

The Lotus Flower and White Frangipani: Cosmological Meaning and Aesthetic Practices in Balinese Hindu Rites

Ida Bagus Gde Yudha Triguna^{1□}, I Ketut Winantra², I Putu Suweka Oka Sugiharta³

^{1,2} Universitas Hindu Indonesia

³ Universitas Hindu Negeri I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa Denpasar

□ Jalan Sangalangit, Tembau, Penatih, Kecamatan Denpasar Timur, Kota Denpasar— 80238

ajiktriguna353@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Flowers are central to Balinese Hindu ritual practice, but previous studies have interpreted them mainly as ritual ornaments, symbolic offerings, or aesthetic complements to ceremonial performance. Much less scholarly attention has been paid to their role as embodied aesthetic media at the intersection of sensory perception, religious experience, and cultural meaning. This study addresses that gap by investigating flowers as integrative media in Balinese Hindu ritual, linking materiality, symbolism, ethics, and spirituality. It adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach based on field observations, in-depth interviews with Hindu priests and ritual practitioners, and textual analysis of the *Agastya Parwa*. The analysis is also informed by Hindu Aesthetics (Triguna, 2025), symbolic anthropology, and ritual studies. The results show that flowers are not merely aesthetic objects but ritual media embodied in four interrelated dimensions: material, ethical, symbolic-cosmological, and spiritual. Together, these dimensions transform sensory experience into sacred experience. The study reveals the distinctive symbolic roles of ritual flowers, including the lotus (*tunjung*) as a cosmological symbol of purity and cosmic order, and the white frangipani (*Plumeria alba*) as an aesthetic conduit of everyday devotion and cultural continuity. Based on these findings, this article proposes the Balinese Hindu Ritual Aesthetics Model, which approaches ritual aesthetics as a holistic religious experience constructed through the interaction of material objects, embodied practice, symbolic meaning, and spiritual consciousness. This model contributes to debates in the anthropology of religion, material religion, ritual studies, and embodied aesthetics by showing that flowers are shared cultural media through which religious values, cultural memory, and cultural resilience are continually reproduced in Balinese Hindu society.

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INTRODUCTION

Hindu rituals in Bali are cultural practices with important implications for art and aesthetics. Above all, religious rituals are artistic performances involving patterned visual designs, objects, colours, scents, and bodily techniques (Schechner, 2013; Kapferer, 2004; Bell, 1997). From this perspective, flowers play a crucial role as an aesthetic form of mediation between sensory perception and symbolic meaning. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains, religious systems operate through symbols that construct an atmosphere of feeling and an orientation of significance within social practice (Geertz, 1973).

Within *Tri Hita Karana*, meaning the Three Causes of Well-being, flowers (*sekar*) are valued not only for their decorative or offering (*banten*) functions but also as living symbolic materials that embody sanctity, beauty, and impermanence. Their fragrance, colour, and fragility make them especially suited to conveying devotion in an immediate yet transient form. This understanding is consistent with symbolic anthropology, which views ritual materials as instruments of meaning-making and transformation through sensory experience and social action (Turner, 1967; Morgan, 2010; Plate, 2014; Meyer, 2012).

Nevertheless, analyses of Balinese art and ritual have often treated flowers primarily as decorative or technical devices, with insufficient attention to their role as a sensory and visual language within ritual (Pink, 2011; Howes, 2014). Research on Balinese performing arts and rituals indicates that the aesthetic materials of ritual performance, including natural substances, intensify feeling, create a sacred ambience, and cultivate *taksu* (spiritual power) within ceremonies (Bandem, 2001; Dibia, 2012). In this light, flowers should be understood as part of the ecology of ritual aesthetics rather than as mere additions.

This article proceeds from the premise that flowers in Balinese Hinduism span two intertwined worlds: cosmology and everyday lived practice. The lotus symbolises pure and sacred creation, while the *mandala* visualises the universe and is therefore associated with harmony and prosperity. In everyday life, the white frangipani represents an accessible form of devotion that is repeatedly enacted in household prayers and modest offerings. Together, these flowers illustrate the range of Balinese ritual aesthetics, from elevated cosmological symbolism to grounded and repetitive devotional practice.

The *Agastya Parwa* palm-leaf manuscript is also consulted to illuminate the ethical and aesthetic qualities of flower offerings. The relevant passage is interpreted not as a prescriptive code but as a set of values establishing standards for incense offerings and flowers: freshness, fragrance, wholeness, and respectful gathering. This interpretation aligns with the material religion approach, which emphasises how religious experience is mediated through the body, the senses, and ritual materiality (Meyer, 2011).

