

The Concept of Sakti and Hindu Women's Leadership in Bali

Divine Feminine Authority in Contemporary Religious Practice

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of Hindu women's religious leadership in Bali by placing the concept of Sakti, or divine feminine power, as the main interpretive framework. In Balinese Hindu tradition, Sakti is not merely a metaphysical entity, but is also concretely manifested in the body, space, and rituals led by women. Through a religious ethnographic approach conducted in three regions Tabanan Regency, Bangli Regency, and Denpasar City, this study explores how Hindu women acquire and exercise spiritual authority within a religious structure still dominated by patriarchal norms. The research reveals that Balinese women are not only custodians of tradition but also agents of transformation in the contemporary religious landscape. Through their roles as Jro Mangku Istri, spiritual teachers, ashram managers, and local ritual leaders, they create new spaces of agency that blend the sacredness of the female body with sacred legitimacy. The concept of Sakti serves as a symbolic and spiritual language to negotiate power, expand spaces for participation, and break through structural limitations within religious authority. By highlighting the relationship between the body, ritual, and sacred power, this article argues that Hindu women's leadership in Bali represents a rearticulation of the meaning of Sakti that not only strengthens the continuity of tradition but also paves the way for a more equitable and transformative model of spirituality. These findings contribute to the global discourse on religion, gender, and authority, while enriching local studies on religiosity based on the relationship between the divine and the profane in the Balinese context.

Keywords: Female Leadership, Balinese Hinduism, Religious Authority, Feminine Spirituality, Religious Ethnography, Agency, Sacred Body

Introduction

In the Hindu religious landscape, the concept of Śakti occupies a central position as the representation of the divine feminine power that underlies the existence, transformation, and regeneration of the universe. More than just a personification of the Goddess, Śakti is the active principle of Brahman, manifested in various forms such as Durgā, Kālī, Sarasvatī, and Lakṣmī. However, behind the symbolic dominance of this feminine power, the institutional structure and leadership within Hindu communities are still often dominated by patriarchal norms that limit women's active participation in religious authority spaces. This is where the paradox that forms the starting point of this research lies: how the concept of divine feminine power is articulated socially and ritually in the leadership practices of Hindu women, particularly in the local context of Bali, which is rich in symbolic and spiritual heritage.

Recent studies on gender and Hinduism have shown that women are not merely objects of subordination in the religious system, but also active agents in reconstructing the meanings of dharma, spirituality, and sacred power (DeNapoli, 2023a). In many cases, Hindu women establish spiritual authority through the performativity of *santo* (purity), *tyāga* (sacrifice), and *bhakti* (devotion), which form the basis of their legitimacy in the eyes of the community. Amanda Lucia (2020), in her study of charisma in Hinduism, shows how women's authority is often built outside the formal structures of religious institutions, but instead gains recognition through spiritual connection and public affection, referred to as "devotional charisma."

Women's leadership in Hinduism cannot be separated from the symbolism of the body and the relationship between purity and impurity (*śuddhi-aśuddhi*). In this context, Menon (2002) asserts that making Śakti is not merely an acceptance of feminine power, but also involves a complex process of negotiation around women's bodies, particularly in relation to narratives of purity, menstruation, and self-control. The female body becomes a symbolic arena where spiritual authority can be built or negated. On the one hand, the female body is considered full of potential *taksu* (sacred power), but on the other hand, it is also vulnerable to stigmatization of impurity in religious ritual practices controlled by patriarchal structures.

In the Balinese context, the meaning of Śakti and female leadership occupies a unique space. Balinese Hindu traditions, which are based on customs and collective rituals, do not strictly separate public and private spaces, but rather place women in crucial positions, both as guardians of the sacred kitchen fire and as leaders in major village rituals. Balinese women play an active role as *Jro Mangku Istri*, meditation teachers, leaders of spiritual centers, and ashram managers. However, their authority is not always formally recognized within religious structures that remain centered on male figures such as *Pedanda* or *Sulinggih*. Here, the role of Śakti as a transformative feminine force becomes crucial to interpret not only as a theological symbol but also as a social and spiritual practice that negotiates women's power and legitimacy within the local religious system.

Antoinette DeNapoli's (2023b) study of Hindu female teachers in India shows how women build authority through what she calls grassroots religious gender activism, a strategy of negotiation that utilizes religious symbols to expand women's spiritual space without having to directly challenge patriarchal structures. This strategy is also evident in the practices of Balinese women who lead cleansing rituals, collective meditation, or *tirtha* services by integrating Śakti symbols into their daily practices, not just in major ceremonies. Through a combination of *karma yoga* (service), *jñāna* (spiritual knowledge), and *bhakti* (devotion), they position themselves as legitimate spiritual authorities in the eyes of the community, even if they are not always recognized by official structures.

Although there have been many studies highlighting the role of Hindu female teachers in India (DeNapoli, 2023a; 2023b) and the concept of charisma in contemporary Hinduism (Lucia, 2020), research specifically examining the connection between the concept of Śakti, the sacred female body, and forms of religious leadership in Bali is still very limited. Most studies on Hinduism in Bali emphasize the formal structure of traditional villages, the position of *sulinggih*, and collective ritual practices, without deeply exploring women's agency in the context of spiritual leadership. Additionally, few studies have utilized a material religion approach to interpret the body and ritual space as a locus of feminine power intertwined with the concept of Śakti. Therefore, this article aims to fill this gap by posing the key question: How is Śakti practiced, embodied, and negotiated by Balinese Hindu women as a source of religious authority within a patriarchal social and spiritual system?

