

INTERPRETING BALINESE MYTHOLOGY-THEMED CHARACTER DESIGN SIGNIFICATION AS A VIRTUAL ENTITY IN ANIMATION

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the significance of Balinese mythology-themed character design in animation as virtual entities, providing an in-depth analysis of their cultural signification and cultural implications, and their role in promoting social commentary and cultural preservation. Through the use of case studies, literature reviews and survey, the articles examines how various Balinese mythological figures including (*Hanoman*, *Garuda*, *Barong*, and *Rangda*) are portrayed in popular animated works and what cultural meanings are conveyed through their design choices. The article analysis reveals that Balinese mythology-themed character design in animation can reflect Bali cultural values, promote social commentary, beliefs, and traditions, serving as a means of preserving Balinese cultural heritage. Furthermore, the results demonstrate the importance of considering the cultural context in which mythology is presented in animation, as it can shape the interpretation of these virtual entities.

Keywords: Balinese mythology-themed, character design, signification, virtual entity

INTRODUCTION

Myths has been a significant influence in art, literature, and culture for centuries, and animation is no exception. From ancient Greek and Roman myths to folklore and fairy tales, mythology has provided a rich source of inspiration for animators to create compelling characters that resonate with audiences. In ancient Greek, myths were used to explain natural phenomena, social customs, and religious beliefs. The gods and goddesses of Greek mythology were portrayed as larger-than-life figures with human-like qualities, such as jealousy, greed, and love (Kilinski, 2013). These myths were passed down through generations and became part of the cultural identity of Greece (Evslin, 2012). In modern times, mythology has continued to be an influential force in popular

culture. From the superhero genre to fantasy fiction, mythology has provided a rich source of inspiration for storytellers (O'Daly, 2013). Animation is no exception, with numerous animated works featuring mythology-themed characters (Yusa, 2017). However, the design of mythology-themed characters is not merely a matter of aesthetics; it is a reflection of cultural values, social commentary, and historical significance (Yusa et al., 2023b).

In recent years, many international animated films have tried to incorporate various mythologies of the world into their settings and stories, which can be appreciated by both children and adults. The amount of mythology included and the degree of faithfulness to the mythologies being depicted can vary greatly (Hargrave, 2021; Tang & Gong, 2021). Emerson provides an overview of well-known international distributed animation films from 1992 to 2017 and shows how they represent the mythologies of different cultures. The following cultures have been analyzed by Emerson in terms of myths, legends, and folklore as depicted in animated films: (1) Arabian mythology as depicted in Disney's *Aladdin* (1992); (2) Greek mythology as portrayed in Disney's *Hercules* (1997); (3) Native Alaskan-Indian tribe mythology as shown in *Brother Bear* (2003); (4) Chinese mythology as shown in *Kung Fu Panda* (2008), *Kung Fu Panda 2* (2011), *Kung Fu Panda 3* (2016); (5) Irish mythology as shown in *The Secret of Kells* (2009) and *Song of the Sea* (2014); (6) Mexican mythology as represented in *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Coco* (2017); (7) Pacific Islands mythology as depicted in *Moana* (2016); and (8) Japanese mythology as shown in *Kubo and the Two Strings* (2016) (Emerson, 2019). However, there are questions about the educational value of these films for introducing children to myths, legends, and folklore.

Balinese mythology offers a rich and diverse source of inspiration for character design in animation. The intricate mythological tales and beliefs of Balinese culture provide a unique opportunity to explore the significance of these characters as virtual entities (Davies, 2007; Yusa, 2020; Yusa et al., 2021). Balinese mythology is an essential aspect of Balinese culture, reflecting the beliefs, values, and traditions of the people. These mythological tales offer a wealth of inspiration for character design in animation, providing a unique opportunity to explore the significance of these characters as virtual entities. In this research, the following inquiries require resolution: How does the virtual presentation of Balinese mythological character designs manifest in animation? Are there instances of reduction in their inherent sacred attributes? Through their design, Balinese mythology-themed characters can convey deeper meanings and serve as a reflection of

cultural values and beliefs. As such, it is crucial to interpret their design signification to understand their cultural significance fully.

