



Tantrāyāna in Nusantara: Historical development of Tantra from Sriwijaya to the Gelgel Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Background: This article examines the early emergence of Tantra and the historical development of Tantrāyāna in the Indonesian archipelago (Nusantara) by tracing the dynamics of transmission, transformation, and localization from South Asia to Southeast Asia. The discussion begins with a mapping of academic debates on the origins of Tantra, particularly between perspectives that emphasize the continuity of pre-Tantric practices and those that assert a sectarian origin of Tantra within Śaiva and Buddhist traditions. **Methods:** This study employs a qualitative method with a historical-interpretative approach to investigate the development of Tantrāyāna in Nusantara from the early period to classical Balinese history. The research data are derived from library research, including primary texts, inscriptions, and relevant secondary scholarly works. **Findings:** The study demonstrates that Tantrism did not emerge as a static system, but rather developed as a fluid, dynamic, and cross-traditional historical process. In the South Asian context, the article highlights the interaction of Tantrism with Vedānta and Bhakti, as well as the diversity of philosophical interpretations, especially concerning non-dualism. The existence of esoteric Buddhist centers such as Sriwijaya, along with the development of Buddhist Tantra and Śaiva-Buddhist traditions in Java, indicates that Nusantara constituted a significant region in the history of Tantrāyāna. Through an analysis of Tantric texts, inscriptions, religious monuments, and Javanese-Balinese literary traditions, this article reveals the continuity of Tantric teachings from the Śailendra, Medang, Singasari, to the Majapahit periods. The discussion culminates in Bali as a distinctive space of Tantric localization, particularly through the transmission of Tantric teachings from East Java and Majapahit to the period of the Gelgel Kingdom of Bali. The roles of religious figures such as Dang Hyang Nirarta and Dang Hyang Astapaka are examined as central to the formation of Śaiva-Buddhist Tantric syncretism that underlies Balinese Hinduism. **Conclusion:** This article concludes that Tantrāyāna in Nusantara cannot be understood as a passive adoption from India, but rather as a religious tradition shaped through a creative, dialogical, and continuous process involving spiritual experience, political power, and local cosmology. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This study finds that the Śaiva-Buddhist tradition that developed in Nusantara is deeply intertwined with Tantric teachings, and that the material and cultural remains of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms in the Indonesian archipelago are closely connected to the influence of Tantrism.

Keywords: Gelgel Kingdom of Bali; Nusantara; Sriwijaya; Tantrāyāna.

1. Introduction

Tantra is one of the spiritual and philosophical traditions that originated in India and began to develop rapidly during the medieval period, approximately between the fifth and tenth centuries CE. Over the course of its historical trajectory, Tantra was not confined to Hindu and Buddhist traditions alone, but also spread across and shaped various religious practices in different regions of Asia (Fic, 2003). However, when introduced to the Western

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world, the term Tantra has often been reductively interpreted and narrowly understood as a doctrine of sacred sexuality. This view does not adequately reflect the true breadth of Tantra, as its core extends far beyond sexual concerns and encompasses a highly complex spiritual system. Tantra includes a wide range of practices such as meditation, ritual performance, mantra recitation, yogic disciplines, the use of sacred symbols, and the worship of multiple divine manifestations (Alper et al., 1983). These elements are integrated into a unified method aimed at transforming human consciousness. Tantra affirms that the body, mind, and energy are not separate entities, but an inseparable unity that must be cultivated holistically (Bjonness, 2013). Consequently, spiritual experience is not attained through the rejection of the world, but through a conscious and mindful engagement with all aspects of human existence.

From a Tantric perspective, the body is not regarded as an obstacle to spiritual attainment, but rather as the primary means through which one approaches the Divine. The body is understood as a sacred space in which cosmic energy resides and can be awakened through self-discipline, concentration, and sustained inner practice (Hyam, 2024). Tantric practices are designed to activate the latent energies within the human being, which, when properly directed, are believed to open higher levels of consciousness and lead to experiences of enlightenment (Rawson, 1973). Furthermore, Tantra encompasses rich cosmological teachings, symbolic systems, and profound philosophical reflections on the nature of reality and humanity's relationship with the universe. Tantric texts elaborate in detail ritual procedures, visualization meditations, and sacrificial offerings as means of self-transformation. For this reason, Tantra can be understood as a spiritual path that demands total engagement, not only at the level of thought, but also through concrete practices that integrate physical, mental, emotional, and transcendent dimensions in a unified manner (Anandamurti, 2008).

During the Vedic period, approximately 1500–500 BCE, the spiritual life of Indian society was largely determined by the performance of *yajña* rituals, which were formalistic in nature and could only be conducted by the Brahmin class. Spiritual knowledge at that time was derived exclusively from Vedic revelation and transmitted hereditarily within the highest caste. This condition positioned the Brahmins as the exclusive custodians of access to the sacred. Spirituality was therefore predominantly external, expressed through sacrificial rituals within a rigid social structure. As a result, opportunities for direct and personal inner spiritual pursuit were limited, since spiritual authority was centralized among the Brahmins and oriented toward externally and materially focused rites (Bartley, 2020).

Although the development of the Upaniṣadic texts and the philosophical systems of *Darśana* (such as Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, and others) introduced deeper philosophical reflections on reality and liberation (*mokṣa*), access to these teachings remained restricted to elite spiritual circles. The path to liberation continued to be framed within Brahmanical orthodoxy, and spiritual knowledge was considered legitimate only insofar as it conformed to the authority of the Vedas. Consequently, large segments of society—particularly lower castes, women, and non-Vedic communities—remained excluded, resulting in widespread spiritual alienation.

These limitations within the Vedic system contributed to a broader spiritual crisis, especially among those marginalized by orthodox religious structures. It was within this context that alternative movements emerged, emphasizing direct, transformative, and non-discriminatory spiritual experience. Tantra arose as a response to a deep longing for sacred experience that was not dependent on social status, birth, or strict adherence to formal ritual prescriptions (Adamson & Ganeri, 2020).

Tantra did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it developed by absorbing and integrating long-standing local traditions in India, such as the worship of nature deities, fertility powers, and popular spiritual practices. In this sense, Tantra functioned as an inclusive framework that embraced elements previously marginalized by official religious institutions. One of its defining features is the recognition of the divine feminine principle (*Śakti*), signaling a

paradigmatic shift from ritualistic patriarchy toward a spirituality that acknowledges gender polarity and balance (Singer, 2014).

