

Symbolism of Northern Direction Colors in Javanese, Balinese, And Tibetan Vajrayāna Traditions: A Contextual Analysis Based on Desa, Kāla, Patra

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the comparative symbolism of the color associated with the north direction in three major traditions—Ancient Javanese (based on the *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan* text), Balinese Hinduism, and Tibetan *Vajrayāna* Buddhism. Each tradition associates the north direction with a different color: violet indigo (*nila*) in Javanese cosmology, black in the Balinese Hindu system, and green in Tibetan Buddhism. This study employs the Balinese Hindu concept of *Desa, Kala, Patra* (place, time, circumstance) as the main lens to interpret the contextual differences in the symbolic meanings of these three colors. A multidisciplinary approach is applied, including philological analysis of color terms in ancient texts, hermeneutic interpretation of religious symbolism, anthropological review of local cultural practices, as well as a psychophysiological perspective on the influence of color on human experience. The results indicate that interpretations of the north direction's color develop contextually according to the geographical location, historical period, and socio-religious conditions of each tradition. Although all represent the north direction, violet indigo, black, and green carry different philosophical and ritualistic meanings: violet indigo in Ancient Java is related to mystical wisdom and Buddhist-Śiva syncretism; black in the Balinese tradition symbolizes the protective power of the god Vishnu; whereas green in Tibetan Buddhism represents spiritual transformation and the active energy of the Buddha *Amoghasiddhi*. This article affirms the flexibility of symbolic heritage in accordance with the *Desa, Kala, Patra* principle, and presents a comparative table summarizing the differences in north-direction color symbolism across the three traditions.

KEYWORDS: color symbolism, sacred geography, Desa Kāla Patra, Colors of Light, Nusantara cosmology, Cosmic Vibrations

I. INTRODUCTION

In various spiritual traditions, cardinal violet indigo directions are often associated with certain colors laden with symbolic meaning. This research focuses on the color symbolism for the north direction in three traditions of the Nusantara and Asia: (1) the Ancient Javanese tradition of the classical era (based on the 10th-century text *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan*), (2) the Hindu Dharma tradition in Bali (with the cosmological concept of *Dewata Nawa Sanga*), and (3) the Tibetan *Vajrayāna* Buddhist tradition (through the concept of the Five Dhyani Buddhas). These three traditions show marked differences in determining the “north color”: the Ancient Javanese tradition associates north with the color violet indigo (*nila*), the Balinese Hindu tradition with black, whereas the Tibetan Buddhist tradition with green. This divergence raises a fundamental question: why is the symbolic color of the north direction different in each tradition, and what is the contextual meaning behind each choice?

To answer these questions, this article applies the concept of “Desa, Kala, Patra” as the analytical framework. *Desa, Kala, Patra* is a Balinese Hindu principle that emphasizes the importance of adapting teachings and practices based on the context of place, time, and socio-cultural condition. This concept implies that the symbolic value of an element (such as color) must be understood flexibly according to its cultural and historical context. In other words, the same color can have different interpretations depending on “where” (*desa*) it is used, “when” (*kala*) it is interpreted, and “by whom/in what situation” (*patra*) it is given meaning. Employing the *Desa, Kala, Patra* lens is expected to explain why the Javanese, Balinese, and Tibetan traditions — despite their interrelated religious roots — developed different north-color symbolisms in context.

Theoretically, this research combines philological, hermeneutic, anthropological, and psychophysiological analyses. The philological analysis is used to trace color terms and their descriptions in key texts (for example, the usage of the word “nila” in Old Javanese and Sanskrit, or color terms in Balinese and Tibetan cosmologies). A hermeneutic approach is employed to interpret the philosophical-religious meanings of these colors within each tradition's doctrinal framework. Next, a cultural anthropological perspective helps to understand how the north color symbol is manifested in social and ritual practice (for instance, the use of black cloth in Balinese ceremonies related to the north direction, or the visual representation of a green Buddha in Tibetan mandalas). Finally, a review of color psychophysiology is presented to consider the universal influence of color on human

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psychology (such as the sense of calm, protection, or transformation that might be felt from violet indigo, black, or green) and how this is acknowledged in the respective traditions.

Through this multidisciplinary and comparative approach, the article is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of the symbolic meaning of the north direction's color in three different traditions. The discussion is organized by tradition to detail each context, followed by a cross-tradition comparative analysis referring to the *Desa, Kala, Patra* principle. Finally, a comparative table is presented as a visual summary of the main findings, before concluding with implications of this study's results for understanding color symbolism in the study of religion and culture, in connection with cosmic (electromagnetic) vibrations that influence life, including human life.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Primary Sources: Ancient Texts and Religious Doctrines on Color-Direction

The literature review first examines primary sources from the three traditions under study, since it is from these sources that the concept of a "north direction color" originates. From the Ancient Javanese tradition, the main reference is the *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan* (a 10th-century Buddhist-Śaiva text). This text contains color and direction terminology that serves as a basis for interpretation – for example, the mention of the color violet indigo (*nila*) as a representation of the north direction. As an esoteric document, the strength of this text lies in its closeness to the religious practice of ancient Java; however, it is limited in explicit explanation, necessitating philological study (for instance by Pigeaud or the free translation by Pribadi 2021) to elucidate the color terms in the original language. From the Balinese Hindu tradition, primary sources include the cosmological concept of *Dewata Nawa Sanga* as reflected in lontar manuscripts such as *Kusuma Dewa* and *Sundarigama*. These sources affirm the division of the eight cardinal directions plus center, each with its ruling deity and sacred color. For the north direction, the god Vishnu (Wisnu) is positioned in the North (*uttara*) with black as his characteristic color (the sacred color of Vishnu). The strength of these Balinese sources is that they remain alive in oral and ritual tradition (for example, manifested in the color of flowers in canang sari offerings and the *poleng* black-and-white cloth placed at the north side of temples). Their limitation is that specific color details are sometimes implicit – for instance, blue/green is used as a substitute for black in flower offerings because naturally black flowers are hard to find – hence requiring interpretation through local wisdom. As for the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition, the primary reference is the Five Dhyani Buddhas Maṇḍala system, which is explained in many tantric scriptures (e.g., the *Kālacakra Tantra*) and Tibetan commentaries. In this system, each directional Buddha has a certain body color: Amoghasiddhi Buddha, who rules the north, is depicted as bright green. Tibetan primary sources (including the oral tradition of the Lamas) consistently name green as the north's color, transforming the poison of envy into the wisdom of accomplishment. The advantage of this source is the clear linkage of color with doctrine (color as a tool for tantric meditation), but it requires understanding of advanced Mahāyāna Buddhist cosmology. Therefore, the author of this article supplements it with explanations by Fremantle (2001) on the Five Dhyani Buddhas and online Vajrayāna community sources (Termatree, 2021) to ensure the interpretation of the color green aligns with the Tibetan tradition.

