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ASA ESA: A DANCE PERFORMANCE REPRESENTING THE TRIDATU SYMBOL IN BALINESE HINDU COSMOLOGY

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Asa Esa is a Balinese contemporary dance performance inspired by the sacred *Tridatu* thread, a symbolic element deeply rooted in Balinese Hindu society. The *Tridatu* symbolizes the *Tri Murti* in Balinese Hindu cosmology, representing the unity of three principal deities. This study aims to analyze how the symbolism of the *Tridatu* is manifested through choreography, music, visual design, and collaborative elements, thereby bridging spiritual values with contemporary artistic expression. The creative process follows Alma M. Hawkins' method of exploration, improvisation, and performance. Data were collected through literature review, interviews, and observations of Balinese Hindu religious practices. The movement vocabulary combines traditional Balinese dance with contemporary techniques, while the use of lighting, costume, and visual design emphasize the symbolic essence of the *Tridatu*. The work originates from the exploration of intertwined threads that gradually unravel, evoking multiple layers of spiritual interpretation. *Asa Esa* represents the belief in spiritual unification embodied in the *Tridatu*. The findings reveal that the work synthesis of tradition and innovation, conveying symbolic meaning through movement, music, makeup, and stage design, while maintaining both aesthetic and spiritual harmony. The implications highlight the potential of performing arts as a medium for cultural preservation, philosophical reflection, and spiritual communication grounded in local wisdom.

Keywords: *Asa Esa, Balinese Hinduism, Dance Performance, Spiritual Symbolism, Tridatu*

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INTRODUCTION

The island of Bali is widely regarded as a vibrant cultural center deeply rooted in religious and spiritual values. Balinese Hinduism, which has evolved through centuries of interaction and acculturation with local traditions, manifests not only in ritual practices but also permeates social structures, artistic expressions, and philosophical worldviews. Among the various art forms, the performing arts particularly dance occupy a central role in embodying and conveying the spiritual essence of Balinese tradition within the community. As Bandem and deBoer (1981) emphasize, “Dance in Bali is not simply an artistic performance; it is a vital part of religious and social life.” Similarly, Hadi (2007) asserts that “Art that emerges within religious rituals does not merely serve an aesthetic function, but also acts as a medium of communication between human beings and transcendent forces.”

One of the most significant spiritual symbol in the religious life of Balinese society is the *Tridatu*. Derived from the Sanskrit words *Tri* (three) and *Datu* (lord or ruler), *Tridatu* consists of three colors: red, representing Lord Brahma the creator; black, symbolizing Lord Vishnu the preserver; and white, signifying Lord Shiva the destroyer (Dibia, 2012). In Balinese Hindu ceremonies, *Tridatu* attains a sacred status after undergoing ritual consecration known as *pasupati*. The *Pasupati* ritual involves the infusion of spiritual energy (*taksu* or magical power) into cultural objects regarded as sacred, which are believed to offer protection and bestow well-being upon devotees (Wahyuni, 2020). Within Balinese Hindu belief, symbols not only serve as spiritual reminders but also function as instruments to deepen concentration and devotion (*bhakti*) toward *Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa*, the Supreme God. Dibia (2012) explains that Balinese Hinduism recognizes the existence of spiritual energy within both the tangible (*sekala*) and the intangible (*niskala*) realms, which continuously overlap, intersect, and interact. Similarly, Eiseman (1989) observes, “Balinese life is a constant interplay between *sekala*, the seen, and *niskala*, the unseen.” Thus, *Tridatu* embodies the interconnected relationship among humanity, the cosmos, and the divine presence of *Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa*.

The interpretation of *Tridatu* as a symbol of divine power that continually protects and accompanies Balinese Hindus serves as the primary inspiration for the creation of the dance work *Asa Esa*. This work is rooted in the phenomenon of the *Tridatu* bracelet, which has become not only popular among Balinese Hindus but also a significant marker of identity. Traditionally, *Tridatu* is regarded as a sacred and protective object. However, upon deeper reflection, its meaning extends beyond the representation of the *Tri Murti*—the manifestation of God in Balinese Hindu belief. *Tridatu* also functions as a spiritual bridge between human beings and their creator, complementing human limitations. *Asa Esa* highlights this deeper dimension of meaning within the *Tridatu* bracelet, emphasizing inseparable balance and eternal interconnectedness that mirror the continuous cycle of life. The dance work thus emerges as both an exploration and a contemplation of the spiritual values embedded within the *Tridatu* thread. Through a non-traditional choreographic approach, *Asa Esa* seeks to translate these spiritual values and sustain tradition amidst contemporary developments. This creative process allows for cross-disciplinary collaboration that integrates movement, music, color, and spatial composition while remaining deeply rooted in Balinese Hindu philosophy.