The period between the third and ninth centuries CE was also marked by significant social transformations, including the rise of major kingdoms such as the Gupta, Chalukya, and Pallava dynasties, which fostered urbanization and multicultural environments. Increased trade, cultural exchange, and social mobility created new spaces for alternative religious practices. Tantra developed within this social milieu not only among forest ascetics, but also in urban centers, monasteries, and semi-secret communities that were more flexible and egalitarian in structure (Davidson, 2002).

Because it stood in tension with mainstream Brahmanism, Tantric practices often developed in relatively closed settings and were transmitted orally through highly personal guru-disciple relationships. Tantric knowledge was not freely written down, but conveyed through initiation and direct, esoteric practice. This mode of transmission positioned Tantra not only as an alternative spiritual path, but also as a form of epistemological resistance to Brahmanical and Vedic claims of exclusive authority over religious truth. Within this social context, Tantra emerged as a powerful cultural and religious force that revolutionized Hindu conceptions of the body, energy, and the path to liberation.

One of the earliest and most influential centers in the development of Tantrāyāna in Southeast Asia was Sriwijaya, which flourished between the seventh and thirteenth centuries. As a major center of Buddhist learning and an international pilgrimage destination, Sriwijaya played a central role in disseminating Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhist traditions through monastic institutions, royal patronage, and transoceanic networks (Soedewo, 2009). During this period, Tantrāyāna was closely intertwined with political authority, functioning not only as a path to spiritual liberation but also as a means of legitimizing state power. Following the decline of Sriwijaya, Tantric traditions in Nusantara did not disappear but instead underwent significant transformation. Tantrāyāna gradually moved beyond a strictly Buddhist framework and entered into intensive interaction with Śaiva and Hindu traditions, giving rise to localized forms of Tantra adapted to changing social, political, and cultural contexts. This process reached its most distinctive expression in Bali, particularly during the reign of the Gelgel Kingdom of Bali. In this context, Tantric doctrines and rituals were integrated into Balinese Hindu cosmology, temple worship, priestly institutions, and concepts of kingship, resulting in a unique synthesis of Balinese Tantra that continues to exert influence today.

Despite the significance of this historical transformation, existing studies tend to address Tantrāyāna in Nusantara in a fragmented manner. Many focus on epigraphic evidence, specific ritual practices, or art historical and iconographic analyses, without constructing a comprehensive historical narrative that connects early Buddhist Tantrāyāna in Sriwijaya with the later development of Hindu Tantra in Bali. Consequently, the continuity, adaptation, and localization of Tantra across historical periods remain insufficiently explained. Therefore, this study aims to examine the historical development of Tantrāyāna in Nusantara by tracing its trajectory from Sriwijaya to the Gelgel Kingdom of Bali.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research method with a historical-interpretative approach to examine the development of Tantrāyāna in the Indonesian archipelago (Nusantara) from its early period to the classical era of Bali. The research data are derived from library research, encompassing Tantric texts as well as Hindu-Buddhist religious literature. In addition, secondary data sources include scholarly works in the form of books and peer-reviewed journal articles relevant to the topic. This study seeks to explore the historical trajectory of Tantra, particularly its rapid development during the period of the Sriwijaya Kingdom and its subsequent transformation up to the era of the Gelgel Kingdom of Bali. The analysis also focuses on identifying the various influences of Tantric teachings on Balinese religious traditions. Data analysis in this study follows the analytical framework

proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Early history of the emergence of Tantra teachings

Over the past several decades, academic studies on Tantra have developed rapidly and have been marked by intense debates concerning its origins and earliest forms. A number of scholars, such as Davidson, Acri and Rosati, and White, argue that before Tantra became firmly established within Śaiva Hinduism and Mahāyāna Buddhism, a variety of practices that may be described as “pre-Tantric” already existed in South Asia. These practices included nāga worship to invoke rain, cemetery rituals, the use of skulls, beliefs in the resurrection of the dead, fertility symbolism, and magical practices deeply rooted in local traditions. According to this perspective, such pre-Tantric elements provided an important foundation for the later development of Hindu and Buddhist Tantra. However, this view is not universally accepted. Scholars such as Alexis Sanderson and Dominic Goodall reject the notion that Tantra emerged from non-sectarian popular practices, arguing instead that Tantra developed within more structured traditions associated with specific sectarian contexts, rather than from general folk religion. Thus, debates on the origins of Tantra reveal two opposing positions: one emphasizing continuity with local pre-Tantric practices, and the other stressing a more systematic sectarian origin (Payne & Hayes, 2022).

In several studies, the initial emergence of Tantrism is not clearly defined within a specific century due to the limitations and diversity of historical data. Nevertheless, to trace the roots of early Tantra, perspectives such as those proposed by M. C. Joshi in his work *Historical and Iconographic Aspects of Śākta Tantrism* are often cited. Robert L. Brown, drawing on Joshi's argument, suggests that Tantrism can be responsibly traced back to goddess worship in India since the Paleolithic period, approximately between 40,000 and 10,000 BCE. The evidence includes texts, inscriptions, and works of art that demonstrate the continuity of devotion to the Goddess. Brown (2002) explains that, according to Joshi, goddess worship in India is essentially Tantric in nature. He further states that “Śākta Tantrism is rooted in prehistoric concepts of a fertile mother goddess and traditional systems of worship.” From this perspective, Joshi does not identify a sharp distinction between representations of the Goddess in Tantric and non-Tantric traditions. Instead, the iconography and symbolic meanings of the Goddess are seen as continuous across historical periods and religious streams. The strength of this approach lies in its rejection of rigid and singular definitions of Tantrism. Tantra is not understood as a system that emerged suddenly, but rather as an ongoing historical process that continuously evolved. In this sense, Joshi as cited by Brown (2002)—assumes that Tantrism has been present since the earliest development of religion in India, particularly through the worship of the Goddess. Consequently, the historical development of the Goddess can also be viewed as the long history of Tantrism itself (Brown, 2002).

Another approach to Śākta Tantrism is proposed by Douglas Renfrew Brooks in his article *Auspicious Fragments and Uncertain Wisdom: The Roots of Śrīvidyā Śākta Tantrism in South India*. Unlike scholars who trace Tantra through broad historical surveys of diverse practices, Brooks conducts an in-depth analysis of a specific text, the *Tirumantiram*, written in Tamil. Through this study, Brooks finds that Tirumūlar was familiar with a highly structured form of Goddess worship, particularly within the framework of the Śrīvidyā tradition. Interestingly, although Tirumūlar is known as a Śaiva practitioner and not formally recognized as a Tantric figure, he nonetheless understood and utilized key elements of the Śrīvidyā system, especially the use of its core mantra (Brown, 2002).

