



The Pura's Oral History: The Forgotten Social Life of Bali's Temples

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Abstract. Although widely recognized as the “Island of a Thousand Temples,” many of Bali's sacred heritage sites lack formal documentation, relying primarily on local mythology. Focusing on key temples within Denpasar—the majority of which are nominated as objek diduga cagar budaya (ODCB)—this study utilizes oral history to demonstrate that these spaces served as vital hubs of community life rather than exclusively religious sanctuaries. Field data indicates that these sites historically functioned as civic spaces: serving as recreational areas, community healing centers during periods of limited medical infrastructure, and essential centers for food security prior to the development of modern markets. Furthermore, these narratives document significant human-environmental interactions, preserving institutional memory regarding local ecosystems and shifting landscapes. Ultimately, analyzing the oral traditions of these temples provides a comprehensive record of regional socio-economic dynamics, mapping their evolution into the contemporary era. Ultimately, oral history allows us to examine a heritage site's past within a closer contemporary timeline, celebrating its living legacy rather than tracking it too far back into poorly documented ancient eras.

Keywords: Oral History, Balinese Heritages, Collective Memory, Civic Spaces.

1 Introduction

Although Bali is often referred to as the “Island of a Thousand Temples,” historian Ida Bagus Sidemen has observed that the actual number of temples is considerably greater. However, the existence of these temples does not ensure comprehensive archival documentation. Only a small proportion of Balinese temples have well-documented textual histories based on contemporary written sources. In ideal Balinese tradition, a temple's lineage is recorded in written texts known as purana or prasasti. Though often conflated in daily conversation, a purana functions as an official site chronicle. In practice, however, such documents are rare. Communities usually rely on oral folklore and babad (genealogical chronicles) to explain a temple's origins. Far from being mere inventions, these myths reflect local reverence for ancestral figures, even if they offer little chronological clarity.

This study aims to fill this gap. When written sources are absent and only myths remain, Bali's temples actually still keep alternative stories rooted in deep memories and real experiences. This article wants to bring these stories forward to offer a different perspective: that a pura is not just a quiet place for worship, but a

living space where memories continue to grow from generation to generation. This research started from my experience with the Denpasar Cultural Heritage Registry Team (Tim ODCB). We inventoried several ancient temples in the city, such as Pura Taman Sari Tonja, and Pura Maospahit Grenceng,. In terms of architecture and rituals, these sites are very unique and have been preserved for generations. Yet, their histories are still broken, only relying on loose babad (chronicles) or myths.

My research interest deepened during a separate fieldwork project aimed at documenting monumental, ancient trees across Denpasar. Beyond these botanical landmarks, I uncovered rich narratives regarding the adjacent temples and the spatial evolution of their surroundings. Engaging with the oral accounts of community elders reveals that a temple's physical environment and its accompanying narratives systematically record major societal shifts. Even in the absence of formal archival documentation, these sacred sites effectively trace the localized transition from an agrarian baseline to a contemporary urbanized community.

2 Method

The concept of living heritage is a way to protect historical sites by balancing physical buildings (tangible) with the community's traditions and memories (intangible). The most important part of this approach is the local people who actively live in, protect, and develop the area. They ensure that traditions, rituals, and local knowledge continue from generation to generation [2]. Unlike old conservation methods that only focus on keeping building materials original, living heritage focuses on the people. It sees physical or functional changes as natural and normal, as long as these changes are accepted by and benefit the local community [2].

In practice, catching these memory details requires a fieldwork method that can record local stories. This is where oral history becomes an important tool to connect generations. It gives a voice to local stories that are often ignored by mainstream history books [1]. This method relies on deep interviews to gather memories from village elders, who act as the “memory keepers” of the site. This approach effectively breaks the silence of the past and strengthens the community's cultural identity [1]. By connecting community action with local stories, living heritage does not just save culture from being forgotten. It also strengthens community identity, improves social well-being, and builds a sustainable economy based on local culture [1]. Ultimately, this approach bridges the values of the past with the development needs of today and the future [2].

