

LANGUAGE, MOVEMENT, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN DOLANAN PERFORMANCES: TRACING NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN BALINESE TRADITIONS AT THE BALI ARTS FESTIVAL

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Abstract: Children's performances at the Utsawa Gong Kebyar Children during the 2025 Bali Arts Festival are more than just playful spectacles, but they pulse with language, movement, and cultural memory. This study explores how children from Northern and Southern Bali express their regional identities through dialects, gestures, and choreographed dolanan performances. Rather than positioning children as passive entertainers, this research considers them as active cultural agents who carry, reshape, and negotiate meaning through embodied traditions. Drawing on ethnolinguistic identity theory and a performative analysis framework, the study is grounded in field observations and comparative interpretation of linguistic and movement-based expressions. Findings suggest that regional identity is not only spoken or danced, but deeply rooted in shared values and communal memory, embodied through children's performances. The Utsawa Gong Kebyar Anak thus becomes a living space where local language is preserved, cultural roles are rehearsed, and identity is playfully reimagined. This paper contributes to wider discussions on arts-based education, child-centered cultural policy, and the performative dimensions of cultural sustainability.

Keywords:

play performances, ethnolinguistic identity, Northern and Southern Bali cultural transmission, children's embodiment,

INTRODUCTION

Bali is widely recognized as the Island of Gods and temples, but beneath its touristic fame lies a complex system of intangible heritage, especially in the performing arts. Culturally, the island is often divided into Northern and Southern Bali, not merely geographically, but also in terms of social structure, religious practices, artistic expressions, and linguistic performance (Ardhana, 2015). Southern Bali, home to Denpasar, Badung, Gianyar, and Tabanan, was known for its adaptive, commercial art forms shaped by tourism and modern infrastructure. In contrast, Northern Bali, particularly Buleleng and Karangasem preserves more conservative, sacred-oriented art practices, with distinctive dialects and social norms (Ramseyer, 2002).

Languages, especially dialect variation, play a crucial role in constructing cultural identity in Bali. Balinese speech levels (*alus sor*, *alus madya*, *alus singgih*) interact with regional accents to convey social status and locality. Northern dialects are often perceived as more "classical" and less refined by Southern standards, while Southern speech reflects influences from Indonesian and tourism (Artawa, 2013). According to Balinese cultural scholar

I Wayan Dibia (interview, July 2025), linguistic hybridity in urban South Bali reflects a demographic mix driven by economic migration and education. This dialectal diversity also shapes *playful* performances, where storytelling styles, speech rhythms, and bodily gestures reflect distinct regional worldviews.

Dolanan, as a traditional children's performance in Bali Arts Festival combining music, narrative, and play, serves as both a cultural transmission tool and a reflection of social embodiment. While often seen as child's play, play embeds linguistic hierarchy, ritual symbolism, and social ideology through embodied acts. Differences in movement, slow and symmetrical in the North, dynamic and expressive in the South, mirror ritual values and openness to global influences. Bali Arts Festival provides a unique annual stage to observe how these regional aesthetics coexist, evolve, and interact through children's performances (Boer, 1981)).

Previous studies on play have primarily focused on its educational or sociocultural functions, often overlooking the performative and linguistic dimensions. There is a lack of comparative research exploring how language (dialect, register) and movement act as markers of regional identity in children's performances. This gap in the literature, particularly regarding the multimodal aspects of children's performance as markers of regional identity, can be addressed with several accessible studies. For instance, Nguyen's *One Hope of Vietnamese Children's Theatre* (Nguyen, 2021) illustrates how children's theatrical productions in Vietnam serve as cultural articulations within local communities. Similarly, Teh's (Teh, 2021) documents how non-formal arts education and theatre in Malaysia empower youth expression and communal identity. These studies demonstrate that children's performance is a powerful medium for cultural articulation across communities, yet its multimodal aspects remain underexplored. Building on these insights. The present study examines *dolanan* performances at the 2025 Bali Arts Festival, focusing on children's performances from Buleleng and Gianyar as representatives of Northern and Southern Balinese traditions.

The study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in performance, social reproduction theories, and movement semiotics. Through direct field observations, informal interviews, and documentation conducted during the Bali Arts Festival 2025, the research investigates how language and movement become tools of cultural negotiation, embodiment, and transmission. In tracing the voices and gestures of Balinese children on stage, this paper positions *dolanan* as a site of symbolic practice, where identity is enacted, contested, and reimagined within the dynamic arena of contemporary Balinese culture.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, ethnographic lens to understand how cultural identity takes shape in children's *dolanan* performances at the 2025 Bali Arts Festival (PKB). Rather than treating performances as objects of analysis, the research engages with them as living cultural expressions. Fieldwork focused on children's performances from Buleleng (Northern Bali) and Gianyar (Southern Bali), selected for their distinct linguistic textures and performance styles that reflect contrasting regional traditions.