Brooks's findings indicate that the boundaries between Śaiva and Śākta traditions were not always rigid or exclusive. Tantric practices, especially those related to Goddess worship, could permeate other traditions without fundamentally altering their identities. This demonstrates that Śākta Tantrism did not develop solely within purely Tantric communities,

but also influenced and was influenced by major traditions such as Śaivism. Consequently, the history of Śrīvidyā can be understood as the result of dynamic inter-traditional interaction rather than the product of a single, isolated lineage.

The Śrīvidyā tradition itself is rooted in its central mantra (*vidyā*), which represents the power of the Goddess. The Goddess worshiped in this system is commonly identified as Lalitāmbikā or Tripurā, who is understood to possess three levels of existence. The first is the gross form (*sthūla*), represented iconically through statues or images of the Goddess. The second is the subtle form (*sūkṣma*), expressed through the *śrīcakra* or ritual yantra. This yantra consists of nine interlocking triangles surrounding a central point (*bindu*), symbolically representing the totality of cosmic forces governing creation, preservation, and dissolution. The third is the supreme form (*parā*), which is transcendent in nature. At this level, the Goddess is no longer understood merely as a symbol or object of worship, but as ultimate reality itself absolute, non-dual consciousness. The entire universe, including human beings, is perceived as a manifestation of this single Goddess. From this perspective, Śrīvidyā practice is not merely ritualistic, but also philosophical and mystical, guiding devotees toward the realization that there is no essential separation between the worshiper, the cosmos, and the Goddess as the source of all existence (Karasinski, 2024).

The concept of the *śrīcakra* is understood as an esoteric means through which reality is symbolically and spiritually reconfigured. Through its use, cosmic forces are not merely conceived abstractly, but are re-presented within ritual space and even channeled into the practitioner's body through the awakening of *kuṇḍalinī*. Thus, the *śrīcakra* is not merely a sacred geometric diagram, but a cosmic map that connects the universe with the human body as a microcosm. This practice affirms the Tantric principle that the body is not an obstacle to spirituality, but rather the primary medium for realizing ultimate consciousness. Within the Samayācāra Śrīvidyā tradition centered on Goddess Lalitāmbikā, the *śrīcakra* is employed in three main forms. The first is the *śrīyantra*, drawn on paper, cloth, or engraved on metal plates, commonly used in domestic rituals and personal devotion. The second is the *Mahāmeru*, a three-dimensional representation of the *śrīyantra*, typically made of *pañcaloha* (a sacred alloy of five metals), symbolizing the cosmic mountain and serving as the focal point of ritual worship. The third form is the healing wand, used as a medium for channeling sacred energy for healing and purification purposes (Karasinski, 2024).

These three forms demonstrate that yantras are not only visual symbols, but also functional, dynamic, and interactive, capable of being seen, touched, rotated, and “activated” through mantra and meditation. In this way, practitioners do not merely observe symbols, but enter into the cosmic structure they represent. Each line, triangle, and point within the *śrīcakra* is understood as a manifestation of divine power operating both in the universe and within the human being.

Historically, the Śrīvidyā system developed in northern India, most likely in the Kashmir region, and began to be documented in Sanskrit texts around the ninth century CE. However, according to Brooks, the ideological structure of Śrīvidyā appears to have existed at least two centuries prior to its formal codification in Sanskrit literature. This suggests that before becoming a written tradition, Śrīvidyā already existed in oral practices, ritual performance, and the lived spiritual experiences of its practitioners. This indicates that Tantric traditions did not necessarily originate from scriptures, but rather from religious experience that was later systematized and textualized (Karasinski, 2024).

The fact that Tirumūlar was familiar with this ideology and capable of integrating it into his religious system reinforces the idea that Tantric thought had already spread widely across India from an early period. Awareness of Tantric ideas was not confined to major intellectual centers or large temples, but was also embedded in society through practices, symbols, and rites. This suggests that prior to its Sanskrit codification, Tantrism functioned as a kind of spiritual “undercurrent” flowing across diverse traditions and regions (Brown, 2002).

Brooks's work implicitly assumes the existence of a shared Tantric horizon of understanding among various Indian communities prior to formal codification. At this stage, Tantric ideology was not yet the exclusive property of a single group, but circulated relatively

freely among different religious traditions. Consequently, the early development of Tantrism can be understood as a fluid, open, and dynamic process, before it later crystallized into more rigid doctrinal systems.

These findings are further reinforced by the research of Maciej Karasinski, who notes that Śākta traditions in Kerala were likely directly influenced by Kashmir Śaivism and indirectly by Śrīvidyā. Karasinski argues that Śrīvidyā functioned as a connecting link among various Tantric traditions in Kerala during the modern period. These traditions were unified through cults centered on the worship of Goddess Lalitā, Śrī, or Tripurā in her gentle, maternal, and compassionate forms. In these traditions, the Goddess is revered as the supreme manifestation of Śakti, the eternal and fundamental principle of the universe. Ritual practices include the use of the *śrīcakra* and the *pañcadaśī* mantra as central elements. Notably, devotional icons in the form of mantras and yantras dedicated to the Goddess were known long before the emergence of written Tantric literature. This suggests that the core symbols of Tantrism first existed in practice and religious experience before being formalized in texts. Consequently, the history of Tantra is essentially a history of continuous interaction between spiritual experience, sacred symbols, and intellectual processes (Karasinski, 2020).

Another reference used by Brown to trace this intellectual history comes from Thomas B. Coburn's study *The Structural Interplay of Tantra, Vedānta, and Bhakti: Nondualist Commentary on the Goddess*. Coburn focuses on the *Devī-Māhātmya*, a text estimated to date from the sixth century CE, and examines how it was interpreted by Indian commentators in the eighteenth century. Two principal figures analyzed are Nāgoji Bhaṭṭa, an Advaita Vedānta thinker, and Bhāskaraṛāya, a Tantric master of the Śrīvidyā tradition. Through this comparison, Coburn explores how non-dual ideas were articulated differently within these two major traditions. He finds that despite their differing backgrounds, both Nāgoji Bhaṭṭa and Bhāskaraṛāya often relied on similar references in interpreting the *Devī-Māhātmya*, and both sought to read the text within a monistic or non-dual framework by interpreting the Goddess as an expression of a single ultimate reality. Thus, the bhakti text venerating the Goddess is not understood dualistically as positing an absolute separation between worshiper and deity, but rather as a path toward realizing unity between the human and the divine (Coburn, 2024).