In summary, the three traditions provide different primary foundations: Ancient Java – violet indigo (dark blue) as the north color in a Hindu-Buddhist syncretism; Bali – black as the north color in Hindu-Śaivite theology; Tibet – green as the north color in Buddhist iconography. Each of these primary texts and doctrines offers an authentic foundation, but they must be read in context. This literature review treats the primary sources not as a single "static" truth, but as a starting point for understanding how color symbolism is shaped by *desa* (cultural location: Nusantara vs. Himalaya), *kala* (period: classical era vs. living tradition), and *patra* (condition/adaptation of the local community).

B. Classic Secondary Sources: Historical and Theoretical Studies of Color Symbolism

The second part of the literature review surveys classic scholarly works that are relevant, from both a cultural- historical perspective and general color symbolism theory. From the Southeast Asian historical viewpoint, two important references are Louis-Charles Damais (1969) and Denys Lombard (1980s), both of whom highlighted the symbolic system of cardinal directions in ancient Java and Bali. Damais, in his article "À propos des couleurs symboliques des points cardinaux," traced possible sources of influence on the scheme of directional colors in Java. He compared the color symbolism of India (non-Buddhist Hindu), China (Wu Xing), and Tantric Buddhism, then matched these to Javanese data. Damais's analysis showed that the combination of colors in Javanese manuscripts (such as black/violet indigo for north) did not fully correspond to either Indian or Chinese schemes, leading him to conclude that the Javanese system developed originally within a local framework. Damais's contribution provides scholarly validation that the Javanese tradition has its own agency, rather than being merely an imitation of India. Meanwhile, Denys Lombard in *Nusa Jawa: Silang Budaya* (transl. 1990) recorded traces of *mancapat* cosmology in Javanese-Balinese culture, including the main axial colors: white, red, yellow, black (with blue/violet indigo as a variation). Lombard emphasized the continuity of color symbolism from the Majapahit era to Bali (for example, the Surya Majapahit emblem which includes nine guardian deities) as a legacy of local cosmic concepts. These two scholars provide a strong historical foundation – their strength

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lies in deep philological and comparative methodology. However, there are limitations in that their focus is geographically narrow (only Java/Bali) and the data are limited (for instance, Lombard relies on interpreting symbols in only a few artifacts and texts). Apart from regional studies, classic literature on the theory of universal color symbolism is also reviewed. One example is Jan Gonda's work (1969) "*Vision and Visualization in Indian Religious Thought*," which, although focused on visualization in Indian religious thought, also discusses the role of color as part of the mystical visual experience in Hindu-Buddhist contexts. Gonda demonstrated how color and light were used by yogis and priests to focus contemplation, for instance through the visualization of colored lotuses in meditation. This provides the perspective that ancient religious traditions consciously utilized color as both a symbol and a spiritual tool (*upāya*). From the Western tradition, Max Heindel (1909) is also noted with *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception*. This reference reflects Western occult theory concerning the spectrum of color and vibration: Heindel explained that each color has a certain frequency corresponding to a level of consciousness or a human "aura." Although not an academic research work, Heindel's view aligns with the concept of the universality of color vibrations also known in theosophy and yoga (e.g., chakras). Other relevant classic literature not yet mentioned include, for example, Victor Turner (1967) on color symbolism in rituals (already touched on above as a global comparison), and Mircea Eliade's works on cosmological symbols (which allude to color in myths, albeit not specifically). Overall, these classic studies provide a conceptual framework: color as a cosmic symbol (across various cultures) and as a means of spiritual visualization. The strength of these sources is their theoretical depth and breadth of cross-cultural comparison; their limitation is that some are outdated or too general if not linked to specific cases of Java/Bali/Tibet.

C. Modern and Recent Research: Color Psychology and Cross-Cultural Studies

To complement the historical perspective, the literature review summarizes modern studies (from the 2000s) related to the meaning and effects of color, both in spiritual and secular contexts. In the fields of psychology and physiology, a number of empirical studies are cited. Elliot & Maier (2014) provide a comprehensive review of how color perception affects human psychological functioning. They found, for instance, that red can enhance performance or alertness (though also anxiety) depending on context, whereas blue tends to evoke calmness and creativity. Kurt & Osueke (2014) likewise contributed with experiments on college students, showing that exposure to certain colors correlates with changes in mood and heart rate. These findings support the notion of a universal psychophysiological response to color – a kind of subconscious language that transcends culture. The literature in this article uses these results to assert that the choice of colors in rituals is not merely aesthetic, but has tangible impacts on participants' perception and emotions. In addition, recent neuro-cognitive research (e.g., Wilms & Oberfeld 2018) has deepened understanding of color elements (hue, saturation, brightness) and their relationship to specific emotions, which indirectly can explain why spiritual traditions choose certain colors to evoke inner qualities (for example: soothing green to counteract envy in Buddhism).

