



# The Meaning and Function of Rerajahan in The Religious Life of The Balinese Hindu Community

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## ABSTRACT

This abstract provides an overview of rerajahan, a form of sacred symbolism prominent in Bali, often referred to as the Island of the Gods. Rerajahan consists of small cloth pieces adorned with intricate images and inscriptions, such as human figures, mythical creatures, and sacred motifs, displayed on structures like homes and shrines. These symbols, embodying both artistic and spiritual dimensions, serve to invoke blessings and protection, reflecting the deep cultural and spiritual practices of the Balinese community. The term "rerajahan" originates from "raja," indicating an inscription or image with mystical power. In Balinese Hinduism, rerajahan is classified into two types: "rerajahan pengiwa" (left-hand path) and "rerajahan penengen" (right-hand path), each with distinct spiritual roles. These symbols are not mere decorations but require specific rituals, known as "pasupati," to activate their spiritual efficacy. The process of creating and activating rerajahan integrates sacred scripts, such as Modré, with symbolic imagery to harness their magical properties. Rerajahan plays diverse roles in Balinese rituals and daily life, including protection, healing, and enhancing spiritual well-being. It features prominently in religious ceremonies like the Panca Yadnya rituals and is used in offerings and personal amulets. The complex Balinese script and careful selection of media for rerajahan highlight its cultural and religious significance. Whether depicted on cloth, metal, or other materials, rerajahan represents a profound connection to the divine, underscoring its importance in both sacred and everyday contexts within Balinese Hinduism.

**Keywords:** Rerajahan, Bali, Spiritual, Hinduism.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the typical sights when visiting Bali, often called the Island of the Gods, is a small piece of cloth, usually no larger than an A4 sheet of paper, attached to buildings such as homes, shops, or small shrines at crossroads. These clothes are not just plain white but adorned with various images. Some depict human-like figures with crowns on their joints; others resemble terrifying giant figures, pairs of feet, lotus flowers, dragons, or even simple inscriptions surrounded by ornamental decorations. These images, inscriptions, and ornamental designs are known among the Balinese as 'rerajahan.' They represent a form of spiritual expression intertwined with art, invoking blessings based on the type and intent of the 'rerajahan.'

The term "rerajahan" is derived from the word "raja," which means an inscription or image imbued with mystical or religious power.<sup>1</sup> Rerajahan is a symbol. In Hindu rituals, various symbols, known as "yantras," are believed to hold religious

magical powers. From the perspective of *Rwa Bhineda*, there are two types of rerajahan: "rerajahan pengiwa" (left-hand path/negative) and "rerajahan penengen" (right-hand path/positive).<sup>2</sup> Despite their seemingly simple appearance, rerajahan requires a special ritual to activate its function. The Balinese believe that without undergoing a process called "pasupati," the rerajahan will not work and will remain a decorative image without any spiritual power. This article will explore rerajahan, its types and functions, and its requirements and use within the Balinese Hindu community.

### Expression of Art Imbued with Mystical Power

"Rajah" refers to an inscription or image possessing mystical or religious power. It represents a fusion of sacred script (*Modré*) with symbolic imagery. *Modré* script documents matters of a sacred nature, often imbued with religious and mystical significance, encapsulating teachings on divinity and symbolizing God in both

microcosmic and macrocosmic forms. The *Modré* script is typically composed of unreadable or cryptic words containing profound philosophical meanings related to the universe, intended to promote physical and spiritual well-being.<sup>3</sup>

The *Modré* script is mainly employed to write about magical topics, such as spirituality, liberation, and Japa Mantra. It includes three main types: *Aksara Lokanatha*, *Aksara Pati* or *Panten*, and *Wijaksana*. These sacred scripts are often combined with symbolic images to create rerajahan, which Balinese Hindus believe possesses magical powers. These powers can be harnessed for sacred purposes or actions contrary to dharma.<sup>5</sup> In Balinese, rerajahan is understood as inscriptions or symbolic drawings used as talismans for protection or healing. Rerajahan must be infused with the power of prayers or mantras to activate these magical properties.<sup>6</sup>

From a spiritual perspective, rerajahan serves multiple roles, including use in rituals, protection, sorcery, and personal

safeguards. Visually, rerajahan is considered a symbolic-magical (sacred) art form. It is a composite of mantras, sacred letters, and symbolic images created by individuals proficient in religious literature (priests) and sorcery (shamans) who also possess artistic skills.<sup>7</sup>