Focusing on the *tunjung* and white frangipani, this article develops an aesthetic argument demonstrating how Balinese Hindu flower rituals mediate between cosmological order and everyday devotional practice. Through symbolic and material readings, the study contributes to discussions of Balinese ritual art by interpreting natural elements as integral to communal aesthetic experience and spiritual aspiration. This artistic dimension has deep historical roots in Balinese culture.

Within this framework, the article situates flowers as aesthetic media in Balinese Hindu religious practice, focusing specifically on the lotus and white frangipani in relation to cosmological symbolism and everyday devotional practices.

METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach (Charles Teddlie, 2009), guided by an ethnographic-interpretive tradition, to explore flowers as elements within the aesthetic ritual complex of Balinese Hindu ceremonies (Geertz, 1973; Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, 2007; Pink, 2015). This approach was selected because it is well suited to examining the symbolic, sensory, and social dimensions of flower use in everyday ceremonies and devotional practices, which cannot be adequately reduced to numerical measures (Creswell, 2014; Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, 2018).

Data were gathered through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, textual study, and documentary sources. Household prayer practices and several communal ritual contexts were observed through participant observation, with attention to the presence of offerings, the types and arrangements of flowers, and the aesthetic experiences involved. Informants included *banten* specialists, temple priests or *sulinggih*, and ritual practitioners directly involved in selecting flowers for offerings. They provided information about local knowledge, aesthetics, and the ethics of offerings (Spradley, 1980).

The textual source is the *Agastya Parwa*, a palm-leaf manuscript translated into Sumatran Malay by Sura (2002). It is read as a moral text concerning floral offerings and aesthetic qualities such as freshness, fragrance, wholeness, and a respectful attitude towards gathering flowers. This textual reading is placed in dialogue with fieldwork to explore how textual norms intersect with practice. The research was also grounded in an extensive literature review of Balinese ritual art and symbolic anthropology (Meyer, 2011; Turner, 1967), providing a robust analytical framework and scholarly positioning.

Data were analysed inductively and thematically by reading fieldwork and textual sources as mutually illuminating clusters of meaning. The analysis addressed the cosmological meaning of *tunjung*, the everyday aesthetics of white frangipani, the sensory qualities of flowers, including colour and fragrance, and the ethics of selecting and gathering flowers. These themes were examined through dialogue between symbolic functions and material-sensory dimensions.

Source and method triangulation, together with limited validation by informants on sensitive or contextual matters, was undertaken to ensure the credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2014).

This perspective views flowers not merely as ritual elements but as active aesthetic materials that shape sacred experience and devotional practice in Balinese Hindu rituals.

RESULTS

Flowers and the origins of Balinese Hindu ritual aesthetics

Field research shows that ritual aesthetics in the Balinese Hindu tradition extend beyond visual beauty. Aesthetics is a lived experience involving the body, the senses, emotions, and spiritual consciousness simultaneously. As discussed in Hindu Aesthetics (Triguna, 2025), aesthetic experience is built upon aisthesis, the human capacity to perceive and experience the world through the senses. Human beings encounter reality through colours, smells, textures, rhythms, and emotional atmospheres before conceptual understanding. Aesthetic experience is therefore a fundamental mode through which human beings relate existentially to the world and to sacred reality.

In Balinese Hindu ritual, however, aesthetic experience conceived in this way extends well beyond mere sensory perception. This is evident in the religious norms governing the appropriateness of ritual offerings. One important textual source that explicitly states that not all flowers may be offered to *Hyang Widhi* is the *Agastya Parwa* (Sura, 2005). It prohibits flowers that are infested with worms, have fallen naturally rather than been picked, are covered with ants, are withered or past their prime, or grow in cemeteries. Flowers used for worship must instead be fresh, clean, and intact, making them worthy symbols of *bhakti* (devotional reverence) (Putu Budiadnya & Komang Prayogi, 2022).

These prescriptions indicate that a flower's aesthetic quality is inseparable from its ethical and spiritual qualities. Freshness is not merely a visual attribute but an indicator of sincerity (*śraddhā*) and the purity of the offering. Fragrance is not simply a source of sensory pleasure; it creates an atmosphere of inner peace that enables devotees to enter more deeply into religious experience. Thus, the ritual aesthetics of Balinese Hinduism embodies an ethic of giving: the finest materials are offered as a tribute to God.