However, the directions of their interpretations are not entirely the same. As an Advaitin, Nāgoji Bhaṭṭa ultimately places the Goddess beneath a higher reality, namely *Para Brahman*, which is *nirguṇa* (without attributes). For Nāgoji, the Goddess remains within the realm of manifestation and therefore does not constitute the highest reality. True reality is Brahman, which transcends all forms, names, and qualities. Within this framework, the world, symbols, and even the figure of the Goddess are considered provisional means toward realizing absolute Brahman. In contrast, Bhāskaraṛāya, as a Tantric practitioner of the Śrīvidyā tradition, does not assign secondary status to the physical world, the senses, or the diversity manifested through the Goddess. For him, all reality both subtle and gross is a direct expression of the Goddess herself. Consequently, there is no hierarchy that relegates the material world to mere illusion. Instead, the world becomes a sacred field in which divine power is present and can be directly experienced through ritual, mantra, and meditation.

Bhāskaraṛāya's approach illustrates the distinctive Tantric method of overcoming epistemological dualism. Whereas Advaita Vedānta resolves dualism through philosophical argumentation and metaphysical reflection, Tantra does so through esoteric ritual practice. Unity is not primarily achieved through intellectual speculation, but through direct experience transformed by ritual action. The world is not abandoned, but rather sacralized and "worked upon" as a path toward non-dual awareness. This highlights that although both traditions speak of non-dualism, Advaita Vedānta and Tantrism embody different orientations. Advaita tends to be philosophical and reflective, emphasizing knowledge (*jñāna*) as the primary means of liberation (Das, 1952), while Tantrism is more personal, existential, and ritualistic, emphasizing direct experience through the body, symbols, mantras, and ceremonies. This difference demonstrates that non-dualism is not a single doctrine, but a horizon of meaning that can be realized in multiple ways.

In modern India, Tantrism has experienced significant development, particularly in the Bengal region. In this context, Tantra plays an important role in Śākta goddess worship, Śaiva traditions centered on Śiva, and movements emphasizing the impersonal feminine principle of *śakti* as the animating force of the universe. These currents often overlap, allowing Tantra to function as a bridge between personal devotion to the Goddess and metaphysical understandings of cosmic energy.

The principle of *śakti* frequently leads to forms of non-dualism, though not always in the strict Advaitic sense. The underlying assumption is that all existence is rooted in a single supreme unity, such that the material world need not be rejected as illusion, but can instead be understood and lived as a path toward liberation (*mokṣa*). Within this framework, the body, emotions, desires, and social life are not regarded as spiritual obstacles, but as means of transformation. This perspective has enabled Tantrism to remain vibrant and relevant by bridging worldly experience and the search for ultimate meaning (Strube, 2022).

In his book *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, Hugh B. Urban examines Tantra as a highly complex and multilayered tradition. Urban rejects simplistic views that treat Tantra as a single, homogeneous form of “Tantrism.” Instead, he demonstrates that Tantra encompasses diverse schools, practices, and communities, interconnected through networks of symbols, rituals, and spiritual ideas. Through a historical and critical approach, Urban shows that Tantra cannot be understood from a single perspective, but must be viewed as a dynamic and evolving religious phenomenon (Urban, 2003).

One of Urban’s key findings is that for orthodox Tantric practitioners, Tantra is understood as a legitimate and profound spiritual path, often expressed through rituals involving the body, the senses, and even sexuality as means of spiritual transformation. The body is not regarded as an obstacle to purity, but as the primary vehicle for experiencing the divine. However, this unconventional approach later became the target of misunderstanding, particularly when encountered through Western moral and religious frameworks. During the British colonial period, Tantric practices were frequently stigmatized. Orientalists and colonial administrators portrayed Tantra as “wild,” immoral, and associated with addiction or deviance. This image emerged not only from misunderstanding, but also from colonial political interests aimed at portraying local cultures as inferior and in need of Western “enlightenment.” As a result, Tantra was marginalized in official discourse and regarded as the dark side of Indian tradition.

Indian responses to this stigma were not uniform. Some groups, particularly those seeking to emphasize the purity and respectability of Hindu teachings, distanced themselves from Tantric elements and promoted forms of religiosity considered more “pure” and rational. Other groups, however, appropriated Tantric symbols especially the figure of the Goddess as instruments of cultural resistance against British colonialism. The Goddess was positioned as a symbol of strength, dignity, and Indian identity that could not be subjugated by foreign power (Urban, 2003).

In the postcolonial period, particularly after India’s independence in 1947, Tantrism began to be rehabilitated both in academic scholarship and religious practice. Scholars such as Agehananda Bharati and Gavin Flood emphasized that Tantra is not merely a closed and deviant esoteric tradition, but a framework of religious experience that integrates the body, symbolic language, and the cosmos as a path toward spiritual realization. Tantra is understood as a system that unifies ritual, philosophical, and experiential dimensions in a holistic manner (Flood, 2005). Beyond academia, Tantric elements continue to live on in contemporary Indian popular culture. Mantras, yantras, and Goddess iconography remain prevalent in Śākta traditions, modern yoga practices, and various forms of urban spirituality. This demonstrates that Tantra is not a static tradition confined to the past, but one that continually adapts to changing contexts. Accordingly, Tantra can be understood as a tradition that exists perpetually between sacredness and controversy, between mystical experience and socio-political dynamics.

In the twentieth century, Tantra spread to the Western world, particularly to the United States, undergoing significant transformation. In the hands of spiritual teachers, therapists,

and practitioners of alternative spiritual movements, Tantra was often interpreted as a teaching of sacred sexuality. The primary emphasis shifted away from complex cosmological rituals toward intimate experience, bodily awareness, and interpersonal relationships. This version differs markedly from traditional Indian Tantra, which is more esoteric, symbolically rich, and bound to rigorous ritual discipline. Although this Westernized form appears to diverge substantially from its origins, Hugh B. Urban argues that it should not simply be dismissed as a “distortion.” Instead, he views it as a response to the needs of modern societies long shaped by moral frameworks that repress the body and sexuality. Modern Tantra offers a new narrative that views the body as sacred and sexuality as a means of healing, intimacy, and self-transformation. In this context, Tantra functions as a form of spiritual therapy for individuals alienated from their own bodies and desires (Urban, 2003).