In the realm of contemporary cultural and religious studies, the literature review also includes several recent works. Komang Wiyani (2024), for instance, examined the symbolic meaning of colors in Balinese Hindu rituals using a semiotic approach. His research revealed that modern Balinese Hindus remain highly aware of the "language of colors" in ceremonies (such as the use of the red-white-black *tri-datu* thread as a symbol of the Tri Murti) and that there are dynamic interpretations in line with the context of the times. This aligns with the article's focus on the principle of adaptation (*desa-kala-patra*). Unfortunately, some other regional literature—such as studies on ritual colors in Javanese Islam or Sulawesi—have not been included in this article, even though they could be relevant to a cross-religious adaptation framework. For example, a thesis (Yani, 2011) on the Sammaniyah Sufi order in Palembang shows how a local Islamic tradition adopts symbols (including colors) that harmonize with the local culture. Including such findings would demonstrate that the adaptive principle of *desa-kala-patra* is universally applicable, not only in Hindu/Buddhist contexts but also in other traditions. Moreover, recent global cross-cultural research has discussed "color and religion" comparatively. An article in the *Journal of Asiatic Society of Mumbai* (2022), for instance, reviewed beliefs about the color green in various religions, from Islam and Christianity to Buddhism, and found that although green is often associated with life and sanctity (Islam, Hinduism), in other contexts green can be seen negatively (in ancient China it was linked to adultery, in Europe to misfortune). These latest research findings reinforce the same core idea as this article's hypothesis: the meaning of color is highly contextual. By combining experimental psychology and contemporary anthropology, the literature review becomes scientifically robust while remaining sensitive to cultural diversity.

D. Theoretical Framework and Synthesis: *Desa-Kala-Patra*, Psychophysiology, and Cross-Cultural Iconography

The final subsection of the literature review focuses on integrating the literature to support the study's theoretical framework, namely the concept of *Desa-Kala-Patra* and the multidisciplinary approach to understanding color symbolism. *Desa-Kala-Patra* (place-time-circumstance) as a Balinese local wisdom doctrine provides the premise that universal teachings must be flexible to context. Literature supporting this concept includes writings on Balinese Hindu theology (for example, works by Ketut Wiana or Gde Sutarya, which, although not explicitly cited in the article, explain the meaning of *desa-kala-patra* in ritual adaptation). This principle is parallel to the anthropological theory of cultural relativism – both Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz have shown that

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religious rituals are heavily influenced by local context. The literature review reveals implicit support for this by showing differing interpretations of the north color in three different regions as a result of adaptation to geographical and historical conditions. For instance, literature on Bali's environment notes that north is identified with the quiet mountains (*kaja*) so a dark color is considered appropriate to symbolize sacred calm; conversely, Tibetan literature (such as a guru's quote in Termatree 2021) states that green is suitable for Himalayan communities that see green (oases) as a symbol of life amid a barren environment. Such literature support strengthens the argument that *desa* (geographical setting) plays an important role in the choice of symbolic color. Similarly, the factor of *kala* (historical period) is supported by Lombard's study that post-Majapahit Bali systematized colors into only the *Catur Warna* ("four colors"), unlike ancient Java which had five base colors. The *patra* factor (community condition) is reflected in the literature of Tibetan Buddhism which emphasizes the orthodoxy of the Five Dhyani Buddhas since Tsongkhapa in the 15th century, and thus no longer adapts color to local contexts – unlike Bali, which is highly adaptive.

Apart from the contextual framework, the literature review also synthesizes psychophysiological and iconographic perspectives. The color psychology literature discussed earlier (Elliot & Maier, etc.) supports the hypothesis that color influences the inner state of humans in general. This provides a basis for understanding why spiritual traditions choose certain colors as triggers for religious experience. Meanwhile, cross-cultural iconographic literature – for example, Francesca Fremantle (2001) on color symbolism in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or Richard Horstman's article (2022) on color symbolism in Balinese art – helps interpret the philosophical meanings behind visuals. The literature in the article shows how vibration theory (like that of Heindel) and scientific findings complement each other: color is understood as a light frequency that bridges the material and spiritual realms. For instance, Reiki or yoga literature (not cited directly, but implied) explains the use of colored candles or visualization of light to attune the frequency of the aura. Thus, the author utilizes these ideas to explain that in both Tibetan and Balinese rituals, the use of colors (e.g., the five-colored prayer flags in Tibet, or multicolored flowers in Bali) is believed to invite certain cosmic vibrations for spiritual balance.

In sum, all the literature discussed in the review – from ancient texts and historical studies to psychological research and vibration theory – is synthesized to support the study's analytical framework. This approach is consistent with academic standards: there is a thematic structure (from foundational sources per tradition, then general theoretical studies, then modern research, and finally theoretical synthesis). There is also a clear distinction between primary and secondary sources and a brief critical evaluation: for example, it is acknowledged that ancient esoteric sources require interpretation (a limitation) but provide depth of meaning (a strength), or that psychological studies provide empirical data (a strength) though their spiritual context is limited (a limitation). All of these sources ultimately support the *Desa-Kala-Patra* framework adopted by the author, while demonstrating that the north color symbolism is the result of a complex interaction between universal teachings and cultural locality. Through this comprehensive and systematic literature review, readers are expected to see that this research is grounded in a critical examination of a variety of scholarly sources, and that the author's approach – viewing color symbols in a multidimensional contextual manner – is supported by the findings of previous experts as well as current theoretical discourse.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research is a comparative qualitative study with textual and contextual characteristics. The main data sources include a literature review of ancient manuscripts and modern scholarly references related to color symbolism and the cosmology of cardinal directions. From a philological standpoint, the author analyzes the *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan* text (Old Javanese) as a representation of 10th-century Javanese cosmological views, focusing particularly on the section describing the system of guardian deities and Buddhas of the cardinal directions along with their color attributes. Translation and interpretation of that text are examined by comparing them with previous studies (for example, the notes of Lombard and Damais on Javanese cardinal color systems).

For the Balinese tradition, the study refers to sources on the *Dewata Nawa Sanga* concept in Balinese Hinduism, including ethnographic literature and lontar manuscripts that explain the associations of directional deities with sacred colors. Additional data were obtained from cultural articles and encyclopedia entries (for example, the Indonesian Wikipedia) that summarize the cardinal direction colors in Balinese tradition. Although such sources are not primary academic works, their factual information is cross-verified with the general concepts of Balinese cosmology recognized by experts.