Data were gathered during June 2025 at Taman Budaya Art Centre, Denpasar, through direct observation, informal conversations, and visual documentation. While access to rehearsal processes was limited, the richness of the live performances, along with side interactions, glimpses of coaching moments, laughter backstage, and group dynamics, offered valuable insight. To deepen the analysis, the study also revisits archived documentation from PKB 2023 and 2024 for comparison purposes.

A threefold triangulation process was employed to ensure credibility, involving cross-checking of data sources (observations, interviews, and previous records), combining methods

(fieldnotes, video, and reflective writing), and integrating theory (cultural linguistics, body semiotics, and performance studies). This approach allowed space for interpreting not only what was said and done, but how meaning resonated through gesture, tone, and timing.

The analysis unfolded in three directions. First, it examined linguistic nuances such as diction, dialect, and rhythm as cultural markers of identity. Second, it explored narrative structures and character roles to reveal how moral and social values are transmitted across generations. Third, it analyzed children's bodily movements and choreographic forms as semiotic expressions of habitus, identity, and cultural capital. Rather than reducing these performances to technique or ritual, the study views them as sites where language, movement, and identity come alive—situated, emotional, and deeply cultural

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Spoken Language and Regional Identity

The spoken language in Balinese children's *dolanan* performance holds a complex layer of cultural values. The difference between North Bali and South Bali can be clearly recognized through the choice of words, sentence structure, intonation, and the context of language use. In this context, Buleleng Regency (North Bali) and Gianyar Regency (South Bali) display linguistic contrasts that reflect the social structure and character of their respective communities.

In Buleleng, the children's language style appears more spontaneous, blunt, and relaxed in terms of adhering to the rules of the speech level (*sor singgih*). In the performance of *Forts* by the Santhi Art Studio of Puri Kanginan, there are sayings such as: "*Wuih... adi mati...*" Improve it by the gesture of kicking his friend in a playful atmosphere. In another scene, a child shouts: "*E... mebading to hapen cai ne... cicing.*" Although "*cicing*" literally means "dog," in this context, the term is used as a familiar slur, more akin to a spontaneous joke among close friends than a form of insult. This kind of language signifies close social attachment and egalitarian communication between children. A flat and non-aggressive tone of voice reinforces the meaning that "rude" speech does not always mean rude, but can be a form of playing solidarity.

On the other hand, in the toy performance from Gianyar by Sekaa Gong Anak Praja Hitha Swara, the speech style reflects a more orderly, polite, and aesthetically structured language. In the opening monologue, a child sweeps the stage while saying: "*Mimih Dewa Ratu, demen san atin tiyange, ape buin dini di Abian Centre...eehhh Art Centre, gumine asri sakewale ade gen anak ngura leluwu.*" This sentence, which can be loosely translated as "O..Queen of God, I am very happy, especially when I am at the *Abian* Centre, eh, I mean the Art Centre. The place is beautiful, but there are also those who litter", shows subtlety, gentle cuteness, and social sensitivity, especially in environmental cleanliness conditions. The sentences are delivered with clear articulation and high intonation, showing that Gianyar children are accustomed to language control and social norms from an early age.

In another character's dialogue, when a child asks, "*Men nyen adan wak e?*", the use of the term "*wak e*" (you), which is popular in Gianyar, is in the context of a more organized society. Meanwhile, the form "*cai*," which means "you," is sharper and more direct, and is more commonly used by Buleleng children. This kind of lexical difference shows that *dolanan* are also a space for the inheritance of values of politeness, social norms, and cultural differentiation through the practice of language.

The context of the use of language in games cannot be separated from who is speaking, to whom, in what situation, and for what purpose. The Buleleng children in one of the scenes displayed a "live TikTok" parody, imitating social trends such as selling Doraemon-themed Japanese cotton fabrics, skincare reviews, and silly actions popular on social media.

Behind the funny scene, there is a subtle insinuation about the dependence on gadgets and the fading spirit of traditional play. Meanwhile, Gianyar children insert ecological criticism in the narrative about the habit of littering. The language they use is not only funny, but also full of reflective value.

These findings strengthen the view Artawa (Kusumaningrum et al., 2024) that the dialect and level of speech in Bali reflect the value system of their society. The openness and spontaneity of the North Balinese people are reflected in the expressive and egalitarian language, while the hierarchical social structure in South Bali emerges in a more careful and measured diction. Bandem & Fredrik (2019), in *Kaja and Kelod*, also emphasize that these differences in expression are closely related to the cosmological orientation and identity of the cultural space of Balinese society.

Thus, language in toy performances is not only a means of communication, but also a means for children to recognize, play, and permeate their collective identity. Whether in the form of subtle satire typical of Gianyar or frontal jokes from Buleleng, every speech that appears on the toy stage is part of the process of social learning and cultural inheritance that is alive and ongoing.