Asa Esa is a contemporary dance work grounded in the vocabulary of Balinese dance and categorized as a form of non-literary choreography, composed through the exploration of movement, energy, space, and time without reliance on a fixed narrative or characterization (Widyastutieningrum & Wahyudiarto, 2014). The work represents both an interpretation and a development of traditional Balinese dance movements, incorporating vocal play and expressive gestures, and is accompanied by a soundscape that blends electronic music with selected Balinese *gamelan* instruments. The piece embodies the integrative values inherent in *Tridatu*, symbolizing the individual’s capacity for self-control. The three colors of *Tridatu*—intertwined and inseparably bound—represent strength and reinforce one’s faith in the

omnipotence of *Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa*. Through this artistic synthesis, the dance conveys the symbolic meaning of *Tridatu*, long revered by Balinese Hindus, and reinterprets it as an embodiment of the balance among three unifying forces believed to provide protection and spiritual guidance.

Building upon this foundation, the creation of *Asa Esa* seeks to address a central question: how can *Tridatu*, as a representation of the *Tri Murti*, be embodied in a dance performance through a non-traditional choreographic approach while preserving the spiritual values of Balinese Hinduism? This artistic inquiry aims not only to produce a work of aesthetic and cultural significance but also to serve as a medium for reflection on the relationship between humanity, the universe, and divinity from a Balinese Hindu perspective. Moreover, the work offers performers embodied experiences that deepen their understanding of spiritual concepts and expand their capacity to translate philosophical ideas into movement. *Asa Esa* thus functions as both a creative and reflective medium, reaffirming the sacred symbolism and meaning of *Tridatu* while reminding society of its enduring spiritual value through the expressive language of dance.

RESEARCH METHOD

The creative method refers to the choreographer's systematic process for obtaining accurate data and information relevant to the theme of the work. These processes include literature review, field observation, and interviews related to the concept of *Tridatu*. The creation of this dance work employed the creative framework developed by Alma M. Hawkins (2003) in *Creating Through Dance*, which comprises three principal stages: exploration, improvisation, and forming. This framework was further adapted to suit the contextual needs of developing a contemporary dance grounded in Balinese tradition, particularly in relation to the symbolism of *Tridatu* and the spiritual values of the *Tri Murti* in Balinese Hinduism. Such adaptation aligns with the view that methods of dance creation are inherently situational and must remain open to dialogue with their cultural contexts (Suharto, 2017).

The creation process of *Asa Esa* began with direct observation aimed at exploring the meanings of *Tridatu* within Balinese Hindu society. Observation, as defined by Nuriawati and Azizah (2025), involves examining an object with the intention of perceiving and understanding phenomena that may serve as sources of creative inspiration. This stage entailed a detailed examination of the colors, forms, functions, belief systems, cultural practices, and symbolic meanings associated with *Tridatu*. The insights gained from these observations formed the conceptual foundation of the creative process, which was subsequently reinforced through literature research and interviews. Based on the outcomes of this inquiry, the choreographer then identified and selected the materials and supporting elements necessary for the realization of the dance work.

The subsequent stages consisted of exploration, designing, and presentation to translate the findings from observation and research into bodily movement:

1. Exploration

The exploration stage served as the initial phase of movement discovery, involving an examination of bodily and spatial possibilities to shape the visual form of the dance (Widyastutieningrum & Wahyudiarto, 2014). This phase focused on translating research findings into a movement vocabulary. As Carter (2020) suggests, dance within research contexts can be understood as a mode of inquiry in which the body functions as a reflective instrument, capable of expressing symbolic meanings through intuitive movement—a process he terms *dancing reflexivity*. The exploration primarily centered on the symbolic meanings of the *Tridatu* colors—red, white, and black—the concept of the *Tri Murti* (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva), and the interrelationship between humanity and the divine. Artistic investigation

during this phase employed somatic and intuitive approaches to open possibilities for bodily expression that embody the symbolic energies of each color.