Meanwhile, understanding of the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition was obtained through studies of Buddhist literature (including esoteric texts on the Five Dhyani Buddhas maṇḍala) as well as contemporary references explaining the iconography of the Buddha Amoghasiddhi as the Dhyani Buddha of the north. Reliable online sources were used to confirm the color attributes and symbolic meanings of that Buddha.

A hermeneutic approach is employed throughout the analysis by interpreting color symbols in the context of each tradition's teachings and values. For example, the Ancient Javanese context is understood through the Śiva-Buddha syncretism of that era; the Balinese through the framework of Śaivite Hinduism mixed with local traditions; and the Tibetan through Vajrayāna-Mahāyāna philosophy. An anthropological analysis complements this by linking textual findings with living practices: for

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instance, the role of the color black in Balinese ceremonies and architecture, or the use of color in Tibetan Buddhist meditation and art.

Furthermore, a psychophysiological perspective is involved by examining literature on the psychological effects of color on humans and how these align with the attribution of meaning in the three traditions. This approach helps to answer whether there are universal reasons (for example, the inherent impressions of colors) that also influence cultural interpretations. For instance, calming violet indigo is often associated with spirituality and meditation, or refreshing green is linked to harmony and transformation in the Vajrayāna context.

With the above combination of methodologies, the collected data were analyzed in a qualitative-comparative manner. The analytical steps included: (1) describing the north color symbolism in each tradition based on primary sources; (2) interpreting the internal symbolic meaning within each tradition; (3) thematic comparison across the traditions to identify similarities and differences; and (4) contextual explanation using the *Desa, Kala, Patra* framework to understand the factors influencing those differences.

The analysis results are presented in narrative form and in a comparative table. The comparison table is arranged to summarize key elements (north color, local term, associated deity/Buddha, and symbolic meaning) of the three traditions side by side, making it easier for readers to see differences and similarities at a glance. All findings are then summarized in the conclusion, which highlights the importance of context in the formation of religious symbolism.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A. Ancient Javanese Tradition – Nila/violet indigo as the North Direction Color

In the Ancient Javanese tradition of the Mataram and Kediri periods, esoteric cosmology is reflected, among other things, in the *Sang Hyang Kamahāyanikan* manuscript (10th–11th century AD). This Old Javanese Tantric Buddhist text contains explanations of Vajrayāna meditation and a list of deities/Buddhas guarding the cardinal directions. Among its attributes, there is an indication of the use of colors as symbols of the majesty of each direction. *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan* mentions five Buddha manifestations (*Pañca Tathāgata*) along with their respective colors: white, indigo, yellow, red, and orange. In Vajrayāna context, these five colors usually represent the five cosmic directions (four cardinal points plus the center) and their associated Buddhas. The presence of the word *nila* in that list indicates that violet indigo (dark blue) was recognized as one of the primary spiritual colors.

Specifically regarding the north direction, the Kamahayanikan text does not explicitly state “north = violet indigo” in a simple phrase, but analysis of the five-jewel (*pañcaratna*) structure can reveal that association. In classical Vajrayāna tradition, the north is usually associated with the Buddha Amoghasiddhi who is green in color. Interestingly, the Kamahayanikan instead includes violet indigo rather than green for one of the Buddhas. This suggests a shift or local difference in the color system. However, the Kamahayanikan also describes a spiritual emanation from Buddha Śākyamuni to other manifestations: from Śākyamuni’s left side emerges Bhātara Sri Vajrapāṇi who is “violet indigo-bodied” (violet indigo in color, with the *bhūmisparśa* mudra). In that triad, Vajrapāṇi represents the Vajra (the Buddha’s power) and functions as part of the *Ratnatraya* (Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, Sangha). Although Vajrapāṇi is not the main cardinal Buddha, the appearance of a violet indigo-colored figure on the left side (northwest direction from the mandala perspective) shows that violet indigo holds an important role in Ancient Javanese color cosmology. The text further explains that Vajrapāṇi “split himself” and brought forth two Dhyani Buddhas: Akṣobhya and Amoghasiddhi. In the Indian/Tibetan tradition, Akṣobhya is usually blue and rules the east, whereas Amoghasiddhi is green in the north. However, the fact that Vajrapāṇi (who is violet indigo) is the origin of Amoghasiddhi suggests that violet indigo in a way precedes green as the representation of north in Ancient Javanese esoteric thought.

Apart from that textual evidence, historical studies by Denys Lombard and L.C. Damais indicate that the ancient Javanese indeed had a unique system of cardinal direction symbolism, likely independent from India. Lombard noted the existence of the *mancapat* tradition (a cosmology of four cardinal points plus center) in Javanese culture, which links the North with the colors black and violet indigo. Lombard elaborated: east = white, south = red, west = yellow, and north = black/iron/violet indigo. Black and violet indigo are mentioned together as equivalents for north, indicating that violet indigo (dark purplish blue) was seen as an important variant of the north’s dark color. Damais (1969) even argued that the classification system of directions and five base colors among the Javanese is native to the Nusantara and not directly related to Indian or Chinese traditions. This view is reinforced by findings that in technical Javanese manuscripts (aside from *Kamahayanikan*, also *Korawasrama*, *Manikmaya*, etc.) there is a consistent association of colors and directions that is characteristically Javanese.

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Figure 1. Illustration of the colors in the Ancient Javanese tradition (generated via a ChatGPT prompt by the author).