As talismans, rerajahan are utilized for various purposes, including ensuring safety or influencing specific outcomes, such as attracting customers or wealth. These images are typically etched onto materials like copper plates, wrapped in white cloth, and accompanied by mantras and offerings. They are then placed or carried according to their intended purpose. Due to their versatile



**Figure 1.**<sup>4</sup> "Rajah" refers to an inscription or image possessing mystical or religious power. It represents a fusion of sacred script (Modré) with symbolic imagery.

applications, rerajahan is often perceived as having negative connotations despite its intrinsic connection to positive or sacred aspects of religious rituals. However, for the Balinese community, these symbols bring a sense of security and comfort, serving as a protective shield in their daily lives.

In ritual practices, rerajahan plays a significant role in five types of ceremonies (*panca yadnya*), with varying applications depending on the ceremony.<sup>8</sup> For instance, in *pitra yadnya* or *ngaben* (cremation ceremonies), rerajahan symbolizes the deceased and is depicted on sandalwood, known as *pererai*, and on cloth, referred to as *kajang*, *kekasang*, and *racadana*. These depictions often represent humans, with explanatory text in Balinese script. The creation of *kajang* rerajahan is tailored to the deceased's social group (*soroh*), symbolizing the soul's journey to nirvana. Similarly, *kekasang* is a rerajahan drawn on a square piece of white cloth, depicting *nawa sanga* weapons as symbols of *Bhatara Nawa Sanga's* seat, and is infused with mantras by a priest before use to invoke safety and blessings from *Dewata Nawa Sanga*.

Moreover, rerajahan is also utilized in creating offerings (*banten*), serving as a primary or supplementary element. For such purposes, rerajahan is depicted in various forms, such as garuda, Padma, chakra, deities, or *nawa sanga* weapons, and applied to vessels like jars (*Paso*), woven offering containers (*ngiyu*), young coconuts (*bungkak*), and others. For example, a *ngiyu* decorated with a *garuda rerajahan* and filled with offerings is known

as *Banten Pengesor Surya*, used in rituals involving the "Catur" offering for the four cardinal directions. Garuda, the vehicle of Lord Vishnu, symbolizes the delivery of offerings to God.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, *nawa sanga* weapons rerajahan is often depicted on white cloth for various religious rituals, ensuring the continuity of rerajahan due to its integral role in religious ceremonies still practiced by the Balinese community.

Rerajahan is also frequently employed in preventative and curative treatments for illnesses, often combined with mantras and herbal remedies sourced from nature tailored to the specific illness. The forms of rerajahan typically involve a combination of sacred and secret Balinese script. Fundamentally, rerajahan is a product of Balinese Hindu culture, representing local genius, as evidenced in the *Panca Yadnya* ceremonies. The creation of *rajah* or rerajahan follows specific rules regarding how and where symbols and letters can be inscribed.

Various media are used for writing rerajahan, with the choice of medium depending on the specific instructions, purpose, and function. Commonly used media include ordinary paper, cloth with specific materials or colors, thin metal plates like gold, copper, silver, or brass, lontar leaves, and specific objects as directed, such as clay pots, *ulam taga* paper, bamboo, bricks, stones, wood, and others.

Religious practitioners and priests craft Rerajahan, traditionally inscribed on palm leaves. The functions of rerajahan include:

- 1) Serving as a means of protection in both the tangible and intangible realms.
- 2) Acting as a ward against negative influences.
- 3) Functioning as a guardian or offering for specific purposes.
- 4) Representing a form of mystical art.
- 5) Serving as protective amulets.
- 6) Imbuing particular objects or rituals with life.

Creating rerajahan is not arbitrary; it typically involves selecting an auspicious time known as "*dewasa ayu*."<sup>11,12,13</sup>

**Types and Functions of Rerajahan**

A common type of rerajahan that can easily be observed by folk is *Ulap-ulap*. In Bali, the



**Figure 2.**<sup>9</sup> Balinese Alphabet consists of Wianjana and Swalalita.



**Figure 3.14** Various media are used for writing rerajahan, with the choice of medium depending on the specific instructions, purpose, and function. Commonly used media include ordinary paper, cloth with specific materials or colors.

ulap-ulap is a sacred white cloth used in the *mlaspas* ceremony, which is performed to consecrate newly constructed buildings. This cloth, decorated with specific symbols or inscriptions, is typically placed strategically on the building, such as at the top or above doorways. The primary function of the ulap-ulap is to signify that the building has been purified and should be treated with reverence, as it is believed to embody a spiritual presence once consecrated. The designs and inscriptions on the ulap-ulap vary according to the purpose of the building and may include

sacred characters, divine weapons, or mythological figures.

the ulap-ulap serves as a symbol for invoking divine power into the structure. The term “ulap” translates to “to call” in Balinese, reflecting the intention to summon divine presence for protection. The creation of ulap-ulap requires the maker to undergo a purification ritual known as *winten*, ensuring both the cloth and the associated ritual maintain spiritual integrity. This practice is essential for upholding the building’s sanctity and spiritual equilibrium.