Thus, this article not only seeks to reveal the existence of women as religious leaders but also offers a critical reading of how the concept of Śakti is used as a tool to build, negotiate, and legitimize the spiritual authority of Hindu women in Bali. This study contributes to the broader discourse on the relationship between gender, religion, and power, and offers a reflective approach to feminine spirituality that is not trapped in the dichotomy of domination-subordination, but rather leads to a transformative understanding of women's agency in sacred spaces. This research is based on three main theoretical frameworks: (1) the theory of Sakti in Hindu religious studies, (2) the theory of women's agency in gender and religious studies, and (3) the material religion approach. In Hindu theology, Sakti refers to a divine power that is feminine and dynamic, enabling the creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe (Kinsley, 1988). Sakti is not merely a companion to male deities but also an autonomous existence that is the center of worship in various Śakta sects. In Balinese tradition, Sakti manifests in the forms of Dewi Danu, Dewi Sri, and Durga, who not only play a role in agrarian and cosmological rituals but also reflect the source of spiritual authority. Menon's (2002) study shows that this power, though associated with purity, is often negotiated through control over women's bodies and rituals.

This theoretical approach emphasizes that women in religion are not merely objects of subordination but active subjects in creating new spiritual and social spaces (Mahmood, 2005). The concept of religious agency here does not always take the form of explicit resistance to patriarchy, but also through the reinterpretation of traditional roles, the purification of the body, and involvement in devotional practices (DeNapoli, 2023b). Lucia (2020) adds that women's charisma in Hinduism is often built on the performativity of purity and closeness to the community, rather than on structural positions.

The material religion approach views religion as existing not only in texts and doctrines, but also in objects, bodies, spaces, and materialized rituals (Meyer, 2012). In this context, women's bodies and sacred spaces such as shrines, temples, and offerings become the locus where Sakti is embodied and ritualized. The body is not only a tool for spiritual expression but also a source of authority and mediation of divine power. By using these three approaches in an integrated manner, this study is able to unravel how symbols, bodily experiences, and sacred spaces of women become part of the articulation of spiritual power in Bali.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with a religious ethnography method, which allows researchers to gain a deep understanding of the practices, symbolism, and experiences of Hindu women in spiritual leadership, particularly within the framework of the concept of Śakti as a divine feminine power. This approach was chosen to capture the dynamics of the relationship between religious structures, symbolic power, and women's agency in the local Hindu context of Bali.

This study was conducted in four major regions of Bali, Tabanan Regency, Bangli Regency, Denpasar City, and Karangasem Regency. Tabanan was selected due to its agrarian character and its deep-rooted association with

the worship of Dewi Sri and the ritual practices of Subak, where women often play both symbolic and practical roles in preserving fertility and cosmic balance (Lansing, 2006). Bangli Regency, particularly the Kintamani area, serves as a key site to observe how women act as Jro Mangku Istri within traditional religious structures grounded in the cosmology and spiritual power of Dewi Danu and Bhatari Batur. Denpasar City, as an urban space, represents the intersection of tradition and modernity, where Hindu women have emerged as yoga teachers, spiritual leaders, and founders of ashrams, bridging Hindu teachings with contemporary contemplative movements. Meanwhile, Karangasem Regency, known for its enduring spiritual heritage and embodied healing practices, showcases how women's bodies become mediums for sacred power often associated with Dewi Durga or Ratu Gede through *kerauhan* (spirit possession), *pengerebongan*, and other ritual healing performances. These four regions were purposefully selected to reflect the diverse spectrum of Hindu women's religious leadership in Bali, spanning agrarian-adat spaces to cosmopolitan centers, from temple-based rituals to transpersonal spiritual expressions.

The research subjects consist of twelve female informants who hold religious leadership roles, whether at the ritual, religious education, or spiritual community level. They were selected through purposive sampling, considering three main criteria: (1) having social and religious legitimacy within the community, (2) being active in religious activities or spiritual education, and (3) having spiritual reflections that connect their experiences with the interpretation of the concept of Śakti. The informants include Jro Mangku Istri, female traditional leaders, yoga teachers, and ashram leaders in the four locations. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and analysis of local documents. Interviews were used to explore narratives of spiritual experiences and the challenges faced by informants in obtaining and exercising religious authority. Observations were made during ritual processes such as *piodalan*, ceremonies to worship the goddess, as well as meditation and spiritual training activities led by female informants. Meanwhile, the documents studied included local texts such as the *Durgā Pūjā lontar*, *Tuturan Uma*, and spiritual community archives managed by women. The analysis also included observations of sacred feminine symbols in temples and ritual spaces, such as the shrines of Dewi Danu, Durga, and Sri, as well as the meaning of women's bodies as sacred sites in the Balinese religious system (Picard, 2011; Eiseman, 1990).

