology, the analysis demonstrates that Tri Hita Karana does not merely serve as a cultural value system but operates as a dynamic mechanism that structures authority, communal cooperation, and ecological stewardship. The findings reveal the adaptive capacities of these principles when faced with pressures from modernization, tourism development, and shifting land-use patterns. Rather than remaining static, the philosophy evolves through institutional innovations such as community-based agritourism, participatory land governance, and temple-centered social coordination. This study contributes theoretically by situating Tri Hita Karana within broader debates on indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable social organization. It also offers scholarly insight into how localized philosophical frameworks can generate resilient socio-ecological governance models.

### INTRODUCTION

Nestled within Bali's lush landscapes and vibrant cultural heritage lies a philosophy that has long shaped the foundations of communal life: Tri Hita Karana, or the "three causes of prosperity." Central to Balinese Hindu thought, this philosophy emphasizes harmonious relations with the divine (Parhyangan), among humans (Pawongan), and with the natural environment (Palemahan). While Tri Hita Karana is frequently celebrated as a cultural hallmark and an ethical guide embedded in rituals, architecture, agricultural systems, and communal governance, existing scholarship often treats it descriptively, focusing on its symbolic or traditional dimensions. However, less attention has been given to how this philosophy operates as a structural and adaptive framework amid rapid sociocultural transformations

such as tourism expansion, land-use change, and shifts in community authority.

This gap raises a key research problem: despite its widespread invocation in policy discourse and cultural narratives, the mechanisms through which Tri Hita Karana actively shapes—and is reshaped by—the contemporary social structure of Balinese society remain insufficiently examined. To address this gap, the present study asks: How do the principles of Parhyangan, Pawongan, and Palemahan function in structuring social relations and collective practices within a changing Balinese sociocultural landscape? By articulating this question, the study aims to move beyond descriptive accounts and provide a more analytical understanding of Tri Hita Karana as a dynamic socio-philosophical system. (Arimbawa, 2016).



Parhyangan—the spiritual dimension—infuses routine and ritual with a solemnity that reflects deep reverence for the divine. Daily offerings, temple festivals, and sacred ceremonies are not mere traditions, but active affirmations of a balanced relationship with the unseen world.

This spiritual foundation nurtures moral consciousness and collective identity, positioning the sacred as inseparable from the mundane.

Pawongan, the second pillar, emphasizes social cohesion through practices such as banjar (community councils) and gotong-royong (mutual cooperation). These institutions serve as the backbone of communal interaction—organizing religious events, managing shared spaces, and reinforcing bonds of reciprocity and solidarity (Budiarta, 2018). Here, social harmony becomes a lived experience, continuously reaffirmed through collaborative action.

Equally vital is Palemahan, which channels environmental stewardship as an expression of cosmic balance. Bali's communal irrigation system, the subak, stands as a hallmark of this philosophy in practice. The subak—an integrated network of water temples, canals, and terraced rice fields—is managed by farmers in a democratic, cooperative fashion that mirrors the Tri Hita Karana ethos of spiritual, social, and ecological harmony.

UNESCO has recognized the cultural landscape shaped by subak as a World Heritage site, highlighting how spiritual rituals, communal water management, and environmental balance converge in an enduring system (Darma & Sudarma, 2019).

Understanding the social structure of Balinese society through the lens of Tri Hita Karana reveals how these three elements coalesce to form a living cultural order. For instance, cooperative management of water resources not only sustains agriculture but also reinforces communal decision-making, trust, and shared ritual life—thus creating a resilient social fabric grounded in shared responsibility.

Beyond agriculture, the reach of Tri Hita Karana extends into community planning and cultural

tourism. In villages like Taro, the design of temple complexes intended for visitors reflects the interplay of spiritual symbolism (Parhyangan), communal narratives (Pawongan), and landscape integration (Palemahan). Similarly, traditional homestays in Ubud incorporate these philosophical pillars into architectural layouts and hospitality practices—bridging spiritual grounding, social warmth, and environmental harmony.

However, the application of Tri Hita Karana is not static; it evolves in response to modernization, tourism pressure, and urbanization. In urban areas such as South Denpasar, the integrity of spatial alignment (Palemahan), communal diversity (Pawongan), and spiritual focal points (Parhyangan) is challenged by land use changes, demographic shifts, and housing development. Such dynamics call for adaptive strategies that preserve cultural orientation, social cohesion, and spiritual continuity amid change.