2. Designing

This stage evolved from Hawkins' improvisation phase and, within the context of this work, was reformulated into the design of the dramatic structure and performance elements. The design process was carried out collaboratively with the music director, visual designer, and dancers to construct a narrative structure inspired by the symbolism of *Tridatu*. Performance segments were organized according to the symbolic dynamics of its three colors, while lighting, costumes, and props were carefully selected to reinforce the spiritual essence of the work. Collaboration played a pivotal role in strengthening *Asa Esa* as a product of creative interaction among artists. As Pavis (2003) asserts, "Collaboration in the performing arts is not merely about working together, but about sharing visions, combining expertise, and constructing collective meaning." In this context, collaboration was realized through the shared efforts of the choreographer, music composer, lighting and costume designers, and dancers. Similarly, Setiawan et al. (2024) emphasize that cross-disciplinary collaboration strengthens the cohesion of the work and expands its expressive dimensions, while Utami (2022) highlights its potential to build a "bridge of meaning" between tradition and contemporary expression. Thus, the collaborative process in *Asa Esa* not only enriched the technical and aesthetic dimensions of the piece but also created a dialogic creative space for articulating the symbolism of *Tridatu* across visual, musical, and movement domains.

3. Presentation

The final stage, forming, constituted the unification of all explorations and design elements into a cohesive choreographic work. The presentation adopted a contemporary dance format grounded in Balinese tradition, emphasizing both symbolic depth and spiritual interconnectedness. The integration of *Tridatu* colors was realized through costume, lighting, and movement composition, producing a visual harmony imbued with philosophical meaning. The performance was conceived not merely as an aesthetic presentation but as a medium for communicating Balinese Hindu spiritual values to the audience. This resonates with Haryati and Darmawati's (2023) findings that dance functions not only as an art form but also as a vehicle for conveying religious and cultural values.

In conclusion, the creation method applied in *Asa Esa* was not only exploratory and conceptual but also spiritual, contextual, and participatory. Through the adaptation of Hawkins' theoretical framework and its integration with the Balinese cultural context, the work sought to bridge traditional values with contemporary performance discourse. This process underscores that dance creation is inseparable from the pursuit of meaning, wherein the choreographer establishes a solid conceptual foundation before engaging in movement exploration. As Astini (2020) affirms, "The creative process is a series of actions employing creative practices in producing a work, reflecting the originality of the artist's ideas as embodied in their creation."

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The Relevance of Tridatu as the Source of Creative Inspiration

The dance work *Asa Esa* embodies a profound spiritual and cultural reflection grounded in the philosophical values of *Tridatu* within Balinese Hinduism. Developed through a creative process of research, exploration, and contemplation, the work is not merely presented as an artistic performance but also functions as a symbolic medium that connects the choreographer, dancers, and audience to a broader spiritual dimension. The conceptual foundation of the work derives from the symbolism of *Tridatu*, which in Balinese Hindu tradition represents the three principal divine powers manifested in the Tri Murti: Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the dissolver). These divine aspects are expressed through the three intertwined thread colors—red, black, and white—which serve not

only as visual symbols in sacred rituals but also as embodiments of profound spiritual and philosophical values. The choreographer interprets Tridatu not merely as a religious emblem but as a metaphor for the human inner journey toward achieving harmony in life. This interpretation is translated into choreographic elements such as movement, floor patterns, visual expression, and musical atmosphere. Through this synthesis, *Asa Esa* emerges as a choreographic work that unites spirituality and aesthetics within a powerful and symbolically rich narrative.

2. The Transformation of Traditional Movements in Contemporary Interpretation

The human body functions as an expression of the soul and serves as a communicative medium between the choreographer and the audience. The movement vocabulary in this work emerges from a synthesis of Balinese traditional dance idioms and contemporary movement approaches. In this context, Miroto (2022) asserts that, “Movement material can be considered a new and creative creation. This approach is unique because movement material becomes one of the strengths of choreography, even serving as the choreographer’s identity that distinguishes their work from others, thereby producing new creations as contemporary dance material.”

The selection of movement vocabulary in *Asa Esa* resulted from the exploratory development of Balinese traditional dance vocabulary, which served as the conceptual foundation of the work. These traditional movements were further refined through choreographic techniques such as initiation, body contact, and spiral motion. The spiral technique emphasizes torso-centered flexibility, which was then combined with *luk nerudut* movements—defined as “the simultaneous upward or downward motion of both palms accompanied by the rising and lowering of the knees” (Parasari et al., 2023). In addition, body contact—through which dancers physically interact with one another—was employed to symbolize the unification of the three divine forces into a state of oneness and balance. The integration of *luk nerudut*, spiral, and body contact techniques generates a movement vocabulary that is not only visually compelling but also imbued with deep symbolic meaning.