Urban even describes modern Tantra as a “religion of late capitalism.” That is, Tantra develops within cultures that emphasize individual freedom, personal choice, and market logic. It becomes widely accessible through popular books, online courses, expensive retreats, and various spiritual products. Spiritual experience is packaged as a commodity that can be selected according to taste, lifestyle, and economic capacity. On one hand, this increases inclusivity; on the other, it risks diminishing the depth and discipline that characterize classical Tantra. Because of its ability to span contexts ranging from ancient ritual to modern therapeutic practice, Urban’s work is often regarded as one of the most comprehensive introductions to Tantra. He examines not only doctrines and practices, but also Tantra’s relationships with power, sexuality, colonialism, and capitalism. Consequently, Tantra is understood not merely as a spiritual phenomenon, but also as a social, political, and cultural one that continues to evolve (Urban, 2003).

When viewed retrospectively, the development of Tantra in India from its earliest phases was indeed highly complex. During the proto-Tantric period, Tantra and the Vedas were often distinguished, yet never entirely separated. Many Vedic elements were reworked within Tantric frameworks, and conversely, Tantric practices influenced interpretations of Vedic traditions. Tantric texts demonstrate that although rooted in oral traditions and myth, their teachings are temporal in nature that is, constantly moving and adapting to changing historical contexts. From a philological perspective, the emergence of Hindu and Buddhist Tantric texts (particularly *Vajrayāna*) reveals important similarities, including a shared emphasis on esoteric ritual, cosmological symbolism, and meditative practices aimed at transforming consciousness. This indicates that Tantra is not a single, isolated tradition, but a vast network of ideas and practices crossing religions, regions, and historical periods. It is precisely this flexible and adaptive character that has enabled Tantra to survive, transform, and continue to flourish both in India and in the modern global world.

3.2 The development of Tantra in Nusantara: From Sriwijaya to the Gelgel Kingdom of Bali

The name Bali is explicitly mentioned in an influential Buddhist Tantric text, the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, alongside the regions of Java and Sumatra. This reference indicates that Bali was already known within Indian religious and intellectual networks from the early period of Tantric Buddhism. The presence of Bali in this text suggests that the island was not merely a peripheral region, but rather an integral part of the interconnected spiritual landscape of South and Southeast Asia, linked through trade, pilgrimage, and the exchange of religious ideas (Yudiantara, 2019).

The *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* is generally dated to around the seventh century CE, a crucial period in the history of Buddhist Tantrism when esoteric doctrines began to undergo systematic formulation. Although the text was translated into Tibetan only around the tenth century, its contents reflect much earlier geographical and cultural knowledge. This confirms that Nusantara, including Bali, had entered the Tantric horizon well before the later phases of translation and re-codification in the Himalayan region (Krom, 1927a).

In addition to the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, another Tantric text closely associated with the development of Tantrism in Nusantara is the *Vināśikhā* Tantra. The Indologist Teun Goudriaan classifies this text as part of the “left-hand Śaiva Tantric tradition,” emphasizing

esoteric and symbolic ritual practices. This classification is significant because it points to a more transgressive form of Tantra, elements of which can also be identified in Southeast Asian religious practices (Goudriaan, 1985).

The *Vināśikhā* Tantra is even regarded as a primary reference text for King Jayavarman II, the founder of the Angkor dynasty in Cambodia. This association positions Tantra not merely as a spiritual doctrine, but also as an ideological foundation of political power. Tantra thus functioned dually as a path to spiritual liberation and as a means of cosmological legitimization for rulers establishing new dynasties.

Crucial information regarding the role of Tantra in the founding of the Angkor Kingdom is recorded in the Sdok Kak Thom inscription. The inscription states that Jayavarman II had returned to Cambodia from Java with the determination to establish an independent kingdom free from Javanese influence. This declaration reveals intense political and cultural relations between Java and Cambodia, while also underscoring Java's position as a regional power at the time. To realize his ambition, Jayavarman II invited a powerful Tantric priest named Hiranyadāma from Janapada. This priest was described as possessing extraordinary spiritual powers (*siddhi*) necessary to legitimate royal authority. The presence of Hiranyadāma highlights the crucial role of Tantric Brahmins in state formation and power structures in classical Southeast Asia (Krom, 1927a).

After demonstrating his spiritual authority, Hiranyadāma introduced four principal Tantric texts *Śiraścheda*, *Vināśikhā*, *Sammohana*, and *Nayottara*. These texts represent the complex spectrum of Śaiva Tantric teachings, ranging from cosmology and ritual to initiation techniques. Their introduction indicates that Tantric practices in the region were text-based and highly structured rather than purely oral. At Jayavarman II's request, a special ritual derived from the *Vināśikhā* Tantra was performed. In this text, the principal deity worshiped is Tumburu along with his four sisters. Tumburu is positioned as a significant manifestation of Śiva's divine principle within esoteric Śaiva Tantra, reflecting a cosmological and symbolic orientation in which the deity is understood as an active principle of cosmic consciousness.

The name Tumburu is widely known in Indian Śaiva textual traditions, including the *Jñānasiddhānta*, an important work within the Śaiva Siddhānta corpus. Tumburu is understood as another personification of *Ōṅkāra* (Sanghyang Ongkāra), which is not merely the sacred sound "Om," but the source of cosmic vibration (*nāda*) from which all reality emerges (Hariyanto & Wantari, 2021).

Significantly, several concepts found in the *Vināśikhā* Tantra remain alive in Balinese religious traditions today. One notable example is the concept of *Ōṅkāra Sungsang*, the inverted *Ōṅkāra*, believed to function as a channel for the flow of *amṛta* or the water of immortality. This concept appears not only in ritual mantras, but also in philosophical reflections within Balinese *lontar* texts, particularly those related to *tattva* and yoga. In Balinese tradition, *Ōṅkāra Sungsang* is often associated with the descent of divine energy from the *niskala* (transcendent) realm into the *sekala* (manifest) world. This continuity demonstrates the integration of Indian Tantric ideas within Nusantara cosmology, where visual symbols, mantra sounds, and the human body are understood as sacred media. Such parallels reinforce the argument that teachings like the *Vināśikhā* Tantra were not only known, but also localized and reinterpreted in Bali (Hooykaas, 1973b).