Field observations show that these principles remain well preserved in contemporary Balinese society. Before preparing *canang* or *banten* offerings, ritual practitioners meticulously examine each flower. Blossoms that are stale, damaged, or withered are not used and are discarded. This practice is understood not merely as a technical procedure but as a religious discipline passed down from generation to generation as an integral part of Balinese Hindu cultural tradition.



Picture 1. White Frangipani (*Plumeria alba*) flowers used in offerings in Balinese Hinduism

These observations are further supported by an interview with Ida Bagus Candra (49), a *walaka* (Balinese Hindu religious practitioner) from Griya Buruan, Tabanan:

"The flowers used for offerings in the rituals should be fresh and not withered. They are even better when they are scented and come in a variety of colours such as white, red, yellow, black and others" (Interview, 3rd Oct, 2025).

To explain the importance of providing fresh and fragrant flowers, he offered the following analogy:

"God is pure so our gifts should be pure, fresh and if possible fragrant. It can improve the inner disposition and bring the heart closer to Ida Sang Hyang Widhi."

This study shows that the aesthetic performance of Balinese Hindu ritual occurs at the intersection of sensory experience, ethical norms, and symbolic meaning. As argued in Hindu Aesthetics (Triguna, 2025), aesthetic experience involves more than viewing beautiful objects. It is a quality of experience in which perception, emotion, action, and reflection are integrated into a coherent framework of meaning. Within ritual practice, flowers function as beautiful media that connect the devotee's body, consciousness, and spiritual experience.

The qualities required of flowers used in rituals, as described in the Agastya Parwa, also demonstrate that, from the perspective of symbolic anthropology, symbols are never merely material objects. Cultural practices are collectively performed, interpreted, and transmitted, and their symbolic significance is produced through these processes. Thus, a flower in Balinese Hindu ritual is not simply an aesthetic object but a living symbol that connects human beings with cosmic order through conscious, sincere, and reverential acts of offering. This aligns with Hindu Aesthetics, which holds that human beings perceive the world not only through the body but also through symbols. Ritual beauty is therefore an experience that integrates sensory perception, cultural values, and spiritual consciousness into a unified religious experience.

The ritual flower is not a sign that points to something beyond itself but a symbol that mediates the sacred reality of religious experience. Symbols are mediating structures between the empirical world and the world of meaning (Triguna, 2025). Thus symbols call to mind the collective consciousness, preserve cultural values and turn the everyday human experience into religious experience. The selection of flowers in Balinese Hindu ritual, therefore, is not to be understood as a question of visual aestheticism, but as a symbolic mechanism for human beings to get into contact with the cosmic order and the Divine.

The study summarises these findings by arguing that the suitability of flowers as ritual offerings in the Balinese Hindu tradition depends not only on their biological properties as plants but on the intersection of three interrelated dimensions: material quality, ethical quality, and aesthetic-spiritual quality. Flowers are valued for their freshness, wholeness, fragrance, and purity. Their ethical quality is expressed through respectful and sincere selection, handling, and presentation. Their aesthetic-spiritual quality is manifested in their capacity to generate an experience of sacredness that engages both the senses and the religious consciousness of worshippers. Within this conceptual framework, the normative criteria for flowers appropriate for ritual offerings are described in the Agastya Parwa, while Hindu Aesthetics (Triguna, 2025) explains how these material qualities are transformed into aesthetic and spiritual experience. The ethnography presented in this study shows how these principles are embodied, transmitted, and reproduced in the ritual practices of Balinese Hindu communities. Flowers in Balinese Hindu ritual therefore cannot be reduced to decoration or religious symbols alone; they are aesthetic media through which religious norms, sensory experience, ritual action, and cultural continuity are integrated into a living religious experience.

***Tunjung* as a Cosmological Symbol in Balinese Hindu Ritual Aesthetics**

Field observations reveal that the *tunjung* flower (*Nelumbo nucifera*; lotus) occupies a highly distinguished position within the ritual tradition of Balinese Hinduism. Compared with other ritual flowers, *tunjung* is valued not only for the elegance of its form and colour but also for the profound symbolic meanings associated with it. In temple ceremonies as well as rituals concerned with purification, the lotus is frequently placed at specific locations within the *banten* (ritual offering) that function as symbolic centres of ritual orientation. Its presence evokes an atmosphere of serenity, majesty, and sacredness, making it one of the most recognizable aesthetic elements in Balinese Hindu ritual practice.