Building upon these movement ideas, further development was undertaken in terms of body form, volume, and tempo to discover movement patterns aligned with the conceptual foundation of the work. Each scene in *Asa Esa* conveys distinct emotional and spiritual messages. The first scene expresses devotion through a slow tempo and kneeling movements that symbolize submission and humility. The second scene reflects inner turmoil through dynamic, sharp, and fragmented gestures, embodying the tension between human emotion and spiritual struggle. The third scene represents unification and the awareness of divine oneness, characterized by the harmonious movement of all dance elements. Additional Balinese traditional movement vocabularies, such as *agem*, were also incorporated and further developed into enlarged movement forms. These were combined with staccato techniques—abrupt, fragmented motions articulated through the dancers’ bodies, with hand gestures expressed in sharp, linear shapes. This synthesis of traditional and contemporary approaches enriches the choreographic texture of the work, reinforcing its symbolic and aesthetic depth.

Facial expression (*polatan*) and eye movement are also emphasized in accordance with the foundational principles of Balinese dance technique. As Maryono (2012) explains, “facial expression, or *polatan*, constitutes the visual condition of a dancer’s face that enhances the expression of bodily movement. This element strengthens emotional communication between dancer and audience, affirming that the work remains rooted in the spirit of tradition, even when presented in a non-traditional form.”

In terms of choreographic structure, *Asa Esa* adopts the framework of non-traditional group choreography, which organizes movement based on content, form, technique, and projection (Widyastutieningrum & Wahyudiarto, 2014). Thematically, the work portrays an

individual's emotional and spiritual journey in longing for the Creator—a transformative process that unfolds through phases of doubt, disquiet, and ultimately, reconciliation within a state of spiritual balance.

The aspect of form, or movement sequencing, in *Asa Esa* consists of three categories: gestural (*gerak maknawi*), pure, and expressive reinforcement (*baton signal*). Gestural movements are visually interpretable actions—for instance, dancers intertwining their hands to symbolize balance and unity, or employing expressive facial gestures, such as furrowed brows and intense gazes, to convey anxiety and tension. Pure movements, as defined by Desmond Morris, emphasize aesthetic beauty rather than representational meaning; in this work, they emerge from bodily exploration and the expanded vocabulary of Balinese dance while retaining its intrinsic spirit. Expressive reinforcement is realized through fragmented staccato movements characteristic of Balinese dance, which intensify the portrayal of inner turmoil and emotional unrest.



Figure 1. The Interlaced Hand Movements Among The Dancers Represent Harmony and Spiritual Unification.

(Source: Prabhawita, 2016)



Figure 2. The Interlaced Hand Movements Among The Dancers Represent Harmony and Spiritual Unification.

(Source: Prabhawita, 2016)



Figure 3. The Facial Expression Reflects a State of Inner Turmoil.

(Source: Prabhawita, 2016)

The technical aspect of *Asa Esa* aims to achieve communicative meaning through the use of *rampak* movements, defined as group movements performed in the same tempo (Smith, 1985). Three types of *rampak* are employed in the choreography. The first is *simultaneous rampak*, in which all dancers execute identical movements in perfect unison, symbolizing harmony and collective unity. The second is *complementary rampak*, where dancers perform different movements within the same timing to evoke a sense of turmoil and internal conflict. The third is *alternating rampak*, characterized by one group's movements being sequentially echoed by another, creating rhythmic interplay and dynamic visual continuity.

Finally, the projection aspect of the work is realized through spatial design and group formations that cultivate a shared perceptual experience between the choreographer and the audience. In several sections, dancers are positioned in close proximity, with their bodies physically connected to convey a sense of unity and collective consciousness. This approach aligns with Construction Method III, which emphasizes motif development and group composition as integral expressive elements (Smith, 1985).



Figure 4. Conveys an Impression of Self-Unification.