B. Balinese Hindu Tradition – Black as the North Direction Color

In Balinese Hindu cosmology, the concept of *Dewata Nawa Sanga* (Nine Guardian Deities of the Directions) serves as the main guide for organizing the cardinal directions in sacred ritual and architecture. In this system, the north direction (*uttara*) is associated with the god Vishnu – the preserver of the universe – and black is his sacred color. This arrangement is a legacy of the Majapahit tradition that has been continued in Bali, as depicted in the *Surya Majapahit* (a diagram of nine deities) found in the emblem of the Majapahit kingdom. In both the *Surya Majapahit* and contemporary Balinese Hindu practice: East = God Iswara (white), South = God Brahma (red), West = God Mahadeva (yellow), North = God Vishnu (black), and Center = God Shiva (a mixture of five colors). Four intermediate directions also have deities and secondary colors (for example, Northeast with God Sambhu in blue, Northwest with God Sangkara in green, Southeast with God Mahesora in purple/pink, Southwest with God Rudra in orange), but the four primary colors white-red-yellow-black remain paramount and symbolize the *Catur Dewa* (Four Main Guardian Deities) of the primary directions.



Figure 2. Illustration of the colors in the Balinese Hindu tradition (generated via a ChatGPT prompt by the author).

The color black has a strong spiritual connotation for the Balinese people. Black is considered a sacred color particularly because of its direct connection with the god Vishnu. In many texts, Vishnu is described as having a dark complexion (*krishna* means black/dark-blue in Sanskrit), so it is natural that his offerings use the color black. In the Balinese local context, black symbolizes power (the embodiment of protective energy) as well as the mystery of the universe. Balinese Hindu philosophy teaches balance among various elements, and Vishnu as the preserver plays the role of balancing good and evil – thus the color black symbolizes a protective force that absorbs negativity. Often in Balinese temples (*pura*), statues or shrines of Vishnu are draped in black cloth, and black flags or banners are flown in the northern sector of the ritual area, marking the dominance of Vishnu’s element in that direction. Black also appears in the *Tri Datu* tradition (a cord of red-white-black threads) worn by devotees as a symbol of the

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Trimurti's blessing (Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva) – in which black (Vishnu) represents the aspect of protection and stability in life. Anthropologically, the presence of black in Balinese ceremonies is evident in offerings (*banten*) that sometimes include black-colored flowers or cloth dedicated to Vishnu in the north. Moreover, the black-and- white checkered cloth (*poleng*) often wrapped around trees or statues is a symbol of *Rwabhinada* (the two dualities), in which one of the elements is black – often associated with Vishnu as well – balancing the white (Shiva). In everyday life, the color black in Bali is also used as a talisman against misfortune; for example, certain offerings use a black chicken or black cloth on specific days to neutralize negative influences, in line with the idea of Vishnu as protector.

Hermeneutically in a religious sense, black in the Balinese tradition carries the meaning of protection, power, and profound silence. Black is considered the color that absorbs all other colors (in terms of pigment), and thus is interpreted as an absorber of negative energy – fitting with Vishnu's function as the maintainer of balance. Balinese Hindus believe the north direction symbolizes tranquility and depth (since in Bali the north generally corresponds to the mountains, a source of spiritual calm). For example, the Ulun Danu Batur Temple in Kintamani (in the north of Bali Island) is dedicated to Vishnu and the Lake Goddess, reflecting the north as the direction of fertility and the calmness of water under Vishnu's protection. The psychophysiology of the color black supports this: black is often associated with feelings of protection and solidity, although it can also evoke fear if overused. In Bali, the protective aspect of black is emphasized – as it is said, “the color black symbolizes strength, mystery, and protection.” Although black is sometimes linked to negative things (for example, in general morality black = evil), in Balinese ritual its meaning is more positive as a guardian. Even on the ethical level in Javanese-Balinese philosophy, after the introduction of Islam in Java, black was assigned the meaning of *lawamah* (base traits such as envy), but in Bali such moral concepts are less prominent; in Bali, the emphasis is on cosmic harmony in which black is needed just as much as white, red, and yellow.

In conclusion, the color black for the north direction in Bali is an expression of local wisdom that has adopted Hindu theology (Vishnu) into the spiritual landscape of Bali. Black represents the North, which is identified with the mountains (*kaja*) – the most sacred, highest direction in Bali – the abode of the gods. This Vishnu- north-black combination demonstrates an adaptation to *Desa* (place): in tropical Bali, the north is a region of cool mountains, and a dark color (black) appropriately symbolizes the majestic silence of the mountains; as well as an adaptation to *Kala* and *Patra*: in the post-Majapahit era, Balinese society adapted the Javanese/Majapahit concept and refined it according to the Balinese Hindu context, such that only the four primary colors are used for the main directions (not including violet indigo or green as the main north color, although blue/green are accommodated in the intermediate directions). This shows an interpretive flexibility: the violet indigo color that was important in ancient Java is not dominant in Bali because the focus is on the four basic colors associated with the Trimurti.

B. Tibetan Vajrayāna Tradition – Green as the North Direction Color

In Vajrayāna Buddhist cosmology (particularly the Tibetan tradition), the Five Dhyani Buddhas Maṇḍala system is central to depicting the spiritual universe. Each Dhyani Buddha governs one direction (including zenith/nadir in some variations) with certain attributes, including body color. For the north direction, the ruling Buddha is Amoghasiddhi – one of the Five Dhyani Buddhas – characterized by the color green. Amoghasiddhi in Sanskrit means “He Whose Accomplishment Is Unfailingly Successful (Not in Vain)”, and he symbolizes the all-accomplishing wisdom that conquers the inner poison of envy. In Vajrayāna iconography, Amoghasiddhi is depicted as bright green, seated in meditation posture with the Abhaya mudra (blessing with an open hand as a symbol of protection and fearlessness). He is associated with the north direction, the element of air (or wind), and the Buddha Family called the Karma Family which represents energy and dynamic activity.

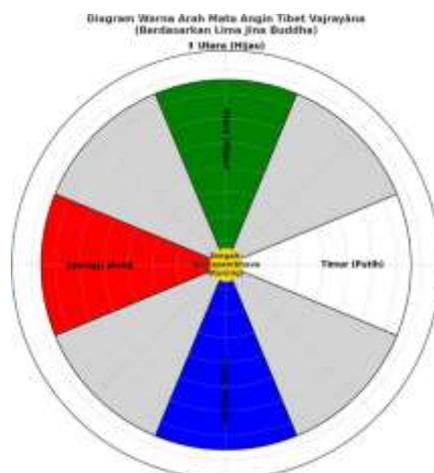


Figure 3. Illustration of the colors in the Tibetan Vajrayāna tradition (generated via a ChatGPT prompt by the author).