Picture 2. *Tunjung* (Lotus) as a Sacred Medium in Priestly Worship in Bali

This is corroborated by the reports of ritual specialists who see the lotus as the archetypal symbol of purity because it grows from the muddy waters bearing a flower of exquisite beauty and impeccable cleanliness. The natural quality, informants said, symbolised man's ability to cultivate spiritual purity in the midst of worldly impurity and adversity. The use of *tunjung* in ritual offerings is not simply a matter of adhering to tradition, but it also carries a moral and spiritual message of cultivating purity of thought, speech and action.

The *tunjung* (lotus) flower is also often found in *banten pancalingga* in *melaspas* (ritual consecration) and *ngenteg linggih* (temple enthronement) ceremonies. Similarly it also forms part of the ritual of *atma wedana* (post-cremation purification) and the *pengentasan jiwa* (soul liberation) ceremony, which is performed in different forms of *padudusan* and other major Balinese Hindu ritual observances. These ritual contexts indicate that the lotus is appreciated not only for its aesthetics but also for its deep theological and cosmological significance in the ritual tradition of Balinese Hinduism (Interview with Ida Bagus Candra, 3 October 2025).

This is also seen in an interview with Ida Ayu Mirah (72), a well-known *tukang banten* (ritual offering specialist) from Griya Jambe, Tabanan:

"The most exalted, the most pure flower is the lotus (tunjung) or astadala. But the blossom itself, though it grows in the mire, is pure. This is the reason why the lotus flower is used in Nyurya Sewana ritual performed by Ida Pedanda." (Interview, 5 October 2025)

The Agastya Parwa has long been the textual basis for the reverence accorded to flowers as ritual offerings. The flowers offered to the Divine should be pure, fresh and offered according to the ritual signifying the highest reverence of the devotee to God. Therefore, the selection of *tunjung* is not only based on aesthetic consideration, but also based on the religious principle that the material of the best quality should be used in the offering in *bhakti* (devotional worship). This tradition is still faithfully preserved by the Balinese society who only chooses fresh and flawless lotus flowers for the needs of rituals.

The Aesthetic Experience of the lotus is not only about the appreciation of its visual form, but also about the Hindu Aesthetics (Triguna, 2025). Aesthetic experience is conceived as a mode of lived experience that arises from the integrated participation of body, senses, emotions and spiritual consciousness. Thus the beauty of the flower is not separate from religious experience itself but a way in which the devotee can meaningfully engage sensually with sacred reality. So in the ritual offerings, when the worshippers reflect on the lotus, they are not merely appreciating the physical beauty but a spiritual experience through the ritual symbolism.

Hindu Aesthetics expands this view further by stating that the body is the principal vehicle of aesthetic experience. Beauty is not an object for abstract intellectual contemplation but an object for immediate bodily participation in ritual life. The aesthetic experiences that constitute religious consciousness are the ritual activity of making *banten*, the aroma of the flowers, the tactile experience of selecting the best petals, and the silence that surrounds the space during prayer.

The significance of *tunjung*, then, does not lie in the flower but in the sacred experience created by the dynamic interaction of human beings, ritual symbols and religious practice.

The study's findings also suggest that the *tunjung*'s symbolism has a deep cosmological meaning. In Hindu iconography the lotus is the divine seat of the gods and symbolises the birth of life from the primordial cosmic source. The lotus that grows in water and mud does not get stained by mud and water. It is a sign, therefore, of our ability to convert this worldly existence into spiritual purity. Cosmological symbolism continues to be reproduced in Balinese ritual practice, so that its sacred meanings are embedded in everyday religious life.

From the point of view of symbolic anthropology, the *tunjung* is an instance of a multivocal symbol, as Victor Turner (1967) describes it, a symbol that carries religious, moral, aesthetic and cosmological meanings at the same time. It is not only the medium between human being and the Divine, but also creates a collective consciousness of the cosmic order that sustains the Balinese Hindu way of life. According to Geertz (1973), the lotus is a web of significance, which the society uses to give meaning to reality through inherited cultural symbols. This interpretation is the basis for Triguna (2025) to say that *tunjung* is a multilevel symbol, which contains cosmological, religious, ethical and aesthetic dimensions at the same time. The symbols are not just about conveying meaning; they are actively involved in shaping the way communities experience reality and organise relations between human beings, nature and the Divine.