The ulap-ulap is employed in these rituals, with specific offerings and practices adapted to each situation. The cloth is inscribed with sacred characters and symbols, and its creation adheres to stringent ritual standards to maintain both spiritual and physical purity. The efficacy and sanctity of the ritual depend on the purity of the ulap-ulap and its creator. Consequently, the ulap-ulap and its associated offerings are crucial for protecting and purifying both physical spaces and individuals within Balinese Hindu practices.<sup>15,16</sup>

Rerajahan, or sacred symbols, can be categorized into four distinct types based on their forms and attributes. The first category includes symbols depicting human figures with various attributes, such as multiple arms, legs, or eyes, representing deities, their attendants, and ancestral figures. Notable examples include the *Ardhanarisvari*, which depicts the Supreme God as half-male, half-female, and figures symbolizing Shiva as the king of dancers.

The second category comprises animal forms, which serve as symbols or vehicles for deities. For instance, the *Barong Ket* symbolizes Sang Hyang Siva, while the *Barong Bangkung* represents Lord Vishnu in his quest for the *Lingga Kristal*. The golden bird Garuda, associated with rain and prosperity, and Naga Anantabhoga, embodying the earth’s sustenance, are also significant symbols. These animal forms often function as divine companions or vehicles.

The third category includes half-human, half-animal forms, such as Ganesha, the elephant-headed son of Sang Hyang Siva and Dewi Uma, and Hayagriva, who has a human body and a horse’s head. These forms represent specific divine attributes and narratives. Finally, the fourth category encompasses symbols related to objects or specific characters, including celestial bodies like the sun and moon, sacred syllables like Omkara, and symbols such as the Svastika or lotus flower. Objects like refined gemstones and sacred water, personified as Devi Ganga, also fall under this category.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, rerajahan is closely associated with the Balinese script, particularly the distinction between

ordinary and sacred script. Ordinary script includes *wreasta* and *swalalita*, used for daily communication, while sacred script is divided into *Wijaksara* (Bijaksara in Bali) and *Modre*. The Balinese script holds a high cultural and religious significance, integral to the unity of Balinese religion and culture. Some characters are readable, others are challenging to decipher, and some are unreadable, reflecting their mystical value. The script's complexity, including the direction and sequence of reading, adds to its spiritual significance, aligning with the intentions of the script's creator.

## CONCLUSION

In Bali, *rerajahan*, a form of sacred symbolism, is a common sight. These symbols, often displayed on small pieces of cloth attached to structures such as homes, shops, or shrines, are adorned with intricate images and inscriptions. These symbols, including human figures, mythical creatures, and sacred motifs, serve as a form of religious expression that intertwines art and spirituality. The primary purpose of *rerajahan* is to invoke blessings and protection based on their specific design and intent, reflecting the Balinese people's deep cultural and spiritual practices.

The concept of *rerajahan* is derived from the term "raja," which signifies an inscription or image endowed with mystical power. In Balinese Hinduism, *rerajahan* is categorized into two types: "*rerajahan pengiwa*" (left-hand path) and "*rerajahan penengen*" (right-hand path),

each serving different spiritual functions. These symbols are not merely decorative but require specific rituals, known as "pasupati," to activate their spiritual potency. The creation and activation of *rerajahan* involve a detailed process that combines sacred scripts, known as *Modré*, with symbolic imagery to harness their magical properties.

*Rerajahan* serves various roles in Balinese rituals and daily life, including protection, healing, and enhancing spiritual well-being. They are often used in religious ceremonies, such as the *Panca Yadnya* rituals, and are integrated into offerings and personal amulets. The complexity of the Balinese script and the careful selection of media for *rerajahan* underscore its significance in Balinese culture. Whether inscribed on cloth, metal plates, or other materials, *rerajahan* reflects a profound connection to the divine, demonstrating its importance in sacred and everyday contexts within the Balinese Hindu tradition.

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