3.2 Narrative of *Dolanan* as a Reflection of Local Values

The narrative in the *dolanan* performance at the Bali Arts Festival not only serves as entertainment, but also as a vehicle to convey local values that live in people's daily lives. The dialogues and monologues that the children performed on stage depicted their life experiences, hopes, social criticism, and norms that were passed down from generation to generation. At this point, *dolanan* became a form of *cultural speech*. According to Hymes' ethnography of communication (Marcellino, 2000) Speech must be studied within its cultural and social context, emphasizing communication as patterned conduct rather than isolated linguistic form, bridging individual expression with the collective values of Balinese society.

In Balinese tradition, the structure and content of the narrative are not neutral. *Dolanan* are not just games, but a medium of cultural education that internalizes collective ethics and local identity. For example, in a performance from Gianyar Regency, a narrative such as "*Mimih Dewa Ratu...*" reflect distinctive expressions that are loaded with moral and cultural values. The dialogue between the two girls—"We *Ujuwala, ne mbok ke mebanten, ngudiang liu sajan luwune*" was answered with "*Mbok... amen kal mebanten nyambat malu nak mbok, gitu lo gitu lo gitu lo...*". These dialogues describe a living cultural practice: cleaning the surrounding place before starting ritual activities such as *mebanten*. This narrative not only arranges the sequence of activities but also contains character values such as cleanliness, order, and responsibility that are instilled through cultural interactions.

These values are not only present in the form of dramatic dialogues, but also through the verses and songs that children sing while playing. One of the notable examples came from the performance by children from the Santhi Budaya Art Studio, Banjar Tegallantang, Liligundi Village, Buleleng District, Buleleng Regency, at the 2025 PKB event. The songs they sing are not only musically evocative but also full of moral messages that are implied and relevant to today's children's social lives. The following lyrics of the song are presented in full with the translation:

Table 1. moral messages in Buleleng's *dolanan* lyrics

Dolanan Poem (Balinese)	Translation
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<i>Meplalianan ajak timpale mekejang</i>	Play with all your friends
<i>Apang liang ilangan susut di hati</i>	To be happy, get rid of sadness in your heart
<i>Sing dadi Bengal</i>	<i>Don't be naughty</i>
<i>Tusing dadi masi piwal</i>	<i>Don't cheat or break the rules</i>
<i>Dong jagain mupipara umahe</i>	<i>Take good care of your friend's house (fortress)</i>
<i>Tampul simbol benteng</i>	<i>Pillars as a symbol of the fortress</i>
<i>Ada ne nyagain, ada ne nyerang</i>	<i>Some guard, some attack</i>
<i>Ada ne ngempetin</i>	<i>Some are holding back</i>
<i>Sing dadi medaya</i>	<i>Don't cheat</i>
<i>Jalan meplalianan</i>	<i>Live the game</i>
<i>Mai, mai mebenteng-bentengan</i>	<i>Come on, let's play fortresses</i>

The above verse, although simple, contains a deep emotional, ethical, and social message. Sentences such as "*apang liang ilangan susut di hati*" imply the cathartic function of playing. Meanwhile, phrases such as "*sing dadi bengal*" and "*tusing dadi masi piwal*" indicate the existence of a system of social regulation developed from within the playing group itself. Children are invited to be sportsmanlike and honest without formal coercion from adults.

This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) idea that play is a space for the expression of the child's internal world through social interaction. In this context, *play* serves as a *pedagogic ethos*, conveying social norms implicitly but effectively. It also supports Huizinga's (1955) thinking in *Homo Ludens*, which posits that the world of play serves as the foundation of civilization and culture, where humans practice freedom within the limits of mutually agreed-upon symbolic rules.

Phrases such as "*dong jagain mupipara umahe*" also imply the concept of collective responsibility and concern between individuals. This song is not only entertainment, but also an instrument of ethical learning that is imprinted in children's memories. Through the repetition of the lyrics while playing, these values are slowly embedded in their social consciousness and practice.

Traditional games become a learning space that blends with daily life. Children learn to control impulses, understand social rules, and build empathic relationships without feeling patronized. In Balinese culture, values such as *tatwam asi*, which involves seeing others as part of oneself, are internalized through play activities that are rich in interaction and symbolism.