The historical association between Jayavarman II and the Śailendra dynasty further underscores the role of the *Vināśikhā* Tantra in Southeast Asian political-religious dynamics. In this narrative, the *Vināśikhā* Tantra is viewed as a ritual and ideological foundation that enabled Cambodia to break free from Śailendra dominance in Java. During Jayavarman II's reign, a new sovereign dynasty emerged in Cambodia, and the king was consecrated as a *cakravartin*, a universal ruler whose authority was cosmologically sanctioned. Concurrently, a new religious system known as the *Devarāja* cult was introduced, in which the king was worshiped as a divine manifestation on earth. This concept closely aligns with Tantric views on the unification of spiritual and worldly power (Goudriaan, 1985).

Long before the emergence of the *Devarāja* cult in Cambodia, Nusantara had already demonstrated highly advanced Tantric traditions. In 775 CE, sacred shrines dedicated to Padmapāṇi and Vajrapāṇi two principal bodhisattvas in Buddhist Tantra were established in

Sriwijaya. This indicates that Sriwijaya functioned as a major center of esoteric Buddhism with extensive intellectual networks reaching India and East Asia.

Similar developments occurred in Java. In 778 CE, a shrine dedicated to Tārā was constructed at Kalasan during the reign of Rakai Panangkaran, followed by the establishment of a Mañjuśrī shrine at Kelurak in 782 CE. This sequence of monuments demonstrates that Buddhist Tantra in Nusantara developed in a mystical and syncretic form, which later became the foundation of the Śaiva–Buddhist tradition (Krom, 1927b).

The Śailendra dynasty reached the peak of its Tantric expression with the construction of Borobudur, often regarded as the largest Tantric monument in the world. Many scholars argue that the philosophical foundation of Borobudur is closely linked to Yogācāra Tantra, a tradition emphasizing consciousness as the basis of reality and spiritual progress as a process of inner transformation. During the same period, the Ratu Boko complex was also constructed. At this site, a yantra in the form of a mantric diagram engraved on a gold plate was discovered. The mantra or *dhāraṇī* is believed to be related to the *Guhyasamāja* Tantra and *Sarvavajrodaya*, Buddhist Tantric texts preserved in Tibetan tradition (Krom, 1927b). Further studies indicate that similar mantras appear in versions of the *Ganapatitattva lontar* in Bali, reinforcing the continuity of Tantric traditions across regions and historical periods in Nusantara.

Alongside the Śailendra dynasty, political power in the Medang Kingdom was also held by the Sanjaya dynasty. During this period, one of Nusantara's greatest religious architectural achievements was constructed: the Prambanan temple complex, known in inscriptions as *Śivagrha* or *Svagrha*. While the complex affirms the dominance of Śaivism in Central Java, it also reveals layers of esoteric symbolism indicative of Tantric influence. Tantric traces at Prambanan can be identified through its iconography, mandalic spatial layout, and cosmological orientation. Some archaeologists and historians suggest that extreme rituals, including animal and possibly human sacrifice, may have been performed at the site. This hypothesis is based on the discovery of skulls and human skeletal remains around the temple complex, suggesting sacrificial rites within specific religious contexts (Sedyawati, 2009).

One Śaiva sect known for practicing human sacrifice is the Kāpālīka tradition, which worships Śiva through skull symbolism (*kapāla*). Although the Kāpālīka sect has long disappeared in India, many scholars argue that its teachings did not vanish entirely, but instead underwent local transformation in Nusantara, particularly in the form of Bhairava Tantra in Java and Bali. Bhairava Tantra emphasizes the worship of Śiva in his Bhairava aspect as a protector and destroyer closely associated with power, death, and liberation. This tradition demonstrates continuity with Kāpālīka practices, adapted to local cultural contexts (Atmaja, 2017).



Fig. 1. Bhairava Tantra in Bali

Following the Śailendra and Sanjaya dynasties, power in Medang shifted to the Iśāna dynasty. During the reign of Mpu Sindok, the political center moved to East Java, accompanied by the transmission of important religious-intellectual traditions. One monumental legacy of this period is the *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan*, a comprehensive Buddhist Tantric text integrating *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* teachings. To this day, the *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan* remains a primary reference for Buddhist priests in Bali, particularly the *Pedanda Boda* community in Budakeling. The text serves not only as a ritual manual, but also as a theological and philosophical foundation of Nusantara Buddhist Tantra. Since 1910, the Dutch scholar J. Kats has conducted extensive research on this text, which is still regarded as one of the most important sources for understanding esoteric Buddhism in Indonesia (Hooykaas, 1973a).

In western Nusantara, the great kingdom of Sriwijaya, also known as Suvarṇadvīpa, emerged as a center of international Buddhist learning. The kingdom was not only a maritime power, but also a beacon of global spiritual civilization. The Chinese pilgrim Yijing recorded that teachings from the *Yogācārabhūmi-Śāstra* were widely studied in Sriwijaya, indicating the prominence of Yogācāra philosophy in the region. The *Yogācārabhūmi-Śāstra* is the monumental work of Asaṅga, the founder of Yogācāra philosophy, which later became one of the key foundations of Buddhist Tantra. Some scholars suggest that Tantric developments in Nusantara, particularly in Sriwijaya, had already begun by the seventh century CE. One indication is the tradition that Dignāga, Asaṅga's disciple and a major figure in Buddhist logic, left Nālandā and settled in Sriwijaya around 684 CE (Hooykaas, 1973a).

Sriwijaya was also home to a highly respected Buddhist figure, Dharmakīrti known in Tibetan tradition as Śerlingpa. Dharmakīrti is regarded as a great spiritual and intellectual master, particularly in the development of philosophically and ethically oriented Mahāyāna Buddhism. He belonged to a major scholastic lineage rooted in the thought of Asaṅga and Śāntideva, and was symbolically associated with the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī as the embodiment of wisdom (Krom, 1927a).

As part of the dialogical interaction between Yogācāra and Madhyamaka traditions, Dharmakīrti emphasized inner practice, compassion, and deep insight into the nature of reality. In the Southeast Asian context, his presence in Sriwijaya underscores the kingdom's role not only as a political and commercial hub, but also as a center of advanced Buddhist learning that attracted students from India and beyond. Between 1011 and 1023 CE, the Indian master Atīśa Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna resided in Sriwijaya and studied directly under Dharmakīrti. This period was formative for Atīśa, particularly in integrating philosophy, ethics, and Tantric practice. Under Dharmakīrti's guidance, Atīśa deepened his understanding of *bodhicitta*, moral discipline, and the structure of the path to enlightenment.