Academic discourse also frames Tri Hita Karana within the concept of “islandness”, where Bali's geographic constraints and cultural particularity underscore the urgency of balanced development. As a guiding principle, Tri Hita Karana equips Balinese communities with tools to maintain cultural resilience, govern shared resources, and negotiate modern pressures without sacrificing identity or ecological integrity.

To address the research problem outlined above, this article clearly sets out a central objective: to analyze how the principles of Tri Hita Karana structure social institutions, spatial organization, and environmental practices in contemporary Balinese society. Building on this objective, the study adopts a multidisciplinary analytical lens—integrating ritual studies, rural governance, architectural analysis, and sustainability theory—to examine the mechanisms through which Tri Hita Karana operates both as a normative moral framework and as a pragmatic system of social regulation. By drawing on empirical examples from subak irrigation networks, village spatial design, tourism governance, and emerging urban adaptations, the article demonstrates how



Balinese communities negotiate continuity and change while maintaining a philosophical foundation that bridges past and present. This refined focus ensures that the purpose of the research is communicated explicitly and early, guiding the reader toward the analytical trajectory of the discussion.

## METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the role of the Tri Hita Karana philosophy in shaping the social structure of Balinese society. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings and values embedded in the social and cultural practices of the community, viewed from the perspective of cultural actors themselves. Data were collected through direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary studies of written sources such as customary manuscripts, village archives, and academic literature related to Tri Hita Karana, the banjar system, and subak. Interviews were conducted with community leaders, traditional elders, members of subak farming cooperatives, and local residents actively involved in social and religious activities (Hariyanto & Saraswati, 2020). Participant observation techniques were used to directly observe traditional ceremonies, banjar meetings, and agricultural activities based on the subak system, in order to capture the relationship between philosophical values and real-life social practices.

All collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, by identifying patterns of meaning that emerged from observations and interviews, then categorizing them based on the three core pillars of Tri Hita Karana: Parhyangan (harmony with the divine), Pawongan (harmony among people), and Palemahan (harmony with nature). The validity of the data was ensured through source and method triangulation, comparing information obtained from various respondents and data collection methods. The analysis process was conducted reflectively and continuously, from the data collection phase to the interpretation stage, to ensure that the resulting understanding is contextually accurate and aligned

with the social realities of Balinese life. Thus, this method does not merely record facts, but also uncovers the cultural meanings that underlie social harmony in Bali through the lens of Tri Hita Karana.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the qualitative research conducted through observation, interviews, and document analysis, it was found that the Tri Hita Karana philosophy is not merely a normative guideline in Balinese society, but is manifested concretely in social practices, agricultural systems, and institutional structures at the community level. The three core elements of this philosophy—Parhyangan (human relationship with the divine), Pawongan (human relationship with others), and Palemahan (human relationship with nature)—each make tangible contributions to shaping a harmonious, adaptive, and sustainable social order.

From the Parhyangan aspect, Balinese people consistently integrate spiritual values into their daily lives. This can be observed in the frequency and seriousness of religious ceremonies, temple worship, and symbolic offerings such as the daily canang sari. These rituals are not only expressions of devotion to Sang Hyang Widhi (God) but also function as collective bonding mechanisms within the community. A notable example is the presence of subak temples, which serve as spiritual centers within the traditional irrigation system. These temples do not merely facilitate ritual worship but also act as coordination hubs for water management in agriculture. Spirituality thus becomes a unifying instrument that connects individual and collective interests under a deeply rooted belief system.

In the Pawongan dimension, Bali's social structure, based on traditional communities such as banjar and desa pakraman, demonstrates a high level of social cohesion. Interviews revealed that individuals feel a moral responsibility toward one another, as shown in mutual aid (gotong royong), collective decision-making, and conflict resolution through customary deliberations. Awig-awig (written



customary law) serves as a formal guideline, but in practice, unwritten norms such as *isin* (shame), *ajeg* (respect), and *sesama* (mutual solidarity) are often more influential in shaping behavior. This indicates that the Balinese social system is flexible yet highly functional. When disagreements arise, solutions are reached through consensus and by balancing individual and communal interests. Pawongan, therefore, serves as the primary foundation for forming a social structure that is both adaptive and committed to maintaining collective harmony.