The concept of living heritage offers a dynamic paradigm for protecting historical sites by balancing physical structures (tangible) with a community's living traditions, spatial practices, and collective memories (intangible). At the core of this approach are the local inhabitants, the authentic practitioners and inheritors, who actively occupy, steward, and adapt the space, ensuring that rituals, local knowledge, and cultural values are transmitted across generations [2]. Unlike conventional conservation models that prioritize the rigid preservation of physical fabric, living heritage adopts a people-centered perspective. It views spatial or functional adaptations as organic processes, provided they align with and benefit the host community [3]

To capture these nuanced socio-spatial dynamics, oral history serves as a critical methodological bridge connecting memory, local narrative, and heritage management. Rather than viewing heritage purely through material artifacts or official documents, oral history operates as a mechanism of “history from below.” It legitimizes the lived experiences, sensory memories, and oral traditions of community elders, who act as primary “memory keepers”, as valid historical evidence [1]. This approach actively breaks the archival silence surrounding unrecorded heritage sites, allowing localized narratives to challenge or complement dominant historical discourses [1].

This integration aligns directly with broader international heritage discourses. As Harlov-Csorján emphasizes, global bodies such as UNESCO and ICOMOS increasingly highlight the human aspect as central agents in the heritagisation process. In contexts where formal archives or written inscriptions (*purana* or *prasasti*) are absent, oral history performs a vital dual function: it actively constructs what should be valued within a site and justifies community-driven management practices [3]

In practice, this research utilized an oral history methodology driven by in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key community members, including village elders, hereditary temple guardians (*pemangku*), local artists, and long-term residents (*panyungsung*). Fieldwork was conducted across targeted sites in Denpasar, specifically Pura Taman Sari Tonja and Beji Pura Maospahit. The collected oral testimonies were triangulated with spatial observations, physical artifacts (such as ancient wells, terracotta figures, and sacred flora), and regional urban history. By documenting how communities interact with, reconstruct, and assign meaning to sacred spaces over time, oral history transforms static monuments into dynamic arenas of living memory-bridging ancestral values with contemporary urban development imperatives [2].

3 Result

3.1 Study Case: Pura Taman Sari - Reading Memories and Local Narratives

In-depth interviews at Pura Taman Sari show that oral history is a crucial tool to find information that is completely missing from formal written documents. Because there is no *purana* or *prasasti* (inscription), the collective memory of the local worshippers (*panyungsung*) becomes the only living historical source. Inside this temple, the physical past is seen in several ancient artifacts, including a *sangku* (holy water vessel), terracotta statues, ancient shrines surrounded by a pond, and an old well. These physical (*tangible*) artifacts act as anchors of memory that prove their past existence, even though the exact timelines are blurry in the residents' minds.

This lack of formal history is replaced by local myths that connect the site to important figures in Balinese history. One of the village elders mentioned that the well is believed to be a legacy of Kebo Iwa. Although the residents do not know if this is factually true, several people from the Karang Buncing clan (the descendants of Kebo Iwa) once came to pray there and claimed the well belonged to their ancestors. From a living heritage perspective, this phenomenon shows how a sacred site adaptively creates spatial claims and family bonds through oral traditions, without needing the validation of ancient texts.

Interestingly, the historical awareness of the core community was also reactivated by interaction with academia. Informants noted that when archaeology students estimated the terracotta statues were extremely old, it gave the residents enthusiasm and a sense of pride to learn more about their temple's history. This testimony proves that the authenticity of ancient materials validated by external science can awaken civic pride. It also acts as a catalyst that pushes local people to take care of their own historical narratives through a *people-centered approach*.

However, when the oral history goes deeper past the Kebo Iwa myth, a closer contemporary timeline appears, which is much more intimate regarding the temple's social functions. The collective memory of the older generation records that the old well at Pura Taman Sari used to be a source for domestic needs and a traditional healing center for residents from various villages. A humorous memory came up when an informant recalled how the temple responded to a past health crisis:

"Imagine when we had chickenpox (edeh), we were supposed to avoid water, but instead we were splashed with water from this well. And we recovered."