During his time in Sriwijaya, Atīśa also taught the doctrine of the "Two Truths" (*satya-dvaya*), Nāgārjuna's distinction between conventional and ultimate truth. According to tradition, this teaching was composed at the request of the king of Sriwijaya, illustrating the close relationship between political authority and spiritual leadership, and confirming the strong presence of Madhyamaka thought in Nusantara. Atīśa also studied in Java, where Tibetan sources describe his experience as "returning home," reflecting a deep cultural and spiritual affinity between Java and Indian Buddhist centers. In Java, Atīśa studied under a Brahmin named Pindo, also known as Paindapātika.

Pindo played a crucial role in transmitting advanced Tantric teachings to Atīśa. Through Pindo, Atīśa received teachings on the concept of *Paramādibuddha*, a supreme Buddha principle transcending duality and forming a cosmological foundation within Tantra. Atīśa later referred to this doctrine in his monumental work *Bodhipathapradīpa* (*The Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*). The *Paramādibuddha* taught by Pindo is understood as the core doctrine of the Kālacakra Tantra. In addition to being a teacher of Kālacakra, Pindo is believed to have authored the *Śrī Kālacakra-garbhāṇḱāra-sādhana-nāma*, a text detailing Kālacakra practices and demonstrating advanced mastery of Tantra. The existence of this text further strengthens the argument that Java was an important center for the development and preservation of advanced Tantric traditions during the medieval period (Yudiantara, 2019).

After leaving Nusantara, Atiśa returned to India and later traveled to Tibet to teach and reform Buddhism there. Upon departing Nusantara, he is reported to have carried six works authored by Dharmakīrti. These texts became part of Tibet's intellectual heritage and serve as enduring evidence of ancient Nusantara Buddhist thought beyond its region of origin.

Returning to the Iśana dynasty, one significant phase in Javanese–Balinese history is marked by the marriage of Gunapriya Dharmapatni better known as Mahendradattā, a great-granddaughter of Mpu Sindok to Udayana, the king of Bali from the Warmadewa dynasty. This political and spiritual union was not merely the joining of two dynasties, but also an important channel for transmitting religious ideas from East Java to Bali. Many scholars argue that it was during this period that Tantric teachings, particularly from the Śākta tradition, began to gain clearer prominence within the Balinese religious landscape (Yudiantara, 2019). Mahendradattā is remembered as a politically powerful and symbolically significant female figure. In Balinese tradition, she is deified as Durga Mahīśāsūramardīnī at Pura Durga Kutri, emphasizing her association with the powerful, protective, and destructive aspects of the Goddess. This deification reflects the Śākta–Tantric view of feminine power (*śakti*) as the cosmic energy sustaining the world. Consequently, Mahendradattā is often understood not only as a queen, but also as a religious figure with strong mythological dimensions (Atmaja, 2017).



Fig. 2. Durga Mahīśāsūramardīnī at Pura Durga Kutri

In Javanese–Balinese literary and folkloric traditions, Mahendradattā is also frequently associated with the figure of Calon Arang (Redi, 2014). Although the historical relationship between the two remains debated, this association illustrates how collective memory intertwines historical figures with Bhairava Tantric symbolism (Sariada, 2017). Calon Arang represents the darker and more ambivalent aspects of Tantra magical power, cosmic rage, and norm transgression often misunderstood by non-esoteric traditions (Kurniasari & Sukarman, 2022).

Mahendradattā and Udayana ruled jointly as queen and king of Bali around 989–1011 CE. This period is regarded as one of political consolidation and intensified Javanese–Balinese cultural exchange. Their dynastic relationship had far-reaching consequences, particularly through their descendants who played central roles in East Javanese history. From this union was born Airlangga in 1001 CE. After the fall of the Medang Kingdom due to an invasion in 1016 CE, Airlangga who inherited Iśana lineage through his mother emerged as a unifying figure and established the Kediri Kingdom, marking a new chapter in East Javanese political history (Redi, 2014).

During Airlangga's reign, Old Javanese literature reached one of its peaks. In 1035 CE, Mpu Kanwa composed the *Kakawin Arjuna Wiwaha*, a monumental work rich in spiritual and political symbolism. Airlangga is the Javanese king most familiar within Balinese tradition,

particularly through his association with the Calon Arang narrative. In this story, Calon Arang a powerful widow from Girah attacks Kediri through black magic driven by personal grievance and social injustice. The conflict is ultimately resolved when Airlangga seeks assistance from Mpu Bharadah, a great priest praised in the *Nāgarakṛtāgama* as an eminent Tantric master. Mpu Bharadah represents the “white” aspect of spiritual power aligned with *dharma*.

After the Kediri period, Javanese history continued with the rise of the Singasari Kingdom. Its last ruler, Kṛtanagara (1268–1292), is known as a highly radical Tantric king. He is said to have mastered Bhajradhātu Tantra and to have been initiated under the name Jñānavajreśvara, indicating a high level of spiritual attainment within Buddhist and Śaiva–Buddhist Tantra. However, Kṛtanagara’s image is ambivalent. The *Pararaton* depicts him as a controversial figure, portrayed as a drunkard who indulged in revelry at cremation grounds. Both praise and criticism of Kṛtanagara ultimately stem from the same source his deep involvement in Tantric practices. The principal ritual associated with him is *gaṇacakra*, an esoteric communal rite that Alexis Sanderson links to the *Guhyasamāja* Tantra and Yoginī Tantras (Yudiantara, 2019).

Kṛtanagara was also known as an expansionist ruler, both politically and ideologically. He launched military expeditions across strategic regions of Nusantara as part of his vision to establish a maritime and cosmological empire. Bali was not exempt from these campaigns, and its conquest marked a crucial phase in Javanese–Balinese relations in the thirteenth century. After Bali was subdued, its ruler was taken captive and political authority on the island fell under Singasari control. To secure his rule, Kṛtanagara appointed Kebo Parud as *Raja Patih* in Bali, serving as a governing official representing Singasari authority.

During this consolidation process, major restructuring also occurred within Bali’s religious institutions. Religious officials from earlier Śaiva (*Kasewan*) and Buddhist (*Kasogatan*) lineages were replaced with figures aligned with Singasari’s religious orientation. This policy demonstrates how political power employed religion as an instrument of legitimation and social control. As a result, the form of Tantrism embraced by the Singasari elite began to develop more systematically in Bali. Pre-existing Śaiva–Buddhist Tantric traditions interacted with Singasari Tantric teachings, producing a new synthesis that later became a defining feature of Balinese spirituality. Traces of this process remain visible in *lontar* texts, iconography, and ritual structures in Bali to this day (Atmaja, 2017).