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques involving reduction, categorization, and interpretation of the narratives that emerged. The main focus of the analysis is directed at four themes: (1) the representation of Śakti in rituals and leadership, (2) the negotiation of women's agency within patriarchal structures, (3) the transformation of women's roles in modern spiritual communities, and (4) the relationship between women's bodies, symbolic power, and ritual legitimacy. To enhance data validity, method triangulation, cross-checking between informants' narratives, and critical reflection on the researcher's position as an insider-outsider within the Hindu religious tradition were employed. With this approach, the research aims not only to reveal the role of women in religious structures but also to understand how the meaning of Śakti is rearticulated through the practices and spirituality of contemporary Hindu women, who often find themselves between the spaces of tradition and renewal.

Results and Discussion

1. Articulation of Śakti in Women's Bodies and Ritual Spaces

In the context of Balinese Hinduism, Śakti is not merely understood as an abstract metaphysical force, but is articulated concretely through women's bodies and the ritual spaces they occupy and manage. Women's bodies in Balinese spiritual practices are not passive entities but active mediums through which divine power is manifested and transmitted. This conception aligns with the idea of material religion, which views the religious dimension as not only present in discourse or doctrine but also materialized through the body, objects, space, and performativity (Meyer, 2012; Morgan, 2010).

Field research in Bangli Regency shows that Jro Mangku Istri, who leads the *piodalan* at Pura Puseh, not only plays a role in delivering prayers or offering *banten*, but is also believed to be a medium for *nadi sakti*, a channel of spiritual energy that enables communication between humans and supernatural forces. In the *ngusaba* village ceremony, women even occupy a central role in maintaining the *taksu* (spiritual charisma) of the temple, through sacred dances, the arrangement of *canang* offerings, and the use of traditional attire symbolizing Dewi Danu or Dewi Sri. Their bodies become the meeting point between the profane and the sacred.

Theoretically, this articulation can be understood through an interpretation of Saba Mahmood's (2005) theory of women's religious agency. Mahmood rejects the notion of agency as merely a form of resistance against domination, instead proposing that the female body in religious spaces can become a locus for the formation of subjectivity and spiritual power, even within formally patriarchal structures. In the Balinese context, this female agency does not mean rejecting customary systems or ritual rules (Wiranata, 2021), but rather navigating and activating Śakti through the absorption of ritual values and the transformation of oneself into a channel of spiritual power.

Interestingly, the interpretation of the body as a channel of Śakti is inseparable from the ecological relations characteristic of Bali. In Tabanan Regency, within the Subak system based on worship of Dewi Sri, elderly women are entrusted with the authority to safeguard the shrines and sacred springs (petirthan) that serve as the center of irrigation. They are not merely technical executors of rituals but also custodians of the purity of water and the cosmic space believed to be the dwelling place of the goddess. In the local community's view, the fertility of the land and the harmony of the village depend on the "sacred vibrations" of the women who maintain the rituals, not only through mantras but also through bodily discipline and inner purity.

This affirms Menon's (2002) analysis that the interpretation of Śakti in women always involves the management of the body in social, ritual, and spiritual terms. The body is not merely a biological location but a symbolic field that must be purified, controlled, and organized to facilitate divine feminine power. However, unlike the discourse of impurity in Indian Hinduism, which often stigmatizes women as unholy, Balinese practices demonstrate a more integrative adaptation. Menstruation, for example, is considered a sacred period of rest that does not demean women but gives them space to rework their sacred power (Lange, 2023). This is a form of Śakti articulation that recognizes the body as dynamic, not profane (Brighenti, 2001).

Another form of articulation of Śakti is seen in the visuality and aesthetics of women in rituals. Traditional attire such as white kebaya, frangipani flowers in the ears, and yellow scarves are not merely costumes but part of the sacred body aesthetics symbolizing the union of rupa (form) and citta (consciousness). In sacred dances such as Rejang Dewa, the female body becomes a moving prayer that radiates Śakti vibrations throughout the temple space. Here, Catherine Bell's (1992) theory of embodied ritual is relevant, the body is not only a means of expression, but the ritual itself is a social mechanism for reproducing and negotiating power structures.

Furthermore, ritual spaces managed or practiced by women are also an extension of the body as the center of Śakti. Family temples, meditation halls, and even kitchens as centers of fire (agni) become fields for the actualization of feminine spirituality. A female priest in Denpasar said that the kitchen is not only a place for cooking, but also a place for making holy water because it is from there that the first offering of each morning emerges. This signifies the expansion of the meaning of the temple as a center of sacred power that is not limited to formal architectural structures but is present through bodily relations, activities, and domestically lived spaces that are spiritually inhabited (Jemiwi & Dharma, 2025).

Thus, the articulation of Śakti in the Balinese context cannot be separated from the body and spaces inhabited by women. The body becomes a symbolic, epistemic, and ritual locus where feminine power is not formed through verbal claims alone but through daily performativity, ritual regularity, and the continuity of relationships with the divine. This is what makes Balinese women's religious practices not merely a form of cultural heritage but a living expression of spiritual power that continues to evolve.

Within the context of Balinese Hindu tradition, the female body occupies a complex position, not merely as a symbolic object but as a medium for ritual and a space for articulating divine power. The body is not merely associated with domestic or social roles but becomes a sacred site where the divine feminine energy of Śakti is concretely materialized through religious practice. This concept emphasizes that sanctity is not something external to the body, but is manifested through the body that performs rituals, services, and devotion.