This shared supernatural experience records how the temple's function transformed into an *indigenous healing center* when modern medical infrastructure was still limited. This medical paradox shows that local healing in Bali does not rely on biochemical logic, but on theological belief in the sacred sphere. Besides recording social-medical functions, oral history at Pura Taman Sari successfully reconstructs how this sacred space operated as an inclusive public space (*civic space*) for children in the past. Informants remembered that during their childhood, the inner courtyard (*jeroan*) of the temple was a lively and casual gathering place where children could freely play football in the afternoon. Because the games were so exciting, a carved dragon tail on the main building (*gedong*) was accidentally broken, and it has been left broken until today. The event of the broken dragon tail due to football—and the community's decision not to reconstruct it rigidly—is empirical proof of the high spatial tolerance that the core community had toward children's activities. The physical damage to the monument was not seen as desecration, but as a part of a living record where the site grows together with its people.

The agrarian memory of Denpasar before it was surrounded by urban modernization is also locked tightly in the residents' minds. They shared childhood experiences of playing while herding buffaloes (*ngangon kebo*), and even clearly mentioned that the texture of the grass in the temple yard is still exactly the same as they used to know. This identification of grass texture is a strong form of sensory memory. Amid massive land changes, the temple yard acts as an ecological time capsule where the grassroots community maintains their past agrarian identity within the temple's spatial walls.

The serious interview atmosphere began to relax as these childhood memories developed, bringing the 1960s generation back to their childhood days. Suddenly, one of them shared a personal spiritual-psychological experience. He remembered playing in the temple as a child but was often disturbed by a mystical entity inhabiting the temple called *Sang Hyang Krinyit*, which made him cry for hours without reason. Because he was disturbed so often, his friends nicknamed him "Krinyit" during his childhood. Uniquely, he has now grown up and serves as one of the head priests (*pemangku*) at Pura Taman Sari, giving special respect to the shrine of that exact entity.

This personal transformation shows a unique internal mechanism in the regeneration of living heritage identity. Subjective spiritual experiences act as cultural validation that forms the core community of temple guardians. This drives the natural regeneration of site managers without formal institutional intervention. This dynamic of myth and adaptation goes hand-in-hand with environmental changes from the agrarian era to urbanization. This is clearly recorded in the residents' memories regarding the shifting of physical *banjar* boundaries through the *Dajan* and *Dlod Gladag* stone markers, as well as practical changes in rituals, like the *nunas tirta* procession at Batur Sima which is now simplified using the *ngubeng* system (praying from a distance) to fit modern time efficiency.

Finally, this oral history method successfully reconstructs the artistic atmosphere and openness of public spaces in past Denpasar through the visual memories of artists. Through oral accounts, informants described life in the 1970s when the temple area was a location for cross-village purification (*melis*) ceremonies and a stage for Barong Tatan performances, which were routinely held from morning to evening. The golden piece of this oral memory is the eyewitness account of a six-year-old boy who watched the legendary painter Affandi and his assistant come to this temple to paint the Barong and Rangda of Tatan.

That young boy has now grown up to become I Made Wiradana, one of the famous master painters in Indonesia. This oral documentation from Wiradana's perspective not only validates Affandi's presence but also connects the local history of Pura Taman Sari with the development of modern Indonesian art [1]. This oral data proves that the inner courtyard of a temple in Bali is a highly inclusive and fluid space, where the boundary between the sacred (rituals) and the profane (children playing football, outside artists coming to paint) blends harmoniously. In the end, the reconstruction of Pura Taman Sari through oral history proves that the strength of the living heritage concept lies within the voices, memories, and transformations of the people living inside it.