These findings lead this study to suggest that the *tunjung* flower in Balinese Hindu ritual is not merely an aesthetic ornament or ritual accessory, but a cosmological symbol that can turn aesthetic appreciation into an experience of sacredness. This transformation is achieved through the interrelation of three interdependent dimensions, i.e. religious norms stated in the Agastya Parwa, the aesthetic experience embodied in Hindu Aesthetics (Triguna, 2025), and the cultural practices that are continuously reproduced in the Balinese Hindu society. Consequently, *tunjung* does more than beautify ritual performance; it mediates the relationship between human beings and the cosmic order by fostering symbolic experiences that engage the senses, emotions, and spiritual consciousness simultaneously.

The Aesthetics of Devotion in Everyday Life: White Frangipani (*Plumeria alba*)

In almost all acts of daily worship of the Balinese Hindu, the white frangipani (*Plumeria alba*) is seen, whereas the *tunjung* (lotus) is mostly linked to major ceremonial events and has considerable cosmological meaning. Field studies suggest that frangipani trees are virtually always located in the compounds of households, family temples, and communal areas of *desa adat* (customary villages). They not only enhance the beauty of the surrounding environment, they are also a source of easily accessible flowers that are picked daily for ritual offerings. This situation shows that the white frangipani is much more than an ornamental plant, it has become part of the religious life of Balinese Hindu communities.

Another example of how symbols are not only powerful because of extraordinary ceremonial events, but also gain their potency through constant repetition in everyday life, is the use of white frangipani as part of everyday life. As argued by Triguna (2025), the cultural symbols continue to exist through the continuous reproduction of meaning in the social practice and thus become part of the collective memory of a community. So how are religious symbols maintained through routine devotional practice not just extraordinary ritual moments? Indeed, the white frangipani is a constant in daily worship.



Picture 3. White Frangipani (*Plumeria alba*) in a Balinese House Compound

Before the sun had risen high enough to light up the landscape, field observations recorded women carefully collecting white frangipani blossoms early in the morning. The flowers chosen were typically those that had recently opened, fresh, unspoiled and not fallen to the ground. Immediately after being picked, the flowers were arranged into *canang sari* together with other ritual materials. Although this activity appears simple, its daily repetition establishes a rhythm of religious life that has become inseparable from the everyday experience of Balinese Hindu families.



Picture 4. A Young Man Gathering White Frangipani (*Plumeria alba*) for Canang Sari

Interviews with informants revealed that white frangipani is chosen not merely because of its abundance and accessibility but because its white colour symbolises purity, sincerity, and clarity of heart when approaching *Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa*. Its subtle fragrance creates a tranquil atmosphere conducive to focused prayer. For most informants, the flower is not simply a component of the ritual offering but an intrinsic part of spiritual experience transmitted from childhood through the religious traditions of family and community.

These results show that the religious experience of Balinese Hindus is mainly constructed from simple acts that are performed regularly in everyday life. However, from the point of view of the Agastya Parwa, the use of flowers in the ritual is not only a ritual obligation, but an expression of reverence toward the Divine by offering flowers that are clean, fresh and ritually appropriate. Thus, the practice of choosing freshly bloomed white frangipani provides an example of how scriptural injunctions continue to influence religious practice, even when they are not consciously articulated by those who worship.

In the framework of Hindu Aesthetics (Triguna, 2025), the practice serves as another illustration of the fact that aesthetic experience is born from the holistic engagement of body, perception and lived experience. Beauty is not confined to the appreciation of aesthetically pleasing objects but becomes an existential experience through which individuals encounter the world by means of colour, fragrance, touch, and emotional atmosphere. Within daily worship, the white frangipani generates precisely such an aesthetic experience. The new flowers, with their delicate fragrance and pure white colour all serve to create a devotional mood and prepare the faithful for prayer and meditation. The continued practice of this ritual also shows the role of ritual as a means of cultural transmission. Ritual is a cultural institution that maintains and

reproduces values by symbolic repetition, thus enabling communities to maintain their cultural identity in the midst of continuous social change (Triguna, 2025).

Hindu Aesthetics takes this further, suggesting that the aesthetic experience is intrinsically embodied, arising from the body's active involvement with the world. The collection of flowers, the arrangement of *canang sari*, the offering and the joint prayer are a series of bodily practices that transform ordinary daily activities into a sacred experience. Consequently, the white frangipani should not be regarded merely as an aesthetically pleasing object but as a medium through which the body, the senses, and religious consciousness converge within a unified experience of the sacred.