In the worship of Dewi Danu, Dewi Sri, Durga, and Bhatari Batur at various temples and sacred sites in Bali, women's bodies are actively involved in preparing, performing, and maintaining rituals. When women lead piodalan, recite mantras, or lead melukat, they not only perform ritual functions but also function as channels for the sacred power flowing from the goddess to the devotees. This demonstrates that in lived religious practice, the body is not a neutral entity but a mediation between the sacred and the profane (Meyer, 2012; Morgan, 2010).

However, the position of women's bodies is not free from ambivalence. In the traditional ritual system, women's bodies are often stigmatized in certain situations, such as during menstruation or in the period of rerainan, which is considered an impure (asuddhi) period. This reflects patriarchal logic that associates women's bodies with uncontrollability, instability, and desires that must be controlled. As noted by Menon (2002), the power of Śakti contained in women's bodies is only considered valid if it has undergone a process of controlling impurity, making the body an object of social and moral regulation.

However, female spiritual leaders in Bali demonstrate that the body is not a boundary, but a bridge between the visible and the invisible. In the concept of ritual embodiment (Bell, 1992), the body is not merely a medium of symbolic expression, but the body itself is the ritual, it absorbs, trains, and reproduces spiritual meaning through disciplined movements, sounds, and postures. This is where what can be called the materialization of Śakti occurs: a process in which the divine feminine power is not only symbolized in discourse or statues of the goddess, but is truly present in and through the living, breathing, and spiritual bodies of women. This materialization does not only occur in major rituals, but also in everyday activities such as preparing offerings, maintaining the family shrine, presenting holy water, and tending the kitchen fire all of which are spaces for the

articulation of Śakti's power manifested in material form. Therefore, the female body in the context of Balinese Hinduism can be understood as an active spiritual space, not passive; as an agent, not an accessory; and as a mirror of divine power moving through the world.

Thus, understanding the female body as the materialization of Śakti allows us to transcend the narrow dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, between ritual and reality. The female body is the arena where transcendent power and immanent experience meet. It is not merely a part of the ritual but is the ritual itself.

2. Negotiating Authority within Patriarchal Structures: The Case of Female Spiritual Leaders in Kintamani

Amidst the structurally patriarchal customary system of Bali, the emergence of women as spiritual leaders in mountainous regions such as Kintamani reveals a complex and multilayered negotiation of religious authority. In Balinese Hindu tradition, religious authority has historically been dominated by men, figures such as Pedanda, Sulinggih, and male Jero Mangku have typically occupied central roles in formal ritual structures. While women, often referred to as Istri or spiritual consorts, are symbolically revered as śakti (divine feminine power), their roles are frequently limited to preparing ritual paraphernalia rather than leading spiritual practices. However, in several regions, there has been a subtle yet significant shift: women's roles have expanded not through overt resistance to patriarchal systems, but through early spiritual articulation and reinforced by communal validation. In Kintamani, particularly in the traditional villages of Batur, Songan, and Belandingan numerous cases exist where women have been appointed as Jero Mangku Istri and Jero Balian from a young age. A notable example is Jero Mangku Istri of Pura Alas Arum, widely known as Jero Jemiwi. She was chosen at the age of eight through a sacred selection process deeply embedded in the niskala (non-material or spiritual) dimension of Balinese cosmology an appointment believed to be divinely ordained and therefore unquestionable. In a personal interview, Jero Jemiwi stated:

"I did not choose this path. I was chosen by the ancestors and deities through a sacred tradition I barely understood as a child. But being a woman in a leadership role is not always easy; not everyone believes a woman's body can carry legitimate tirta. Yet the power of the niskala renders that authority undeniable, no one dares to contest it."

This statement contains two important dimensions. First, female religious authority in this context is constructed through spiritual appointment and collective validation rooted in transcendent experience. Second, despite gaining community legitimacy, doubts persist originating from a system that has not yet fully opened formal spaces for women as centers of sacred authority.

Such doubts stem from patriarchal logic that shapes religious perceptions of the female body across traditions. As Menon (2002) points out, in Hindu traditions the female body is often viewed as ambivalent: on the one hand as a source of śakti (divine power), and on the other as a locus of aśuddhi (impurity). In this context, women like Jero Jemiwi must navigate the tension between their divinely conferred legitimacy and the sociocultural resistance that questions their spiritual authority especially when leading public rituals or distributing tirta (holy water) to devotees from outside the village.

The strategies of negotiating authority employed by figures like Jero Jemiwi can be analyzed through the lens of grassroots religious gender activism, as articulated by DeNapoli (2023). According to her, Hindu women in India and South Asia often do not challenge patriarchal systems through direct opposition, but instead build spiritual charisma and authority through devotion, service, and a consistent enactment of sanctity. This aligns with Amanda Lucia's (2020) theory of charisma in Hinduism, which suggests that religious legitimacy often emerges not from institutions but from spiritual intimacy with the community, founded on trust and affective closeness. In the Kintamani context, Jero Jemiwi's charisma and authority are not derived solely from ritual acts or prayers, but from her embodiment of spiritual ethics in daily life. She embodies principles such as tapini (austere surrender), tyāga (sacrifice), and seva (selfless service). She is a constant presence in the community's spiritual and social life from birth rites to funerals. Her religious agency does not confront patriarchal systems verbally, but rather manifests as a morally commanding presence an indispensable spiritual source whose existence quietly challenges a system that has long marginalized women.