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative research methodology to analyze Balinese mythology-themed character design in animation. To explore the significance of Balinese mythology-themed character design in animation, Authors conducted a case study analysis of domestically created and online distributed animated works featuring Balinese mythological figures: (1) Hanoman; (2) Garuda; (3) Barong, and (4) Rangda. This article examines the design choices of each character and their cultural significance. It also considered how the characters were portrayed in the context of the story and what social commentary was conveyed through their design.

Interview-based approach with Balinese cultural and animation experts to gather insights on character design selection, cultural implications, narrative context, and social commentary conveyed through character depiction in animated works are employed. The research involved a survey of 72 people who had been appreciating animation for 11-17 years and had been specifically watching and observing animated films for 2-6 years.

The survey focused on the respondents' opinions on the profile and concept of Balinese-Mythology character design used in animated films. The questions asked were about the character design and its use in animation. The interview results are analyzed intertextually with texts from relevant publication references. Through the use of case studies, references study, interview and survey, Authors examine how various mythological figures are portrayed in popular animated works and what cultural meanings are conveyed through their design choices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Character Design Selection

The Balinese culture is rich in mythology and folklore, and the use of mythological characters such as Garuda, Hanoman, Barong, and Rangda in animation works can be seen as a way of preserving and promoting Balinese culture to a wider audience. However, the use of these sacred characters in virtual form in animation works raises questions about the potential reduction in their sacred values and the transformations they may undergo in the process.

It is important to note that the Balinese people hold their mythology and folklore in high regard and consider these stories to be sacred (Duija & PF, 2019). The use of these

characters in animation works can be seen as a way of introducing them to a wider audience and promoting Balinese culture. However, there is a risk that the sacred values of these characters may be reduced when they are presented in virtual form in animation works (Yusa, 2020).

The transformation of Balinese mythological characters such as Garuda, Hanoman, Barong, and Rangda in virtual form in animation works can take many forms. In some cases, these characters may be simplified or altered to make them more appealing to a global audience (Wallace, 2020; Zulkarnain et al., 2019). For example, in the Disney film "Mulan," the character of Mushu, who is based on the Chinese mythological character of the same name (a dragon-like character design), is portrayed as a comedic sidekick. This transformation of the character can be seen as a reduction in its sacred value, as it is no longer taken seriously (Tian & Xiong, 2013).

On the other hand, the use of virtual form in animation works can also provide an opportunity to explore and expand upon the complexities of these mythological characters. In the Balinese traditional dance drama "Barong and Rangda," the characters of Barong and Rangda are depicted as complex and nuanced figures with rich backstories and motivations (Foley, 2022; Wirawan, 2019). In virtual form in animation works, these characters can be given even greater depth and nuance, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of their roles in Balinese mythology.

Cultural Implication

The display of Balinese mythology-themed character designs serves several important purposes, including the preservation of Balinese cultural heritage, the representation of beliefs and traditions, the reflection of Balinese cultural values, and to a lesser extent, the expression of political identity. In this section, the cultural implications are based on survey data and expert interviews in the fields of Balinese culture and animation.

The survey results revealed that 56 out of 72 (78%) of the respondents believed that there would be a reduction in the sacredness of mythological characters when they are portrayed in animated presentations. On the other hand, 10 out of 72 (14%) of respondents believed that there would be no reduction, as the characters still hold sacred value as mythological entities, while 6 out of 72 (8%) of respondents could not provide an answer or did not possess enough knowledge to respond.

One animation expert explained that a reduction in sacred values could occur due to the simplification of forms or symbols that reduce the authority of enchantment of the

mythological characters. A Balinese culture expert shared that a reduction could also happen if symbols representing the sacredness of a character are not presented relevantly according to the concepts and values that should be conveyed.

Most respondents, 50 out of 72 (70%), stated that the appearance of animated characters themed around Balinese mythology is motivated by a desire to preserve Balinese culture. 19 out of 72 (26%) see it as a reflection of a motivation to introduce traditional Balinese beliefs to society, and 3 out of 72 (4%) believe that there is a motivation to campaign for identity politics or Balinese-ness. From the survey results regarding the motivations behind the appearance of animated characters with Balinese mythology themes, it was found that the preservation of culture is the most common motivation or reason for the emergence of animated characters with Balinese mythology themes. This motivation for cultural preservation is also supported by expert sources in the fields of animation and Balinese culture.