The ethnographic evidence also shows that the symbolic power of the white frangipani is in its repeated perpetuation. It is not used as ceremonial flowers but it forms part of the daily devotional life of Balinese Hindus. Such repetition produces what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls webs of significance, networks of cultural meaning that are continually reproduced through symbolic practice. At the same time, from the perspective of Victor Turner (1967), these repeated devotional acts can be read as forms of social drama which constantly re-create communal solidarity through simple but deeply meaningful ritual symbols.

The white frangipani is unique in its simplicity, and this simplicity suggests that Hindu aesthetics is not based on material extravagance but on the capacity of humble symbols to evoke profound religious experience. The flower's beauty cannot be separated from the devotee's sincerity who offers it. The aesthetic value is not assessed by rarity or magnificence but by the ability of the flower to mediate between the human being and spiritual consciousness.

To summarise, this study reveals that the white frangipani is a devotional aesthetic symbol which transforms the banal activity into religious experience through the continuous performance of ritual offering. The normative basis governing the fitness of flowers for ritual offerings is provided in this regard by the Agastya Parwa. The transformation of sensory perception to aesthetic and spiritual experience is described by Triguna (2025) Hindu Aesthetics. The ethnographic findings also show that the practices of collecting, choosing, arranging and offering white frangipani are mechanisms through which religious values are transmitted and the continuity of Balinese Hindu tradition is maintained. Therefore, the white frangipani should be seen not merely as a ritual flower, but also as a cultural medium that involves embodiment, aesthetic experience, devotional practice and cultural resilience in the everyday religious life of the Balinese Hindu society.

A Model of Balinese Hindu Ritual Aesthetics Materiality, Symbolism, and Sacred Experience

The result of this research suggests that the use of flowers in Balinese Hindu ritual cannot be explained sufficiently from one analytical perspective, whether it is aesthetic, symbolic, or theological. However, the ethnographic evidence reveals that Balinese Hindus perceive flowers as multi-dimensional cultural media that combine material qualities, religious norms, symbolic meanings and spiritual experience into a coherent ritual system. Within this framework, flowers act not only as decorative elements of ceremonial practice but as mediating agents, transforming the ordinary human experience into sacred experience through acts of ritual offering.

Field observations repeatedly show that flowers are carefully selected, both in terms of aesthetic sensitivity and religious consciousness, before they are offered in rituals. Worshipers check the flowers for freshness, integrity, colour, fragrance and cleanliness. These seemingly mundane actions contain a body of religious knowledge, transmitted through the generations by cultural practice. In ritual life, aesthetic judgement is inseparable from ethical responsibility, as informants repeatedly stressed that the flowers offered to *Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa* should be the best possible expression of devotion. This view is in agreement with Triguna's (2025) idea of ritual as a tool of cultural resilience. Through ritual, cultural symbols are reproduced, reinterpreted and handed down from one generation to the next in continuous succession, enabling their meaning to be maintained even as society, the economy and technology continue to change. In this study, flowers function both as ritual offerings and as cultural media that reproduce collective memory and continually reaffirm the enduring relationships among human beings, nature, ancestors, and the Divine. This is supported by an interview with university lecturer and experienced *banten* practitioner I Gusti Ayu Artatik (58) who said: "*White frangipani is the most common flower in Balinese Hindu communities. It is used in everyday worship*

because it is widely planted in household compounds and its white colour symbolizes purity. Consequently, the first flower offered during prayer is usually the white flower, presented to Bhatara Surya as the divine witness to worship." The interview and field observations confirm that white frangipani continues to be the most commonly used flower in everyday Balinese Hindu worship, demonstrating how symbolic meaning is continuously maintained through ordinary religious practice rather than through exceptional ceremonial occasions alone.

Normatively, the legitimacy of these ritual practices is derived from the Agastya Parwa which states that the flowers used in offerings must be pure, fresh and ritually correct. These prescriptions suggest that Hindu ritual aesthetics has always been rooted in an ethics of offering. Beauty is not considered as an end in itself, but it is an expression of reverence, sincerity (*śraddhā*) and inner purity in devotional worship. As such, the material properties of flowers are perceived as external expressions of the devotee's moral disposition.