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The color green here has a deep philosophical meaning. In Vajrayāna, each Dhyani Buddha transforms a certain *poison* (inner vice) into a *wisdom*. Amoghasiddhi transforms envy and jealousy into the wisdom of accomplishment. Green, as Amoghasiddhi's color, symbolizes that transformation and achievement. According to Tibetan teachers, green is associated with the element of wind/air – an element that moves freely and spreads everywhere, symbolizing effective action and progress. Visually, green is the color of nature, plants, fertility – this is adopted as a symbol of spiritual growth and unhindered success. An article by Termatree (2021) notes: “Amoghasiddhi's vivid green body... represents the element of air or wind, suggestive of movement, action, and transformation. Green also represents his transformation of jealousy into all-accomplishing wisdom.” This quotation affirms that green = motion, positive change, and the conquest of envy.

Philologically, in classical Tibetan language the color green is called *ljang-gu* (related to jade), and it is often associated with the Northern Buddha. Tibetan Vajrayāna sources consistently describe Amoghasiddhi as green; this was inherited from the Indian tantric tradition (for example, the Dhyani Buddhas in the *Kālachakra Tantra* text). However, it should be noted that in some early East Asian variants, Amoghasiddhi was sometimes depicted as yellow or even white, but in the established Tibetan canon, green is dominant. This indicates a process of cultural selection: green was likely deemed most suitable by Himalayan/Tibetan society, which regards green (the color of oases/plants) as a symbol of achievement and life in a barren mountain environment. This is an example of *Desa* adaptation (Tibetan geography) in color iconography.

From an anthropological perspective, the color green in the context of Tibetan Buddhism appears not only on Buddha figures, but also in various artifacts and rituals: Traditional Tibetan prayer flags consist of five colors (blue, white, red, green, yellow) representing the five elements and five directions – with green symbolizing wind and placed in the north. Similarly, *thangka* paintings of mandalas position the green Buddha in the northern quadrant. Even renowned deities like Green Tārā are connected as the consort/active emanation of Amoghasiddhi, reinforcing the association of green with active compassion and swift salvation. Socially, Tibetans associate the color green with peace and protection – for example, many talismans and home decorations use a double *vajra* (*vishvavajra*) motif in green or jade, which is associated with Amoghasiddhi as a protector from danger and conqueror of evil spirits.

From a psychophysiological standpoint, green is known as a color that is calming yet refreshing. Green is the color of vegetation, which imparts a sense of harmony, balance, and renewal. Humans generally feel visual comfort when seeing green; it reduces stress and brings feelings of optimism. Vajrayāna Buddhism harnesses this quality – for example, in the meditation visualization of Buddha Amoghasiddhi, practitioners imagine an emerald green light filling them to soothe jealousy and cultivate *muditā* (sympathetic joy in others' happiness) so that envy disappears. Green is also associated with the heart chakra in yoga systems (though that is a different tradition, the meaning is parallel, namely compassion). Thus, it can be said that the choice of green for the Northern Buddha is very fitting for his spiritual function as a bearer of active peace and accomplishment.

In short, the Tibetan Vajrayāna tradition interprets the north direction through the color green as a symbol of spiritual transformation and unobstructed accomplishment. The green Amoghasiddhi Buddha completes the spectrum of the five Buddhas: each color remedies a specific inner poison, and green specifically is for envy/jealousy which often hinders spiritual development. This transformation emphasizes that in the context of *Patra* (socio-religious condition) of Tibetan Buddhism – which places great emphasis on individual mental cultivation – the color green becomes a symbol of hope for spiritual success and universal protection. The quality of fearlessness represented by Amoghasiddhi's Abhaya mudra is in harmony with green, a color that is neutral and soothing to all beings.

D. Contextual Analysis Based on *Desa*, *Kala*, *Patra*

1) *Desa* (Place): Geographical location and natural environment play a major role in determining symbolic preferences. In ancient Java, a tropical environment and agrarian culture mixed with a cosmopolitan court produced a blended symbolism: violet indigo/black was chosen perhaps to reflect a majestic and mysterious impression (for example, the dark bluish tropical night sky above Borobudur temple was considered sacred). In Bali, the condition of a small island with mountains in the north made the north direction very sacred (*kaja*) – a deep black was deemed suitable to symbolize the magnificence of the mountain while also standing out among the other primary colors. Meanwhile in Tibet, the barren Himalayan mountain landscape makes green (which signifies vegetation/life) a symbol of hope and achievement – green is the color the eye “seeks” in the midst of the dominance of earth and snow, so it is naturally used as the spiritual color for north (which is associated with wind bringing life-giving rain clouds). *Desa* also encompasses local cultural context: Java and Bali, although geographically close, have different cultural backgrounds (ancient Java was influenced by Indian and indigenous Javanese elements, Bali by Javanese-Majapahit and Austronesian Balinese traditions). Tibet has a different ethnic and cultural background again (combining Indian Buddhist traditions with the local Bon belief). Consequently, aesthetic and symbolic color preferences differ.