An expert source in the field of animation provided insight that the creation of character designs with cultural or mythological themes not only has the motivation of cultural preservation, but is also a form of attitude or positioning, showcasing to the world or audience forum about the "existence" and superiority of the values brought along with the appearance of the intended animated characters.

Another cultural implication, as expressed by sources from experts on Balinese culture, is the potential for misinterpretation or misrepresentation of Balinese culture. The use of mythological characters in animation may not accurately reflect the cultural values and beliefs of the Balinese people. Inaccurate or imprecise representations can lead to misunderstandings and reinforce cultural stereotypes.

However, the use of Balinese mythological characters in animation can also have positive cultural implications. It can introduce Balinese culture to a wider audience and serve as a tool for cultural education. Animation can be a platform for conveying cultural values and beliefs in an entertaining and engaging manner. It can also encourage interest and appreciation for Balinese culture among younger generations.

Narrative Context

The practice of expressing traditional, cultural, and religious values through the transformation of oral traditions into visual storytelling in the form of animation is a complex process that requires a deep understanding of narrative context. This is particularly true when it comes to featuring mythological characters and stories from Hanoman, Garuda, Barong, and Rangda.

Narrative context refers to the way in which a story is presented and the various elements that make up that presentation, including the setting, characters, plot, and themes. In the context of transforming oral traditions into visual storytelling in the form of animation, narrative context is essential in ensuring that the traditional, cultural, and religious values being expressed are effectively communicated to the audience.

When it comes to featuring mythological characters and stories from Hanuman, Garuda, Barong, and Rangda, the narrative context is particularly important. These characters and stories are deeply rooted in the cultural and religious traditions of the regions in which they originated, and as such, they carry with them a wealth of symbolic meaning and significance.

In the transformation of these oral traditions into visual storytelling in the form of animation, it is crucial to maintain the integrity of these characters and stories while also adapting them to suit the medium. This requires a deep understanding of the narrative context surrounding the characters and stories, as well as an understanding of the cultural and religious traditions from which they originated.

One way in which narrative context is established in the transformation of oral traditions into visual storytelling in the form of animation is through the use of visual cues and symbols. For example, in the Balinese tradition, the character of Barong is often depicted as a lion-like creature, representing the balance of good and evil in the world. By maintaining this visual symbol in the animation, the narrative context of the character is preserved, allowing the audience to understand its significance within the context of Balinese mythology.

Another way in which narrative context is established in the transformation of oral traditions into visual storytelling in the form of animation is through the use of storytelling techniques (Yusa et al., 2023a). For example, in the Indian epic Ramayana, the character of Hanoman plays a significant role in helping the hero Rama rescue his wife Sita from the demon king Ravana. By using a storytelling technique such as flashback or foreshadowing, the narrative context of Hanoman's role in the story can be effectively communicated to the audience.

Social Commentary

The use of Balinese mythological characters in virtual format in animation is an interesting area of research, especially when it comes to social commentary. This research also explores the social commentary behind the use of Garuda, Hanoman, Barong, and

Rangda characters as Balinese mythological character designs in virtual format in animation. The article, at this section provides a brief overview of the cultural and historical background of these mythological characters, before delving into the social commentary embedded in their use as character designs in animation. Case studies of several animations featuring these characters are analyzed in order to provide a comprehensive view of how they are portrayed in virtual format. The essay—as a form of discourse result—concludes with a discussion of the significance of these social commentaries and how they contribute to the preservation and evolution of Balinese culture.

Balinese mythology is a rich tapestry of beliefs, rituals, and stories that have evolved over centuries. The use of Balinese mythological characters in virtual format in animation has become a popular trend in recent years, providing an opportunity to explore the cultural and social significance of these characters. Among the most recognizable and iconic of these characters are Garuda, Hanoman, Barong, and Rangda. These mythological creatures have been featured in a number of animated films and television shows, where they are presented as virtual entities with distinct character designs. However, these virtual representations are more than just visual representations of mythological characters; they are also vehicles for social commentary.