The fall of Singasari at the end of the thirteenth century did not halt these dynamics, but instead paved the way for the rise of the Majapahit Kingdom. Under Hayam Wuruk, Majapahit reached the height of its political and cultural power. The kingdom was not only militarily strong, but also a major center of literary production and religious thought. During Hayam Wuruk’s reign (1350–1368), monumental works with *Vajrayāna* nuances were composed. One such work is the *Kakawin Sutasoma* by Mpu Tantular, which expresses Tantric Buddhist values of compassion and tolerance. The concept of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* articulated in this poem reflects a profound synthesis of Śaivism and Buddhism within a Tantric framework.

In addition to *Sutasoma*, Mpu Prapañca composed the *Nāgarakṛtāgama*, which praises Hayam Wuruk and depicts Majapahit’s system of governance. This text is not merely a historical source, but also a cosmological document illustrating the integration of royal authority, spatial organization, and Śaiva–Buddhist Tantric religious legitimation. Meanwhile, after the fall of Singasari, Bali regained its sovereignty. The last Balinese ruler of the Warmadewa dynasty was Sri Astasura Ratna Bumi Banten, also known as Ki Tapawulung or “Sang Pertama Utama.” In Balinese tradition, he is remembered as both a king and an ascetic, and is often described as a practitioner of Buddhist Tantra. This aligns with the tendency of earlier Warmadewa rulers to integrate political authority with Tantric spiritual practice, positioning Bali as a significant center for the continuation of Tantric traditions in Nusantara (Hooykaas, 1973a).

In 1343 CE, the Majapahit Kingdom launched a military expedition to Bali, marking a major turning point in the island’s history. This conquest ended the rule of the Warman dynasty of the Singhamandawa Kingdom, which had governed Bali for nearly five centuries.

The event represented not merely a political transition, but also a profound reconfiguration of Bali's cultural, religious, and social structures. Following the Majapahit invasion, Bali's governance was reorganized through the appointment of Majapahit representatives known as *Dalēm*. These rulers governed on behalf of Majapahit and served as intermediaries between Javanese Majapahit traditions and local Balinese customs. From this period emerged the classical Balinese political pattern that integrated political authority with Śaiva–Buddhist Tantric religious legitimation.

Toward the end of Majapahit's golden age, particularly during the reign of Dalēm Watuenggong in Bali, two prominent Brahmin figures arrived from Java: Dang Hyang Nirarta and Dang Hyang Astapaka. Their arrival had far-reaching consequences, especially in religion, literature, and priestly institutions. This period is often regarded as the golden age of classical Balinese civilization, marked by rapid intellectual and spiritual development. Dang Hyang Nirarta is known as a *Kawi Wiku* a priest-poet who mastered both spiritual practice and literary composition. Throughout his life, he produced numerous important works that are not merely aesthetic literary creations, but also convey deep philosophical and spiritual teachings. These works functioned as media for transmitting religious teachings to Balinese society in symbolic and contextual forms.

Among Dang Hyang Nirarta's major works are *Kidung Rasmi Sancaya*, *Niti Śāstra*, *Puṣpa Sañcaya*, *Añang Nirartha*, and *Nirartha Prakerta*. When examined thematically and symbolically, these texts reveal the strong influence of Tantric paradigms in Nirarta's thought. He positioned the body, sacred syllables, mantras, and yogic discipline as means of uniting the human microcosm with the divine macrocosm a hallmark of Yogācāra and Śaiva–Buddhist Tantra.

Through his role, Dang Hyang Nirarta came to be regarded as the principal ancestor of the Śaiva Brahmins in Bali, known today as *Pēdanda*. Balinese Śaiva priestly systems draw heavily on the teachings, rituals, and spiritual lineages transmitted by him. Meanwhile, his nephew, Dang Hyang Astapaka, became the ancestor of Balinese Buddhist Brahmins, whose tradition is centered in the village of Budakeling. Dang Hyang Astapaka played a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of Tantric Buddhism in Bali. To this day, the *Pedanda Buddha* community in Budakeling preserves *Vajrayāna* and *Kamahayanikan* teachings as theological and ritual foundations. The existence of these two priestly lineages Śaiva and Buddhist both rooted in Tantra, explains why Śaiva–Buddhist syncretism is a defining characteristic of Balinese Hinduism (Kiriana, 2016).

It is therefore unsurprising that both Dang Hyang Nirarta and Dang Hyang Astapaka adhered to Tantric teachings, as Tantra had been a foundational tradition since their Javanese ancestors. Both figures are said to descend from Mpu Bharadah, the great Tantric *Yogīśvara* of Lemah Tulis, and from Mpu Tantular, the Majapahit poet who articulated *Vajrayāna* teachings in the *Kakawin Sutasoma*. Consequently, post-Majapahit Balinese civilization can be understood as a continuation of Javanese Tantric traditions reworked within the local Balinese context.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Tantrāyāna in the Indonesian archipelago (Nusantara) constitutes a religious tradition that developed through a long, dynamic, and context-dependent historical process, rather than as a mere passive adoption from Tantric centers in India. Since its early emergence, rooted in ritual practices and esoteric cosmologies in South Asia, Tantrāyāna has exhibited a strong adaptive character that enabled it to transform in response to changing social, political, and cultural contexts across different regions. Within the Nusantara context, the presence of Sriwijaya marks a crucial phase in the early history of Tantrāyāna as a center for the transmission of esoteric Buddhism and maritime networks of learning. During this period, Tantrāyāna functioned not only as a spiritual path but also as an instrument for legitimizing political authority, revealing a close interrelation between religious practice, royal power, and sacred cosmology. This relationship provided the foundation for the subsequent development of Tantric traditions in Nusantara. Over

time, Tantrāyāna in Nusantara underwent significant transformation through intensive dialogue with Śaiva and Hindu traditions. This process generated localized and syncretic forms of Tantra, particularly within the Śaiva–Buddhist framework, as evident in Old Javanese and Balinese traditions. The culmination of this localization is most clearly reflected during the period of the Gelgel Kingdom of Bali, when Tantric doctrines and practices were systematically integrated into Balinese Hindu ritual structures, priestly institutions, and cosmology, and have continued to endure as an integral part of the religious life of Balinese society up to the present day.

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