This perspective is further elaborated in Hindu Aesthetics (Triguna, 2025) which argues that aesthetic experience originates in aesthesis, the human capacity to encounter the world through embodied sensory perception. Hence aesthetics is not a theory of beauty but a philosophical study of how humans experience being through perception, emotion, symbolism, and action. In Balinese Hindu ritual, this experience manifests itself in the colours and scents of flowers, their haptic qualities, the bodily movements entailed in arranging offerings, the ambience of ritual performance and the contemplative attitude developed during prayer. Thus, beauty is not only in the flowers, but also in the religious experience created through the interaction of human beings, ritual symbols, and sacred reality.

Moreover, Hindu Aesthetics conceives of the body as the primary medium in which aesthetic experience is constituted. Beauty is not generated by disengaged intellectual contemplation, but by active bodily participation in ritual practice. Collecting flowers, choosing those considered ritually suitable, arranging the *canang sari*, making offerings and saying prayers together are a series of embodied actions that transform mundane life into a sacred experience. Ritual thus becomes a space where body, symbol, community, and cosmos converge, allowing aesthetic experience to achieve its fullest religious significance.



Figure 5. White Frangipani (*Plumeria alba*) for *Canang Sari*

Flowers are also, from the perspective of symbolic anthropology, multivocal symbols, as suggested by Turner (1967). One flower has biological, aesthetic, ethical, religious, social and cosmological meanings at the same time. The lotus (*tunjung*), symbolising purity and cosmic order, and the white frangipani (*jepun putih*), symbolising the simplicity of everyday devotion, these symbolic forms do not exist in isolation but rather form interlinked webs of meaning (Geertz, 1973) which are continually reproduced through ritual practice. The flowers are therefore not just symbolic objects but means for the transmission of religious knowledge and cultural memory from one generation to another.

The ethnographic findings also show that Balinese Hindu ritual aesthetics cannot be reduced to visual beauty alone. Rather, the beauty of ritual is a fundamentally multisensory one, involving sight through colour, smell through fragrance, touch through the preparation of offerings, hearing through sacred chants and the ringing of the ritual bell (*genta*), and inward consciousness through contemplative prayer. Aesthetic experience then becomes a comprehensive form of religious engagement, where materiality and spirituality are inseparably intertwined. Based on these findings, this study proposes a conceptual framework called Balinese Hindu Ritual Aesthetics Model. The model contends that aesthetic experience in ritual is constituted through the integration of four interdependent dimensions: material, ethical, symbolic-

cosmological, and spiritual. The material dimension is manifested in the chosen flowers that are fresh, whole, fragrant and clean. The ethical dimension is about how flowers are obtained and offered, in a respectful and sincere way. The symbolic-cosmological dimension reflects the function of flowers as symbols of cosmic order and human-Divine relations. The spiritual dimension is finally realised through experience of sacredness generated by the embodied participation of worshippers throughout ritual practice. The integration of these four dimensions shows that Balinese Hindu ritual aesthetics is a holistic system of religious experience where beauty serves as a path to spiritual awareness and cultural continuity.

This conceptual model represents the principal theoretical contribution of the present study. Whereas previous scholarship has generally understood flowers either as ritual symbols or as aesthetic components of ceremonial offerings, the present research demonstrates that flowers function as integrative cultural media through which religious norms, embodied aesthetic experience, cosmological symbolism, devotional practice, and cultural reproduction converge within a unified religious experience. Accordingly, Balinese Hindu ritual aesthetics should be understood not merely as an explanation of how beauty is created in ritual, but as a cultural mechanism through which religious values are transmitted, collective identity is sustained, and cultural resilience is strengthened amid the continuing dynamics of contemporary social change.

Symbolic Analysis: Flowers in Aesthetic and Ritual Significance

Analysis of flowers in Balinese Hindu rituals suggests that symbols do not operate as static signs but as aesthetic processes actualised through ritual practice (Morgan, 2010; Triguna, 2025; Turner, 1982). In symbolic anthropology, symbols derive their potency from social practice and sensory encounters. As Victor Turner argues, ritual symbols concentrate multiple layers of meaning—cosmological, affective, and social—within a collectively experienced event (Turner, 1967). In this sense, flowers function as media through which sacred meaning registers in consciousness, both intellectually and viscerally.