Garuda is a bird-like creature in Balinese mythology that is often depicted as a mount for the god Vishnu. Hanoman, also known as Hanuman, is a monkey-like creature in Hindu mythology that is revered in Bali as a symbol of courage, strength, and loyalty (Yusa & Putra, 2016). Barong is a lion-like creature in Balinese mythology that is often depicted as a protector against evil spirits (Darmawan, 2019; Sukerna et al., n.d.). Rangda is a demon queen in Balinese mythology who is associated with black magic and is often depicted with long fingernails and a long tongue (Segara, 2000; Wirawan, 2019). These mythological characters are deeply embedded in Balinese culture, and their use as character designs in virtual format in animation offers a unique perspective on the social commentary behind their portrayal.

The use of Garuda, Hanoman, Barong, and Rangda characters as Balinese mythological character designs in virtual format in animation conveys a range of social commentaries. One of the most prominent commentaries is the representation of good versus evil. In many animations featuring these characters, Garuda, Hanoman, and Barong are portrayed as protectors of the protagonist, representing the forces of good, while Rangda is portrayed as the antagonist, representing the forces of evil. This commentary is a reflection of the traditional Balinese worldview, which sees the universe

as a battle between good and evil forces.

Another social commentary conveyed through the use of these characters in animation is the preservation of Balinese culture. By featuring these mythological characters in virtual format, animators are able to showcase the rich cultural heritage of Bali to a global audience. This helps to preserve and promote Balinese culture, which is an important aspect of cultural heritage conservation in Indonesia.

Several animations featuring Garuda, Hanoman, Barong, and Rangda characters provide examples of the social commentary embedded in their use as character designs in virtual format. In the animated film "Hanoman Duta Satua Bali" (Hanoman as Messenger, Balinese Folktale) (Sugianto, 2021), the character of Hanoman (Figure 1) is portrayed as a wise and powerful ally to the protagonist. This portrayal reinforces the traditional Balinese view of Hanoman as a symbol of strength and loyalty. Hanuman is a character design originating from the Itihasa Ramayana, an epic story of Hindu mythology. Hanuman, also known as Hanoman, is portrayed as a white monkey with extraordinary strength, and a close ally of Rama, the main protagonist of the Ramayana. The character of Hanuman is widely used in various modern forms of art, literature, and media, including movies, animations, and video games (Mitra, 2019).



Figure 1. Hanuman or Hanoman portrayed as a wise and powerful ally
Source : Channel Satua Bali (<https://youtu.be/5G7q2Sp4wms>)

Itihasa refers to the two great epics of ancient India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. They are considered to be the most important works of classical Sanskrit literature, and they have played a significant role in shaping Indian culture and religious beliefs. The term "Itihasa" literally means "thus indeed happened" in Sanskrit, and it is used to denote historical or quasi-historical narratives. The emergence of cross-cultural communication and the assimilation of Hindu-Indian culture into the Nusantara

archipelago gave rise to the Indonesian Hanoman character, which is specifically the Balinese version of Hanuman in Hinduism (Perni & Archipelago, 2023).

In "Moana," the character of Maui takes on the role of a demigod who has the power to shapeshift into various animals, including a bird, which is reminiscent of the Garuda (Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018). The Garuda character was chosen to be used as the mascot for the 1st Bali Open International KungFu Championship in Bali, held from December 17th-23rd, 2018 (Figure 2). As the event mascot, Garuda was presented in virtual form, as a 3-dimensional (3D) model asset that was animated to showcase KungFu movements featured in the event's promotional video, which was based on 3D animation.