Moreover, Jero Jemiwi's leadership can be examined through DeNapoli's (2023) concept of the performativity of saintliness a model in which sanctity in Hindu traditions is enacted through the body, rituals, and disciplined daily practices. In many rituals, her presence before the altar marked by slow gestures, white ceremonial attire, and gentle yet resolute mantra recitations constitutes a sacred performance that generates spiritual authority. This authority does not come from institutional recognition but from the repetitive praxis internalized by the community as authentic holiness.

Ultimately, the practice of appointing female spiritual leaders from childhood in regions such as Kintamani points to the development of alternative models of religious authority in Balinese Hinduism. These models do not originate from formal structures but from the intersection of spiritual experience, communal validation, and embodied performance. Thus, while the overarching framework remains patriarchal, it is within the interstices of this system that śakti divine feminine power finds expression, embodied and enacted through the lived experiences of women.

3. The Female Body as a Sacred and Symbolic Medium: Between Śakti and the Goddesses of Bali

In Balinese religious traditions, the veneration of divine feminine power is not solely theological but also materialized in the worship of various goddesses who play vital roles in the cosmic cycle and agrarian life. Dewi Danu, as the guardian of lakes and water sources; Bhatari Batur, protector of the Batur caldera and symbol of volcanic power; Dewi Sri, the goddess of fertility and food; and Dewi Durga, a manifestation of both protective and destructive force all represent the polyvalent nature of the feminine symbol in Balinese Hinduism. These goddesses are not merely objects of devotion, but also constitute a symbolic system in which the female body becomes a cosmic mirror of divine power (Śakti). At Pura Ulun Danu Batur, for instance, the worship of Bhatari Batur and Dewi Danu situates water as a symbol of liquid śakti a flowing, nourishing divine energy. In many cases, women who lead offerings or tend to pura petirthan (sacred water temples) are regarded as custodians of regenerative power, not only biologically but spiritually. Field observations in Kintamani reveal that women assigned to care for Danu's springs and prepare banten tirta (holy water offerings) undertake fasting, ritual silence (tapak dara), and strict self-restraint during ceremonial periods. These practices are believed to amplify the vibration of sacred water they channel. Through such rituals, the female body functions as both vessel and purifier of natural forces ritually embodying Dewi Danu herself.

A parallel can be observed in the worship of Dewi Sri, particularly integrated into the Subak irrigation system in regions such as Tabanan and Gianyar. In some customary villages, the mepayasan rite (offering of the first rice harvest) is led by elderly women or juru sri, individuals believed to possess spiritual capacity to invite the spirit of Dewi Sri to descend into the rice granary. Here, the female body is seen as a conduit of cosmic balance, not only invoking the goddess but also mediating the tension of rwa bhineda the duality between drought and abundance. As Meyer (2012) proposes in her theory of material religion, the body is not merely a site where faith is experienced, but an affective-material medium through which the sacred is realized and circulated within communal life.

Women also hold vital roles in the veneration of Dewi Durga, especially in eastern Bali, such as in Karangasem and Buleleng. In several pura penyawangan Durga (Durga's satellite shrines), rituals such as ngereh and mapedanan involve female pemangku (priests) who invoke the presence of Bhuta Durga to restore energetic balance in society. Here, the female body is not framed as soft or passive, but as active and forceful, representing the ugra śakti (fierce power) aspect of Durga. Such representations challenge and deconstruct weak or submissive femininity, illustrating that female spiritual power encompasses protection, purification, and even confrontation with social disorder.

Catherine Bell's (1992) theory of ritual embodiment argues that the body in religious practice is not merely a symbolic vehicle but an active site for the reconfiguration of power and social structure. In the Balinese context, the female body becomes an instrument for articulating the goddess's power through the gestures of Rejang Dewa dance, oral narratives during mapetik rituals, and ritual fasting before temple festivals (piodalan). These practices position the body as the conduit through which Śakti is mobilized to organize, regulate, and sanctify both social and cosmic realms.

Beyond functioning as a medium, the female body also serves as a microcosmic representation of the universe. In Tantric philosophy, the woman's body is often described as a living maṇḍala a meeting point of prāṇa (divine breath), cakras (energy centers), and śakti (dynamic force) (Padma, 2013; Mahalakshmi, 2011). While not all Balinese practices are explicitly Tantric, similar principles are evident in the way women prepare their bodies for ritual purity before piodalan through ascetic observances such as brata (vows), samadhi (meditation), and tirta yatra (pilgrimages). In this way, women become vessels for the goddess's presence not in a passive sense, but as active providers and transmitters of sacred power.

The negotiation of women's sacral authority through their bodies and roles in goddess worship reveals a symbolic and ritual agency that resonates with Saba Mahmood's (2005) framework in *Politics of Piety*. She posits that obedience, silence, and ritual discipline can be understood as legitimate forms of spiritual agency, rather than mere submission. In Balinese practice, a woman's willingness to engage in embodied spiritual processes cleansing and preparing herself to become a living offering constitutes a form of symbolic power and spiritual autonomy. Though not always formalized, such authority is deeply recognized within the community.