Dolanan are not just games; they are cultural media that internalize collective ethics and local identity. Furthermore, *dolanan* are also part of culture-based value education (ethnopedagogy). Children not only imitate, but also experience values through the body, emotions, and togetherness. This is evident in a community-based study among Indonesian children in Malaysia, where regional songs like "Soleram" and traditional games such as "Ampar-Ampar Pisang" are used to reinforce cultural identity (Putraedi et al., 2025). Furthermore, research on Sasak traditional games in Lombok reveals that these games

embody values of solidarity, precision, and responsibility (Muliadi et al., 2024). Together, these findings show how children's play serves as a pedagogical tool that connects personal expression to communal ethics and supports intergenerational transmission of cultural identity. Interestingly, both North and South Bali have a distinctive approach in conveying values to children. In North Bali, the straightforward and blunt style forms honest and spontaneous interactions. In contrast, South Bali emphasizes politeness and social harmony through a more subtle and structured language. These two approaches, although different, both enrich the way Balinese children absorb and appreciate the values of life through play.

3.3 Movement and Cultural Identity

In the context of Balinese culture, the human body is not only understood as a biological entity, but as an expressive medium that conveys meaning non-verbally. In performing arts, including children's *dolanan*, gestures play an important role as a form of symbolic communication that is rich in nuance. It is not merely an aesthetic element, but rather a cultural message, value, and identity that can be "read" by communities that share the same social code. As emphasized by the body in a performative context stores embodied meaning that is, meaning that is manifested and experienced concretely through bodily actions, not just through words (Foster, 2011).

The traditional games performed in the toy show at PKB 2025 reveal diverse bodily practices, from expansive sweeping gestures and high-paced dance styles reminiscent of contemporary youth expression, to the imitation of everyday social encounters. These embodied actions constitute an alternative system of cultural language in which every gesture, posture, and rhythm conveys values such as respect, courage, discipline, and even subtle forms of social commentary. Thus, children's play movements should be understood not merely as recreational activities, but as symbolic enactments that carry social, spiritual, and pedagogical significance.

For example, in the performance of Duta Gianyar, the *mebanten* ritual begins with a sweeping movement performed by girls before arranging offerings. This action is not just dramatic, but reflects the values of purity, discipline, and spiritual readiness. Children not only imitate the daily activities of adults, but also represent their attachment to indigenous values through their bodies. The property of the broom in this case is not only a hygiene tool, but also a choreographic element that reinforces the ethical and symbolic message.

Interestingly, both in the making of *dolanan* from Gianyar and Buleleng, the influence of popular culture is evident, particularly through TikTok. TikTok's signature gestures, such as velocity, pointing gestures, and fast-motion synchronization, are modified and creatively integrated into the choreography of the *dolanan*. Children not only passively imitate global trends, but reinterpret them within the framework of local culture. This demonstrates that they are active participants in digital culture, as the concept of participatory culture, as outlined by Jenkins (2009), suggests. This concept involves individuals, particularly children and adolescents, collaborating to create, interpret, and distribute cultural content.

The choreography of *dolanan* in this context becomes a dialectical arena between traditional values and contemporary expressions. Children not only follow the inherited dance patterns, but also respond to the social dynamics around them. In line with Foster (2011), children's bodies in performance are sites of cultural negotiation and representation of identity. It is unstable, but active, pliable, and contextual. So, *dolanan* like Gayung Batu are not just ordinary games, but a living cultural mirror—where the body becomes a medium that dances, plays, and thinks at the same time.

CONCLUSION

The findings in this study show how children from the cultural regions of North and South Bali articulate their social identities and values in a distinctive way. In Buleleng, dialogues that sound straightforward and sometimes rough actually contain the typical warmth of friendship. Meanwhile, in Gianyar, the subtle choice of words was delivered in a loud and enthusiastic voice. Children do not just imitate; they also interpret. In the "Rock Dipper" performance, they sweep while dancing, satirizing littering, and incorporate the popular TikTok movement as a means of negotiating between old values and the digital reality they inhabit. In this context, the incorporation of TikTok elements and other forms of digital expression into children's dolls not only reflects an openness to global popular culture but also indicates *a shift in the way communication across cultures is conducted*. Children in Buleleng and Gianyar use body language, digital symbols, and local dialects simultaneously as a form of multimodal communication that reflects their identity. This phenomenon confirms that children's art performances are now a *translanguaging space*, which is the practice of combining various forms of language (including dialects, movements, and visual symbols) in a single, meaningful communication event (García & Wei, 2014). Furthermore, Astuti (2022) emphasized that the use of dialects in children's toy performances is a strategy for preserving the Balinese language as well as affirming local identity. In this case, children's *dolanan* become a vehicle for value articulation, a place where language, movement, and music come together to form a lively and meaningful learning space.

SUGGESTION

In closing, it is suggested that the practice of performing children's *dolanan* in the Balinese Arts Festival is not only preserved as a medium of character education, but also developed as a vehicle for language preservation and strengthening the cultural identity of the local community. The uniqueness of the dialects and speaking styles that appear in the performances from North and South Bali reflects the linguistic richness and way of life of the supporting community. Therefore, it is important for local governments, educators, and the arts community to integrate *dolanan* as part of a culture-based education strategy, so that regional languages and local values remain alive and relevant amid global cultural currents.

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