(Source: Prabhawita, 2016)

3. Music, Makeup and Costume, as well as Lighting Design as Mediators of Collective Emotion and Symbolic Support

Music in *Asa Esa* functions as both an emotional binder and the atmospheric foundation of the performance. As La Meri (1986) states, “Music is the partner of dance, conveying the choreographer’s intention and message to the audience.” The musical composition integrates traditional Balinese instruments—such as *gender wayang*, *kendang*, *suling*, and *ceng-ceng*—with elements of electronic sound and vocalized mantras, thereby creating a ritualistic soundscape that feels simultaneously sacred and contemporary. Each musical section is carefully synchronized with the emotional tone of the scene: the prologue evokes serenity and spiritual contemplation, while the second section introduces heightened tension and dynamic intensity. The recitations of the *Gayatri Mantra* and *Pranayam Mantra* are incorporated not merely as auditory components but as performative expressions imbued with spiritual meaning. As Nerta (2021) notes, “The power of mantra prayer can generate positive energy that accumulates within the body.”

Visual elements such as makeup and costume are deliberately structured to reinforce the spiritual theme of the work. As Nuriawati and Azizah (2025) note, “Makeup and costume in dance performance are generally related to the meaning or values of the dance, the characterization, heroism, symbolic elements of tradition, religion, and civilization, and sometimes are considered purely for aesthetic value.” In *Asa Esa*, natural makeup is applied with particular emphasis on the eye line to maintain simplicity while preserving expressive clarity. The costume design does not replicate traditional Balinese attire directly; instead, it adopts a modernized interpretation that retains the symbolic colors of *Tridatu*, visually embodying the work’s spiritual and philosophical foundations.



Figure 5. Makeup *Asa Esa*.

(Source: Prabhawita, 2016)



Figure 6. Costume *Asa Esa*.

(Source: Prabhawita, 2016)

Lighting in dance “is not merely for illumination, but serves to support the creation of atmosphere” (Soemaryatmi & Supriyanto, 2024). In this context, lighting becomes a crucial component in shaping the emotional and spiritual ambience of the performance. The use of spotlights and general lighting in *Asa Esa* is carefully synchronized with the dynamics of movement and the emotional nuances of each scene. Beyond its functional purpose, lighting accentuates the dancers’ spatial presence while constructing an imaginative realm for the audience that resonates with the work’s spiritual essence. Notably, the lighting design forms the sacred symbol of *Ongkara*, visually evoking the divine energy that underlies the choreography’s conceptual foundation.



Figure 7. The *Ongkara* Symbol Manifested Through Stage Lighting.

(Source: Prabhawita, 2016)

CONCLUSION

The creation of *Asa Esa* illustrates how symbolic representations within Balinese tradition can be transformed into a contemporary dance performance that unites aesthetic innovation with spiritual depth. The work draws inspiration from the *Tridatu* bracelet, which in Balinese Hindu tradition embodies profound philosophical significance and represents the divine power of the *Tri Murti*—Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the dissolver). Through a process of creative exploration, the choreographer interprets *Tridatu* not merely as a ritual attribute but as a metaphor for the human life journey toward unity, balance, and wholeness centered upon the Almighty. In this sense, *Asa Esa* transcends its function as a cultural reflection, serving instead as a symbolic medium that bridges spirituality, tradition, and contemporary artistic expression. Furthermore, the creative process underscores the centrality of collaboration. As Miroto (2022) observes, dance creation commonly unfolds through cooperative engagement involving negotiation within shared time and space. The collective contributions of dancers, composers, costume designers, and lighting designers were integral to realizing the work's symbolic depth and artistic cohesion. This demonstrates that performing arts are not solely the product of individual inspiration but rather emerge from a collaborative process grounded in shared artistic consciousness and mutual interpretation.

Accordingly, *Asa Esa* presents a model of tradition-based contemporary dance creation that affirms the potential of the performing arts as a transformative space. In this context, art is not merely conceived as an aesthetic product but as a medium of cultural preservation, spiritual reflection, and creative innovation that resonates within the broader discourse of contemporary performance. This study underscores the value of integrating traditional Balinese philosophical symbols into contemporary choreography as a strategy for both cultural continuity and artistic renewal. It offers practitioners and choreographers an alternative creative framework that harmonizes aesthetic modernity with spiritual depth, providing a sustainable approach to revitalizing traditional values within the performing arts. The findings of this study contribute to the expanding discourse on tradition-based contemporary dance and open pathways for further interdisciplinary exploration into how symbolic traditions can be recontextualized in modern artistic practice. Future research may extend this inquiry through cross-cultural comparisons of symbolic embodiment in performance, thereby enriching global perspectives on the intersection of spirituality, tradition, and contemporary artistic creation.

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