Thus, in the worship of Balinese goddesses, the female body is not a passive recipient of patriarchal symbolism, but an active site where Śakti is manifested socially, ecologically, and spiritually. Through their bodies, women

channel the regenerative force of Dewi Danu, the abundance of Dewi Sri, the cosmic protection of Bhatari Batur, and the confrontational power of Dewi Durga. The female body, then, is not merely biological, but cosmological a sacred space that enables the sustenance of life and the continuity of Bali's spiritual ecology.

4. Mapping Female Leadership in Śakti-Based Ritual Practices in Bali

To provide a concrete and comparative overview of women's engagement in religious leadership grounded in the worship of Śakti in Bali, this section presents field data in tabular form. The data were collected through ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews conducted in 2025 across four main regions: Kintamani (Bangli), Tabanan, Denpasar, and Karangasem. The following table summarizes the types of leadership, associations with specific goddesses, ritual functions, and the forms of agency enacted by female spiritual leaders in each locale:

Table 1. Ritual functions and forms of agency performed by female spiritual leaders in Bali

No	Location	Figure/Title	Type of Leadership	Associated Goddess (es)	Primary Ritual Function	Form of Agency / Authority
1	Kintamani (Bangli)	Jero Istri / Jero Balian	Jero Mangku Istri / Jero Balian Istri	Bhatari Batur, Dewi Danu	Leading piodalan, melukat, nunas tirta	Charismatic from childhood; trance medium; ritually chosen
2	Tabanan	Pedanda Istri Kania, Mangku Sri Sedana	Spiritual Leader, Juru Sri, Subak Guardian	Dewi Sri	Rice and water rituals, mepayasan, agricultural rites	Agrarian and ecological agency
3	Denpasar	Guru Ma	Yoga teacher and Pemangku of Ashram	Durga, Sarasvati	Meditation, tirta yatra, dharmic guidance	Contemporary charisma, bhakti yoga
4	Karangasem	Jro Balian	Jro Balian (spirit healer)	Durga, Ratu Gede	Spiritual healing, mapedanan, pengerebongan	Healing through embodied sacredness

Source: Fieldwork Data, 2025

The table illustrates the diverse expressions of female religious leadership evolving in Bali, particularly in the context of goddess worship and the embodiment of divine feminine energy (Śakti). Field data reveal that women's roles in ritual and spiritual leadership are highly contextual, influenced by geographical setting, customary structures, ritual types, and local cosmologies of sacredness.

In the highlands of Kintamani (Bangli), women's leadership often manifests through Jero Mangku Istri or Jero Balian roles, conferred upon individuals from a young age through sacred callings. Their leadership is intimately tied to the worship of goddesses and natural forces such as Bhatari Batur and Dewi Danu, who cosmologically govern lakes, volcanic craters, and water sources. Their agency is built through spiritual charisma and capacity as trance mediums forms of authority not acquired through formal education, but validated through transcendental experiences that compel communal recognition of their sacred legitimacy.

In agrarian regions such as Tabanan, women act as custodians of fertility rites, integrated within the Subak irrigation system and the worship of Dewi Sri. Their roles are not limited to ritual performances but also extend to sustaining ecological harmony between humans and the natural world. Agency in this context is constructed through continued involvement, ecological wisdom, and spiritual connection to the rhythms of nature. This aligns with what may be called an ecological agency, where women serve as mediators between the goddess of fertility and the agricultural abundance of the community. In urban areas like Denpasar, more contemporary forms of female spiritual leadership emerge where women serve as spiritual teachers, yoga guides, and community mentors. These figures integrate knowledge of yoga, bhakti, and dharma within a modern psychosocial framework, linking the energies of Durga and Sarasvati with practices of inner healing and moral instruction. Their spiritual authority is based on contemporary charisma, public service, scriptural literacy, and broad social engagement indicating a transformation from structurally conferred leadership to one that is affective and relational, as theorized in modern charisma studies (Lucia, 2020; Budi Shantika, Ernawati, & Sarja, 2021)).

In East Bali, such as Karangasem, female leadership is represented by Jro Balian, healers who embody the protective forces of Dewi Durga and Ratu Gede. These women lead rituals for healing, expelling negative energies, and restoring cosmic equilibrium. Their bodies function as sacred media, particularly during trance

states (kerauhan) that allow access to invisible realms. As theorized by Meyer (2012) and Bell (1992), this affirms the perspective of material religion in which the body is not only a ritual instrument but a site of divine embodiment and transmission.

These four contexts demonstrate that female religious leadership in Bali is far from monolithic. Rather, it encompasses a broad spectrum from transcendental charisma to ecological stewardship, urban spiritual instruction, and traditional healing. All of these are rooted in the principle of Śakti, dynamically manifested through body, labor, voice, and social presence.

This analysis reveals that female agency in Balinese Hinduism is not merely a response to patriarchal structures, but a lived manifestation of sacred power deeply embedded within local culture. Women do not simply represent Śakti symbolically; they embody and enact it through daily rituals, spiritual leadership, and concrete social roles that bridge the human, natural, and divine realms.