This dual mode of symbolic operation is demonstrated through the *tunjung* and white frangipani. The *tunjung* carries elevated cosmological and aesthetic meanings: it evokes centrality, sacredness, and verticality, directing ritual imagination towards cosmic order. In ritual art, the *tunjung* helps orient space physically and symbolically, balancing visual perception and cultivating *taksu*. White frangipani, by contrast, functions primarily through everyday habituation across the *Pañca Yadnya*, embodying a simple and recognisable devotional practice sustained over time. These two modes confirm that symbols communicate not only through spectacle but also through immanent repetition.

From a material religion perspective, religious experience is shaped through the interaction of body, senses, and materiality (Meyer, 2011). Through their colour, scent, freshness, and temporality, flowers activate sensory dimensions that connect the visible with the invisible. The fragrance of white frangipani in everyday ritual conveys an intimate devotional affect, while the image of the lotus in major ritual events and sacred performances evokes a cosmic affect. Symbols therefore operate not only representationally but also through embodied aesthetic and sensory experience.

The local context reinforces this interpretation. Triguna maintains that symbols are living forms of signification that are continuously reinterpreted through practice and that their use sustains cultural continuity (Triguna, 2025). In the Balinese Hindu tradition, the elaborate and repetitive use of flowers in both major and minor ritual acts constitutes an aesthetic and symbolic intervention in social relations. Rituals are therefore not merely enactments of tradition but spaces of creative transformation that enable meanings to evolve while also being preserved.

The criteria for offerings set out in the *Agastya Parwa* also articulate an ethical-aesthetic dimension of symbolism. Freshness, fragrance, integrity, and respect for the source of flowers during gathering demonstrate that symbolic meaning is inseparable from aesthetic quality and ethical behaviour. Read in dialogue with practice, this textual standard shows that symbols derive legitimacy not only from religious teachings but from the alignment of intention, material, and action.

Flowers in Balinese Hindu rituals may therefore be understood as aesthetic-symbolic media that connect cosmology, everyday worship, and cultural continuity. The lotus and *jepun putih* (white frangipani) represent a spectrum of symbolic functions, from the cosmological axis to everyday devotional practice. Together, they constitute a lived artistic and ritual

experience. This synthesis demonstrates that the study of flowers is not peripheral but central to understanding Balinese ritual aesthetics as a system of meaning that is lived, sustained, and transformed over time.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that ritual flowers in Balinese Hinduism are more than ritual ornaments or aesthetic decorations. Instead, they are religious media that integrate sensory perception, ritual practice, cultural symbolism, and spiritual consciousness into a unified religious experience. Ethnographic data show that selecting, collecting, arranging, and offering flowers are embodied cultural practices through which religious values are continually recreated in the everyday lives of Balinese Hindus. The Agastya Parwa provides a normative foundation for these findings by establishing standards of purity, freshness, and ritual appropriateness for flowers used in offerings. The findings are also theoretically grounded in Hindu Aesthetics (Triguna, 2025), which views aesthetic experience as an embodied engagement mediated through perception, symbolism, and religious practice.

The principal contribution of this research is the Balinese Hindu Ritual Aesthetics Model. The model explains that ritual aesthetic experience is generated through the dynamic integration of four interrelated dimensions: material, ethical, symbolic-cosmological, and spiritual. It suggests that the significance of ritual flowers does not rest solely on their visual qualities; rather, they function as transformative media that elevate sensory experience into sacred experience. By integrating materiality, embodiment, symbolism, and devotion within a single analytical framework, the model enables a more holistic interpretation of ritual aesthetics than approaches that regard flowers as either purely decorative objects or disembodied religious symbols. It also contributes to broader theoretical debates in ritual aesthetics, material religion, symbolic anthropology, and embodied religious experience. Beyond the study of Balinese Hinduism, this research contributes to comparative religious studies by presenting flower offerings as integrative cultural media that connect human beings, nature, culture, and the Divine. The findings suggest that ritual aesthetics should be understood not only as the creation of beauty but also as a cultural process that communicates religious values, sustains collective identities, and strengthens cultural resilience amid contemporary social transformation. Further research could develop this conceptual model through comparative studies of ritual aesthetics in other religious traditions in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Such work would help to foster interdisciplinary dialogue among the anthropology of religion, material religion, ritual studies, and lived religion.

This study demonstrates that flowers in Balinese Hindu ritual are far more than ritual accessories or aesthetic embellishments. Rather, they function as religious media that integrate sensory perception, ritual practice, cultural symbolism, and spiritual consciousness into a unified religious experience.

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