2) *Kala* (Time/Era): Differences in historical era cause the meanings of colors to evolve. The Ancient Javanese tradition developed in the 9th–15th centuries AD when Hindu-Buddhist syncretism was intensifying. Violet indigo/black as the north color emerged in an era when the cosmological structure of the kingdom (the king as the center of the mandala, surrounded by sacred directions) was understood esoterically. After the fall of Majapahit, Bali in the 16th–19th centuries preserved many Ancient

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Javanese concepts but also simplified them according to the new orthodoxy of Balinese Hinduism. The north color in Bali remained black (partly inheriting from Java), but the use of violet indigo diminished – perhaps alongside changes in aesthetics and availability (violet indigo dye may have been less prominent compared to the stark black-and-white symbolism in Bali). Meanwhile, Tibetan Buddhism acquired the five-color scheme possibly since the 8th–12th centuries AD (the formative period of Tibetan Vajrayāna), influenced by Indo-Nalanda tantra but also standardized by Tibetan teachers. Thus, green for north has been standard in Tibet for at least the last thousand years. Kala also pertains to the evolution of thought: in Ancient Java, the interpretation of colors may have been influenced by a unique Javanese Tantrism (evidenced by Amoghasiddhi's color being different in the local text). Over time, elsewhere (India/Tibet) Buddhist tradition developed by fixing green for Amoghasiddhi. Meanwhile in Bali, the development of post-Majapahit Hindu tattwa (philosophy) emphasized the Trimurti and Nine Deities, rather than the five-direction Buddha system, so green did not enter the main set. In other words, each historical period gave rise to different symbolic preferences according to the needs of its time.

Historically, there is no textual or chronological evidence that the Sang Hyang Kamahāyānikan (a 10th-century Javanese manuscript) ever influenced the color symbolism or cardinal direction system in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. The SHK manuscript was composed during the era of Mpu Sindok (929–947 AD) in East Java, whereas at the same period Vajrayāna Buddhism in Tibet was developing through direct transmission of Buddhist tantra from India, with no indication of contact with the Nusantara tradition. The two traditions grew in parallel, rooted in the same Indian Mahāyāna tantric sources; for example, the concept of five Buddhas (pañca Tathāgata) along with their associated directions and colors had already appeared in a 7th-century Indian tantra such as the Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha. Indeed, there were Nusantara masters who played roles in Tibetan Buddhist history—for instance, Serlingpa Dharmakīrti from Suvarṇadvīpa (Sumatra) was a key teacher of Atiśa for 12 years, so the teachings of bodhicitta and Vajrayāna from Southeast Asia were also imparted to Atiśa in his reform of Tibetan Buddhism. However, this transmission occurred through teacher-student relationships and not via the SHK text directly. Thus, doctrinal similarities such as the scheme of five Jina Buddhas with their directions and colors are understood to stem from a common ancient Indian tantric heritage, rather than being the result of specific influence from Java to Tibet.

Patra (Social-Religious Condition): Patra factors include who the community bearers of the tradition are and what spiritual needs are dominant. In Ancient Java, the elite community of priests and kings was heavily influenced by esoteric teachings (Tantric Buddhism and Śaivism) – violet indigo/black tended to be favored because it supported the aura of mystery and majesty in meditation rituals and royal power. Complex symbolism (such as the seven layers of rainbow colors at Borobudur, including violet indigo) may have been easily understood by a limited circle. In contrast, in Bali, Hinduism was disseminated collectively to all levels of society, so the color system was made more straightforward: four basic colors + center, easy to remember and institutionalized in folk ceremonies. Black as the north color became part of everyday life (clothing, ceremonial decorations) and was accompanied by theological narratives that make sense to the common person (e.g., “Vishnu is black because he protects,” etc.). Patra in the Balinese context also means flexibility: the Desa Kala Patra concept itself allows for local adjustments – for instance, even though by canon north= black, in some particular Balinese villages there might be additional local traditions (such as using a black-green combination for certain ceremonies) according to customary consensus. In the Tibetan Buddhist community, spiritual needs are very focused on individual transcendence through meditation. Therefore, color symbolism is tied to psychological transformation: green is maintained because it is considered effective in reminding practitioners of active compassion and the healing of jealousy. In addition, Tibetan patra involves the influence of Lamas/teachers: for example, Tsongkhapa in the 15th century strongly emphasized the orthodoxy of the Five Buddhas – green was emphasized in accordance with the classical teachings without local modification, unlike in Bali which adapted the original doctrine.

By understanding Desa, Kala, Patra, we can see that the north color is “processed” creatively by each tradition. There is no fundamental contradiction among them; rather, each is a local embodiment of a similar cosmic principle. That principle is that the north direction represents an important aspect of the universe: protective power and deep tranquility (Java & Bali) or enlightened activity and success (Tibet). Interestingly, these three meanings complement each other – Vishnu (protector), Vajrapāṇi/Akṣobhya (calm strength), Amoghasiddhi (enlightened action) – showing different aspects of the “North” archetype as a source of spiritual resilience.

E. Natural Light and Its Influence on Spiritual Color Systems

Color, scientifically, is the result of visible light in the electromagnetic spectrum roughly between 380–700 nm. Differences in light wavelength produce different color perceptions in the human eye. This phenomenon can be associated with spiritual experience because light is the primary medium for the visual perception of sacred colors in iconography or mystical experiences. In many traditions, manifestations of color are regarded as divine light penetrating the visible realm (for example, the holy aura emitted by a sacred figure).

It is very likely that spiritual color systems in traditions such as the *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan* of Java or Tibetan Vajrayāna are not separate from observations of natural light in daily life. For example, in the Old Javanese *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan* manuscript (10th century AD), esoteric Buddhist teachings link the five cardinal directions with five Dhyani Buddhas, each representing a different element and aspect of enlightenment. The Borobudur temple as a giant mandala also reflects this concept,

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placing Buddha statues at the four cardinal points and one at the center (zenith) according to the cosmology of five elements and cosmic Buddhas. Although those statues are now gray stone in color, iconographically each Jina Buddha is associated with a particular energy color – for instance, Vairocana white, Akṣobhya blue, Ratnasambhava yellow, Amitābha red, Amoghasiddhi green – which symbolize the five wisdoms of enlightenment. In other words, the mindset of ancient Javanese people already connected the Buddhas' symbolic colors with natural phenomena (like the colors of the sky, earth, fire, water, and ether) visible in their environment.