These diverse forms of female spiritual leadership reflect varied local contexts, ritual forms, and community structures. In the case of Jero Jemiwi of Batur, Kintamani, her authority is established through early charisma directly linked to ancestral calling and spiritual relationships with Dewi Danu and Bhatari Batur. She enacts spiritual discipline as a medium, not through institutional learning, but through symbolic embodiment and experiential legitimacy.

Conversely, agrarian leaders serve as guardians of Śakti in its ecological expression, with the female body operating as an embodied field (Bell, 1992) connecting agricultural rhythms with fertility rites. This supports the theory that material religion is not only found in objects or sacred places but also in the actions, labor, and bodily cycles through which women sustain sacred life (Meyer, 2012).

In Denpasar, Guru Ma represents urban, modern female leadership that fuses bhakti yoga, pedagogy, and community action. Though not from a traditional Jero Mangku lineage, her authority is based on widely acknowledged contemporary charisma and spiritual performativity aligned with Amanda Lucia's (2020) framework on religious charisma in Hinduism.

Meanwhile, in Karangasem, Jro Balian demonstrates that the female body is not confined to nurturing or passive roles, but becomes a powerful site of protection and healing. Through goddess worship of Durga or Ratu Gede, women are believed to generate spiritual fields capable of neutralizing communal imbalance and spiritual disorder.

Thus, female leadership in the Śakti tradition in Bali is contextual and multifunctional: from water keepers and granary guardians, to meditation teachers and spiritual healers. In all its forms, women serve as living vessels of divine power embodied extensions of goddesses whose presence flows not only in shrines but through female bodies, voices, labor, and enduring presence within the community (Surpi, 2022).

The data affirm that the role of women as spiritual leaders in Bali extends beyond domestic or supportive ritual spaces. It includes symbolic and performative authority realized in rituals, sacred space management, and direct spiritual service to the community.

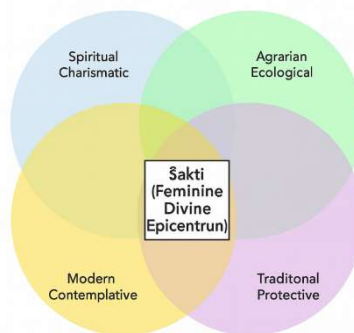


Figure 1. Intersection Diagram Female Religious Leadership Spectrums in Hindu Bali
Source: Researcher Data Analysis, 2025

Through this mapping, it becomes evident that female agency in Hindu religious leadership in Bali manifests across four primary spectrums: (1) trans-mediatoric and charismatic, (2) ecological-ritual, (3) contemplative-educational, and (4) therapeutic-protective. These four forms demonstrate that the power of Śakti is not confined to doctrine or temple shrines (pelinggih), but is tangibly embodied in the bodies, actions, and practices of women who enact sacred roles within their communities. The conceptual intersection diagram places Śakti at the center as the divine feminine epicenter. Each circle in the diagram represents a distinct form of female agency, shaped

by unique social contexts, ritual functions, and spiritual expressions yet they intersect and overlap in everyday praxis.

The trans-mediatoric and charismatic form of leadership (as seen in Kintamani) arises from ritual investiture, early-life spiritual experiences *kerauhan* (spiritual trance), sacred dreams, and an innate awareness of serving as conduits for divine power. In contrast, ecological-ritual leadership (Tabanan) reflects women's involvement in sustaining the Subak system and the worship of Dewi Sri, goddess of fertility. Here, women not only perform rituals but also maintain the material-spiritual equilibrium between humans and the environment, embodying Śakti as the regenerative pulse of agro-cosmology.

The contemplative-educational leadership (Denpasar) is more urban and modern, blending Hindu teachings with yoga, meditation, and dharma pedagogy within broader social settings. This illustrates that female agency in spiritual leadership is not solely inherited through tradition, but cultivated through inner wisdom, public service, and textual knowledge. Meanwhile, the therapeutic-protective leadership (Karangasem) reveals how women become healers and protectors, mediating sacred power through their bodies in rituals of purification and the expulsion of negative energies often associated with goddess figures like Durga or Ratu Gede.

Although these four expressions arise from distinct transcendental, ecological, pedagogical, and therapeutic contexts, they converge at a central point: Śakti as the unifying source of female spirituality. The body, voice, ritual acts, and labor of women across these domains form tangible articulations of the divine feminine force not as distant metaphors, but as immanent realities embedded in everyday devotional and communal life. Thus, this diagram is not merely a typological chart, but a reflective map of spiritual dynamics, wherein women are guardians, regulators, teachers, and healers each embodying Śakti in living form (Surpi et al., 2021).

The intersectional diagram, which places Śakti at the epicenter, reveals that female Hindu leadership in Bali is not a fragmented phenomenon but rather a constellation of intersecting agencies. By adopting an integrative approach merging Śakta theology, feminist agency theory, and material religion we can understand that these four types of agency observed in the field (trans-mediatoric, ecological-ritual, contemplative-educational, and therapeutic-protective) are not isolated. They affirm and sustain each other, drawing upon the same ontological source: divine feminine power.