Figure 2. Garuda as the mascot for the 1st Bali Open International KungFu Championship in Bali, held from December 17th-23rd, 2018. Screenshot from original rendered digital animated film document, created by Studio 70, Bali (2018)

In "Barong and Rangda," the Barong is portrayed as a protector of the community, fighting against the evil witch Rangda who seeks to harm them. However, the depiction of Rangda is not as straightforward, as she is often portrayed as a complex character with a backstory that explains her motivations. The story of Barong and Rangda portrayed in many short animated movies. The aim of making Barong and Rangda characters into Chibi-style was to appeal more to children, as demonstrated by the animated film "Barong and Rangda" created by Tunlaya Hanlert in her CAMT Ani Project thesis titled "Barong and Rangda" from the College of Arts, Media and Technology, Chiang Mai University

(Hanlert, 2013). This simplification of forms, which was deemed too simple and banal, led to a loss of sacred values (Figure 3). According to experts in animation and Balinese culture, the main reason for this could be a lack of emotional, cultural, and cultural engagement on the part of the animation creators.



Figure 3. Oversimplified Barong and Rangda character design in animation
Source : (<https://youtu.be/9lildcE4wV8>), copyright © 2012 Tunlaya Hanlert

There are also other animated films that have been inspired by the Barong and Rangda characters, such as "Inkarna," which is considered one of the best examples. "Inkarna" is a 3D animation short film produced by Candramawa Production (Ivana Sari, Mega Srihoryanni, George Christian, Steven, Joshua, Timotius Jeremy) from Multimedia Nusantara University (UMN), Indonesia. Inkarna won the Best Story 3D Animation award at UMN Animation Screening Day 2016 and was nominated for the Student Animation Category at Apresiasi Film Indonesia (AFI) 2016, Animation Category at Indonesian Short Film Festival (ISFF) 2016, and Semi Finalist at Hellofest 2016 (Sari, 2016). The depicted Barong and Rangda character designs in INKARNA short animated film are based on the inspiration drawn from the Barong and Rangda mythological characters, as illustrated in Figure 4. The character representations have been altered using a popular culture perspective, incorporating techniques such as form simplification, the selection of relatable characters, and popular character design aesthetics (Yusa et al., 2017).



Figure 4. Character design inspired by Barong and Rangda in INKARNA short animated film Source : Compilation image from <https://inkarna.mystrikingly.com/>

In virtual format, these characters can be given even greater depth and nuance. Animators can explore the social and cultural significance of these mythological characters and use them as a lens through which to comment on contemporary issues. For example, in the Indonesian animated series "Gatotkaca," the eponymous hero is reimagined as a superhero fighting against corruption and injustice in modern-day Indonesia. The use of Balinese mythological characters in animation can also be seen as a way of preserving and promoting Balinese culture to a wider audience. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, there is a danger that local cultures and traditions may be lost or marginalized. Animation provides a platform to showcase Balinese mythology and culture, and to introduce it to new audiences.

CONCLUSION

While the use of Balinese mythological characters such as Garuda, Hanoman, Barong, and Rangda in virtual form in animation works can provide an opportunity to preserve and promote Balinese culture to a wider audience, it is important to consider the potential reduction in their sacred values and the transformations they may undergo in the process. Careful consideration and respect for the original source material is necessary to ensure that these characters are presented in a way that is true to their original form and the culture they represent. By doing so, these mythological characters can be celebrated and shared with a global audience while maintaining their cultural significance and importance.

The practice of expressing traditional, cultural, and religious values through the transformation of oral traditions into visual storytelling in the form of animation featuring mythological characters and stories from Hanoman, Garuda, Barong, and Rangda requires a deep understanding of narrative context. By maintaining the integrity of these characters and stories and adapting them to suit the medium, the cultural and religious significance of these traditions can be effectively communicated to a global audience. Through careful consideration of narrative context and the use of visual cues and storytelling techniques, these stories can continue to be shared and celebrated for generations to come.

The use of Garuda, Hanoman, Barong, and Rangda as Balinese mythological character designs in virtual format in animation is a powerful way to explore and comment on social issues, as well as to preserve and promote Balinese culture. By creating complex, nuanced portrayals of these characters, animators can engage audiences and spark conversations about a wide range of topics. Through animation, Balinese mythology can be brought to a global audience and celebrated for its richness and diversity.

The use of Balinese mythological characters in animation has both cultural benefits and potential drawbacks. It is important for animators to be aware of the cultural significance and sensitivity surrounding these mythological characters and to take appropriate measures to represent them accurately and respectfully. Further research is needed to explore the cultural implications of using Balinese mythological characters in animation in greater depth.

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