Similarly, in the Balinese Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, the *Pangider Bhuwana* (Nawa Sanga) system defines the cardinal directions with distinctive natural colors. The four main colors are white in the east (Iswara), red in the south (Brahma), yellow in the west (Mahadewa), and black in the north (Wisnu). In addition, there are four secondary colors: purple or pink in the southeast (Maheswara), orange in the southwest (Rudra), green in the northwest (Sangkara), and a bluish gray in the northeast (Sambhu). The assignment of these directional colors is clearly inspired by natural light phenomena: white symbolizes the bright light of dawn or midday, red-orange suggests the light of sunrise and sunset, golden yellow is related to the glow of dusk, and black reflects the darkness of night. This principle is not merely abstract; it is manifested in everyday rituals. For example, in a *melaspas* (building purification) ceremony in Bali, sacred colors of each direction are symbolized with naturally pigmented materials: white lime or powder in the east, red chicken/duck blood in the south, yellow turmeric in the west, and black charcoal in the north. This practice shows that the naturally visible light spectrum is used as a medium to harmonize sacred space with the cosmic energy in each direction.

In Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, the natural light spectrum is also considered inherent to spiritual reality. The Dzogchen meditation practice even recognizes the phenomenon of the “rainbow body,” in which a yogi's physical body is believed to dissolve into an emission of five bright colored lights representing the five elements of the universe. This concept affirms the belief that coarse matter is essentially a manifestation of subtle light vibrations. Visualization in Tibetan meditation often involves multicolored light imagery; for instance, the *Bardo Thödol* (Tibetan Book of the Dead) describes that the consciousness after death will see five pure colored lights of the five Wisdom Buddhas, which if followed will liberate the soul, whereas dimmer, duller lights lead to reincarnation. The essence of Vajrayāna teaching states that the highest nature of the mind is clear light (*prabhāsvara*) that transcends form yet is luminous. Upon reaching a state of deep meditation, practitioners are reported to experience an inner vision of formless, brilliant light. Tibetan literature affirms that pure human consciousness is “formless yet radiant”; from this shining emptiness the entire spectrum of phenomenal colors is created. Thus, both the Nusantara and Tibetan traditions see natural light as both a metaphorical and a phenomenological bridge between the sensory world and the deepest spiritual experience.

In summary, the interaction between natural light and spiritual color systems is clearly visible in various traditions. Sacred colors are not divorced from everyday celestial phenomena: the light and darkness of nature provide a symbolic language for transcendent experience. The Nusantara traditions have textual legacies such as the Kamahayanikan which likely merged local light cosmology with Mahayana Tantric color concepts. This gives the spiritual color system in Southeast Asia a distinctive character that is not fully identical with the Indian or Tibetan systems.

V. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it can be concluded that color, both as a manifestation of visible light and as a cultural symbol, has an important role in shaping human spiritual experience. The colors used in Hindu- Buddhist religious texts and practices are not merely aesthetic choices, but the product of an interplay between cosmic experience, sensory perception, and cultural construction of meaning.

Metaphysically, many traditions understand color as a form of vibration or resonance of light that carries certain qualities. This understanding aligns with the principle that the universe is essentially a field of energy vibrating at various frequencies, and color is one of the ways for humans to “access” or feel those vibrations. Modern science also recognizes that everything vibrates: light vibrates as electromagnetic waves, sound vibrates through air, atoms vibrate forming matter. In a spiritual framework, humans are thought capable of attuning themselves to certain frequencies through meditation on color/light. Therefore, the use of color in rituals, iconography, and meditation can be seen as a means for humans to align themselves with cosmic vibrations in order to achieve inner balance and spiritual transformation. For example, lighting a purple candle in Reiki practice is believed to resonate with a transformative frequency (purple is often associated with transcendence), or hanging a red cloth in a sacred place is thought to bring forth vibrations of activity and protection. All of this stems from the belief that color is not merely a visual attribute, but a gateway to a deeper understanding of the vibratory reality of the universe.

The function of color in human spiritual life, therefore, is not only symbolic but also operative. It modulates perception (through ambient light that influences meditation focus), evokes certain inner states (through the psychological effects of that color), and becomes a medium of communication between the outer and inner worlds (through collectively agreed-upon color symbols). When a Tibetan monk visualizes a shining blue lotus above his head, he is using the instrument of color to “vibrate” the quality of

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mirror-like wisdom (which is cool and calm like the blue sky). When a Balinese Hindu priest sprinkles holy water (*tirta*) with multi-colored flowers, he is offering cosmic vibrations (water = clear, red flower = Brahma's energy, yellow = Vishnu, white = Shiva) to the people as a blessing. These examples show that in the spiritual context, color is truly treated as a language of vibrations – a language capable of touching the deepest aspects of human consciousness, a universal language of the soul that connects humans with the vibrations of the universe.

Finally, this understanding opens a new perspective to examine color not just as a passive visual object, but as a portal to a deeper awareness of reality. Research and historical studies show that color symbolism in various regions develops according to local cosmologies. The spiritual color system in Southeast Asia, for example, has a distinctive classification that is not entirely identical to the Indian or Tibetan systems. The sacred colors honored in Java/Bali are arranged “depending on desa, kala, patra,” i.e. adapted to the local geographical context, era, and customs. This explains why, for instance, in Bali the *tri-datu* combination (three colors: red-white-black) is so dominant – red symbolizes Brahma (creative fire), white symbolizes Shiva (pure light), black symbolizes Vishnu (void/mystical balancing power) – a local synthesis that differs from the five-color pentagram of Tibetan Vajrayāna or the *panchavarna* in India. Nonetheless, the core cosmic vibrations represented by those colors are universal. All traditions agree that through color (alias light frequency) humans can connect with divine qualities: love, courage, wisdom, purity, and so on.

In conclusion, it can be stated that color is a subtle bridge between the light of the universe and the human soul. It influences our lives at the most profane levels up to the most sacred. Understanding color as part of the “vibrations of the cosmos” gives us a more complete appreciation of why colorful ceremonies remain enduring, why meditation uses light visualization, and why ultimately that rainbow of colors adorns nearly every human pathway to the Divine.

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