From a Śakta theological perspective, Śakti is the autonomous force animating the cosmos. In the Balinese context, this is actively embodied in the worship of Dewi Danu, Dewi Sri, Durga, and Bhatari Batur (Surpi, 2020). These goddesses not only symbolize divinity but serve as archetypes for women's roles in ritual and social life. Women leading water and lake rituals in Kintamani express Śakti as flowing and purifying force; those safeguarding Subak in Tabanan embody Śakti as fertility and agrarian order; spiritual leaders in Denpasar and Karangasem manifest Śakti as contemplative depth and protective strength. In this way, Śakti is lived within the female body not as metaphor, but as practice and spiritual authority.

The analysis through female agency theory (Mahmood, 2005) highlights that women's spiritual leadership in Bali is not born of rebellion against patriarchal structures, but arises from subtle and sustained negotiations through ritual, service, and symbolic proximity to divine power. Female *pemangku*, spiritual teachers, and healers do not seek institutional validation, but derive authority through community recognition of their sanctity, ritual consistency, and lived spirituality as discussed by DeNapoli (2023b) and Lucia (2020). This form of authority is charismatic, embodied, and relational emerging not from formal office or traditional appointment, but from spiritual resonance with the community.

Material religion theory (Meyer, 2012) further emphasizes that bodies and spaces are not mere backdrops to religious life, but integral to religious processes themselves. In this intersectional diagram, the female body operates as a sacred field through which Śakti is materialized: in prayers, dances, offerings, trance, and healing. Spaces such as rice barns dedicated to Dewi Sri, forest shrines, sacred kitchens, and ashrams are external expressions of Śakti's energy mediated through female presence and practice. The female body, in this context, is not passive matter, but an active agent of the sacred a threshold between the divine and the mundane.

The conceptual diagram positioning Śakti at the center affirms that every form of female leadership in Bali though diverse and shaped by local contexts, shares the same ontological and epistemological foundation: Śakti as creative, regenerative, and transformative energy. These varied forms of female authority do not compete, but synergize to compose a holistic and inclusive spiritual landscape (Utama et al., 2020).

This reading of the diagram suggests that Śakti in Balinese women's religious life is not abstract or symbolic alone, but enacted through relational acts, sacred spaces, and embodied practice. By employing an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, we may understand that Balinese Hindu women's religious agency is a living expression of embodied Śakti, and that their leadership is not an anomaly but a vital, authentic manifestation of Bali's dynamic spirituality.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that female leadership within Balinese Hindu tradition cannot be fully understood through the lens of formal patriarchal structures that dominate religious institutions. Rather, it must be interpreted through the articulatory practices of Śakti as embodied in the female body, ritual performance, and the socio-spiritual spaces inhabited by women. Through ethnographic research conducted in Kintamani, Tabanan, Denpasar, and Karangasem, it becomes evident that Balinese Hindu women play a central role in sustaining spiritual continuity, ritual ecology, and the cosmic balance of the *desa adat* (customary village) through leadership forms rooted in charisma, service, and transcendent experience.

The presence of figures such as Jero Istri, Jero Balian, Pedanda Kania, and Guru Ma illustrates that female religious authority is constituted not solely through institutional structures, but through spiritual power that is embodied, experienced, and disseminated via sacred action and communal recognition. The female body, in this context, is not merely perceived as a biological entity, but as a sacred vessel of Śakti, capable of manifesting sanctity, healing, and teaching within the community.

Moreover, the veneration of goddesses such as Dewi Danu, Bhatari Batur, Dewi Sri, and Dewi Durga reveals that feminine power in Balinese Hinduism is an active and multifaceted spiritual foundation. Through the ritual leadership of women, the divine feminine is not confined to shrines or symbols, but is materialized in daily labor, spiritual discipline, and socio-religious roles. In this regard, female agency is neither oppositional to customary systems, nor marginal, but rather negotiative and performative, as articulated in theories of ritual embodiment (Bell, 1992), material religion (Meyer, 2012), and the performativity of saintliness (DeNapoli, 2023).

The findings of this study challenge the classical dichotomy between structure and charisma, between formal ritual and women's spirituality. Instead, they reveal that Balinese Hindu women's spiritual leadership emerges from a convergence of transcendent experience, bodily awareness, and social acknowledgment, positioning these women not merely as guardians of tradition, but as agents of value transformation. Furthermore, the findings affirm that Śakti is not simply a metaphysical belief, but a lived force embodied in daily service, self-discipline, relationality with nature, and deep communal embeddedness. Sacredness, therefore, does not transcend the body, but flows through it disciplined, adorned, and sanctified within spiritual rhythms. Here lies the symbolic and practical potency of a Jero Mangku Istri, who does not merely officiate ritual but becomes an integral part of the rite itself.

Academically, this research enriches the discourse on gender and religion by offering a localized, embodied, and ritual-based reading of spiritual leadership. Practically, it opens a space for greater recognition of women's roles in religious leadership not as peripheral supporters, but as central bearers of the community's spiritual power. Ultimately, Śakti is not merely a metaphysical abstraction, but a living reality, manifested through the bodies, actions, and voices of women. In a world continuously searching for inclusive and sustainable spiritual paradigms, the women leaders of Balinese Hinduism demonstrate that sanctity is not the monopoly of institutional structures, but the result of a soul's journey made manifest in loving presence and sacred service.

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