3.2 Study Case: Beji Pura Maospahit: Water, Mysticism, and the Memory of the Twin Trees

In-depth interviews at Beji Pura Maospahit show how crucial oral history is for uncovering timelines and spatial functions not found in formal documents. Through the oral testimonies of Pemangku Nyoman Suantara, Pemangku Nyoman Ruswana, and Nyoman Suarta, Pura Beji, located about 500 meters from the main Pura Maospahit complex, is identified as a living heritage space. It records a close relationship between humans, nature, and spiritual sanctity. Local narratives consistently link the ancient well spring at the beji to local myth, celebrating it as the footprint of the legendary figure Patih Kebo Iwa. This water source is ecologically protected by the massive ancient trees growing around it.

Two banyan trees stand side by side at the site, yet they carry distinctly different histories: the Northern Banyan Tree and the Beringin Kuang Tree. Oral history successfully uncovers the historical lineage of this sacred vegetation. Nyoman Ruswana acts as a direct participant who helped plant the Northern Banyan in 1973. Its sapling was deliberately transferred from the main Pura Maospahit complex to replace a colossal ancestral banyan tree. The original tree had to be cut down because

its immense size threatened nearby shrines and homes. To protect the young sapling at that time, villagers safeguarded it within a bamboo cage. Conversely, the adjacent Beringin Kuang is a primordial tree, estimated to be hundreds of years old, dating back to the era of their great-grandparents.

Oral history also reveals the differences in practical use and magis-religious perception toward these two trees. The guardian community views them through the lens of cosmic duality (*rwa bhineda*)—the standard banyan represents the feminine aspect, while the kuang banyan represents the masculine. This spiritual classification dictates their practical use; only the leaves of the Northern Banyan are harvested for major rituals such as *memukur*, *ngaben* (cremations), and Saraswati offerings, sought after by both locals and pilgrims from outside the region who come to request them using *pejati* or *canang* offerings. Meanwhile, the Beringin Kuang's foliage remains completely untouched due to its intense spiritual energy. Local lore notes that outside woodcutters have repeatedly backed down from trimming its overgrown branches out of fear, reporting severe spiritual resistance the moment they approached the tree.

Furthermore, oral history at Beji Pura Maospahit successfully reconstructs spatial memory regarding the changing urban landscape of Denpasar. Informants note that prior to 1951, what is now Jalan Setiabudi in front of the beji was a dirt track and a waterway (*lobong*) where locals sourced clay to make red bricks. The government's paving and modernization projects in 1951 permanently cut off the physical courtyard of the beji from the main temple.

Despite this physical separation by modern city roads, the continuity of living heritage is maintained through rituals on Tumpek Wariga (Tumpek Bubuh) and Tumpek Landep. The community worships the manifestation of Ratu Pengalasan at the Balai Kembar shrine, an indigenous theological concept mandating forest conservation for watershed protection. This theological framework explains why the twin banyan trees at Beji Maospahit remain preserved and respected by an urban society. Ultimately, reconstructing the history of Beji Pura Maospahit through oral history proves that large trees in Bali are not merely natural infrastructure to hold water. Instead, they are spaces of living memory where ecology, the Kebo Iwa myth, and Denpasar's urban transformation are dynamically sustained.

4 Conclusion

This study proves that oral history and the living heritage approach are crucial tools for saving the history of Balinese temples that lack formal written documents like *purana* or *prasasti*. Through the collective memories of the communities at Pura Taman Sari Tonja and Beji Pura Maospahit Denpasar, it is revealed that temples historically did not just function as sacred religious sanctuaries, but as active public spaces (*civic spaces*). These sites record collective memories ranging from communal healing centers, playgrounds, and art performance stages, to the transformation of agrarian landscapes into urban spaces, and the ecological preservation of sacred trees rooted in local spirituality. Based on these findings, the way we view and treat cultural heritage in the future must undergo a radical paradigm shift. We must no longer get caught up in rigid, conventional conservation that only prioritizes physical, material authenticity (*tangible*) or gets busy tracking undocumented ancient timelines while

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References

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