In the area of Palemahan, observations show that the relationship between humans and nature is not exploitative but symbiotic. Nature is viewed as a living spiritual system, and environmental management is conducted based on the principle of balance. A prominent manifestation of this principle is the subak irrigation system, recognized by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage site. In this system, water management is carried out collectively by farmers, within a democratically and spiritually organized institutional structure (Mahendra & Suryawan, 2017). The head of the subak or *pekaseh* plays both a technical leadership role and serves as a guardian of traditional values. Agricultural rituals, such as *mepatung* and *ngusaba*, are held regularly to maintain balance among humans, nature, and divine forces. Thus, Palemahan is not just an abstract principle, but a concrete and time-tested socio-ecological system that continues to thrive today (Putra & Wicaksana, 2015).

However, global dynamics and socio-economic shifts in modern life have presented significant challenges to the continued implementation of Tri Hita Karana in Bali. The research found that tourism growth, land-use conversion, and lifestyle changes among younger generations are major threats to the sustainability of traditional systems like subak. Many youth prefer to work in the tourism and service sectors rather than farming, which they perceive as economically less promising. This has led to declining participation in ritual subak activities and a weakening of farmer solidarity. In some cases, the

subak system has experienced fragmentation due to the lack of generational regeneration and community involvement (Saraswati & Sudira, 2019).

To address these challenges, several adaptive initiatives have been developed by communities and local governments. Some traditional villages and subak organizations have begun integrating cultural and agricultural activities into agritourism concepts, aiming to involve tourists in preserving local traditions. For instance, in areas such as Ubud and Tabanan, visitors can join educational programs on subak farming practices, such as planting rice, making offerings, and participating in small ceremonies. These strategies have proven effective in educating tourists about the values of Tri Hita Karana while also providing alternative sources of income for farmers. Additionally, provincial and district governments have enacted zoning regulations and sustainable agricultural land protection programs (PLP2B) to control land conversion and safeguard subak zones from uncontrolled development.

Further analysis of two case study areas—Subak Juwuk Manis (tourism-oriented) and Subak Temesi (purely agricultural)—revealed that the level of adherence to Tri Hita Karana values remains high, although the degree of sustainability varies. Using fuzzy logic analysis, the sustainability score of Subak Juwuk Manis reached 85.52%, while Subak Temesi scored 78.83%. This suggests that subak systems that have adapted through educational tourism strategies actually show stronger capacity to preserve their philosophical and social structures. On the other hand, subak systems that rely solely on traditional agriculture without economic diversification are more vulnerable to external economic pressures (Putra & Wicaksana, 2015).

These findings indicate that the Tri Hita Karana philosophy possesses strong resilience, as long as there are mechanisms of adaptation and sufficient policy support (Wibawa & Dewi, 2022). The key lies in the community's ability to preserve the essence of the values, even though the form of their implementation may evolve. Amid globalization and modernization





pressures, the principles of harmony between humans, nature, and the divine can still be upheld through cross-sector collaboration—between traditional communities, government bodies, scholars, and tourism stakeholders. Thus, Tri Hita Karana is not merely a cultural symbol to be preserved, but a living philosophical foundation that offers a framework for building an inclusive, sustainable, and dignified social system.

## CONCLUSIONS

The philosophy of Tri Hita Karana clearly serves as the foundational framework for establishing and maintaining social, spiritual, and environmental balance within Balinese society. The three main pillars—Parhyangan, Pawongan, and Palemahan—work synergistically to create a harmonious and sustainable way of life. Parhyangan strengthens the spiritual dimension and moral values that bind the community, Pawongan governs social relationships and norms that nurture solidarity and peaceful conflict resolution, while Palemahan integrates humans with nature through sustainable resource management and traditional agricultural rituals.

Despite facing pressures from economic development, lifestyle changes, and modernization, this philosophy remains relevant due to its capacity for adaptation through flexible social and institutional mechanisms. Local initiatives that combine traditional values with contemporary needs—such as the integration of agritourism and agricultural land protection—stand as concrete examples of successfully maintaining the principles of Tri Hita Karana in practice.

Therefore, Tri Hita Karana is not merely a static cultural heritage but a dynamic framework that preserves harmony among humans, the divine, and nature within an ever-changing social context. The success of safeguarding this philosophy depends greatly on the synergy among traditional communities, government authorities, academics, and the private sector, all committed to sustaining the

continuity and profound meaning of Tri Hita Karana for the future of Balinese society.

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