The *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* by Mpu Tanakuṅ: Śaivistic Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis

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ABSTRACT

Mpu Tanakuṅ's *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* is a fascinating text to explore further to gain insight into the religious phenomena of Balinese Hinduism. This article focuses on the Śiva-centric discourse found within this literary work. The research method employed is qualitative, utilizing a hermeneutic and comparative perspective between literature as a form of orthodoxy and religious rituals as a manifestation of orthopraxis. The findings reveal that the pursuit of Lubdhaka culminates in forgiveness within a simple and meditative Śaivistic path, thereby achieving full awareness in the darkest night, leading toward the light—or Śiva himself. Therefore, *the Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* offers another alternative path, primarily through the *Śiwarātri* ritual, which is orthopraxis in nature, without losing the meaning and value of Śiva-ness itself, yet is more meditative.

Keywords: *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa*, Śaivism, Meditation, Soteriology

I. Introduction

Understanding Śiva, as well as understanding Śaivism itself, requires not only willingness and admiration, but also fear and anxiety. There are so many mythical, mystical, and historical dimensions. Various literature has discussed Him from various angles, yet the question remains: Who is Śiva? In other words, confusion always seems to arise in the quest to seek and understand Him.

This confusion is also reflected, for instance, in A. Coomaraswamy's book (1999: 83): "Among the greatest of Shiva's names is Nataraja, Lord of Dancers, or King of Actors. The cosmos is His theater; there are many different steps in His repertoire; He Himself is both actor and audience." This confusion continues with the statement, "How many dances of Shiva are known to His

worshippers, I cannot say." It turns out that it is this very confusion that leads Shiva's devotees to Him. This is depicted in one of the Old Javanese poems (*kakawin*) by Mpu Tanakuṅ, *the Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa.*

The *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* by Mpu Tanakuṅ is one of the monumental literary works of the late Majapahit period, written in Old Javanese in the second half of the 15th century (circa 1466–1478 CE [Nihom, 1997: 104]), which Teeuw et al. (1969: 19) describe as "A situation, as is well-known from modern Bali, where 'Śaivism' and 'Buddhism' are integrated into a Balinese religion, may have existed in 15th-century Java as well." A similar view is expressed by Agastia (1982: 10; 2001: 3, citing Teeuw, 1969), who states that this work was composed during the late Majapahit period, between 1466 and 1478 CE. This work holds an important place in the literary heritage of Old Javanese and Balinese literature, not only because of the beauty of its form as a *kakawin*, but also because of its profound religious messages and teachings.

The *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* specifically tells the story of Lubdhaka, a hunter, who, despite leading a sinful life (?), ultimately attained salvation and eternal bliss in *Śiwaloka* thanks to "accidentally" observing the *Śiwarātri* fast. This story serves as the central narrative in Mpu Tanakuṅ's effort to introduce and adapt the Śiwarātri ritual, which originates from the South Indian tradition.[1]—heavily influenced by or blended with Mahayana Buddhism (?)—into the cultural and religious context of Ancient Java, and has been passed down and developed within the Balinese tradition to this day.

The *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* has been the subject of ongoing attention and study, including by A. Teeuw (1969), Zoetmulder (1974), Agastia (1982;

[1] In India, the celebration of Śiva's night, or *Śivārātra*, actually fell around February 15–16, 2026, unlike the celebrations in Bali and other regions, which took place on January 17, 2026. This difference stems from astronomical and *Jyotisha* calculations in India—particularly in the northern regions—which indicate that the month of *Magha* falls on the next new moon. In the calendar system and method of determining days used by Hindus in Bali and the Nusantara, there is the term *"nguna r/latri*" or *"nampih sasih*," which is not there. Is this a sign that we are being reminded to understand not only "*sastra tulis*" ('written texts') but also *"sastra tan patulis*" ('referring directly to reality and nature'), since everything is a text in the sense of deconstruction? For further details, see Agastia (1982: 22).

2001), Nihom (1997), Yasa et al. (2012), Acri (2022), and various articles discussing it from diverse perspectives, particularly focusing on the study of its religious values. This means that this *kakawin* plays an important role in the Javanese-Balinese Hindu literary tradition, particularly in affirming orthodoxy: the close connection between the literary source (orthodoxy) and the *Śiwaratri* ritual (orthopraxis), which falls one day before *Tilem Kapitu* ('the seventh dead moon').

For a long time, a certain principle has often been heard in Balinese culture: "*manut ring sastra*" ('in accordance with the scriptures or authoritative texts'). The *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* aptly illustrates this situation. Moreover, Nihom (1997: 106) states, "The *Śiwarātrikalpa* may be seen to embrace a theistic form of yoga, which is regarded as being the result of the suppression of the senses." From this, it can be understood that this *kakawin* has been categorized as a form of yoga, specifically in its theistic form. Thus, the *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* is a continuation of the project of Patañjali's Yoga, which is also categorized as a theistic yoga text (*Īśvarapraṇidhāna)* or more commonly known as *Nirodhayoga,* with other variants where Śiva and Īśvara are often equated. This is highly likely given the eclecticism that characterizes Javanese-Balinese Śaivistic texts.[2]

The *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa*, once again, recounts the journey of a *niṣāda* ('forest dweller')[3] named Lubdhaka, who received forgiveness

[2] See: Gitananda, WAS, et al. (2020). Śaivistic Sāṁkhya-Yoga: Revisiting the Eclectic Behavior of the Balinese Hindu Textual Tradition. Article in *Archipel* Vol. 100. France: Association Archipel.

[3] According to Teeuw (1969: 188), who was later cited by Agastia (1982: 22), the *Śiwarātrikalpa* is most closely related to, or is even a translation of, the *Padmapurana*. In the *Padmapurana,* there is a conversation between Bhagawan Wasistha and King Dilipa stating that *Śiwarātri* falls in the month *of Magha*. In the *Śiwarātrikalpa*, Lubdhaka is referred to as a 'hunter,' whereas in the *Padmapurana,* he is called Niṣāda, a 'forest dweller,' although the term *lubdhaka* is also used twice to describe his profession as a hunter. Dharma Palguna (2009) also relates it to, or considers the text as even a translation of, the *Padmapurana*. In the *Padmapurana,* there is a conversation between Bhagawan Wasistha and King Dilipa stating that *Śiwarātri* falls in the month of *Magha*. In *the Śiwarātrikalpa*, Lubdhaka is referred to as a 'hunter,' whereas in the *Padmapurana,* he is called Niṣāda, a 'forest dweller,' although the term *lubdhaka* is also used twice to describe his profession as a hunter. Dharma Palguna (2009) also discusses *Śiwarātri dalam Padma Purana* in his book.

(soteriology) due to an unintentional act—driven by the darkness of night and fear of wild animal attacks—which led Lubdhaka to perform the *Śiwarātri vrata.* As previously discussed by Yasa et al. (2012: viii; 29), the term *'Śiwarātri'* itself contains a paradox between the word '*Śiwa'*—meaning 'light,' 'day,' 'radiance,' and 'consciousness'—and *'rātri,'* which signifies 'night,' 'darkness,' and 'unconsciousness.' Thus, from its title alone, the *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* has already revealed the dynamic aspect of Śiva's nature, especially Śiva himself, who continues to dance within this world of life. Consequently, this article is merely one attempt to understand Śiva through the *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* as a reference for the cultural practices of the *Śiwarātri* night celebration in Bali and the Nusantara.

This article is an attempt at a qualitative re-reading of the *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* text. The focus is primarily on its language—the *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* employs Old Javanese and is composed in the *kakawin* form and meter, which is closely tied to Sanskrit tradition. The analysis is conducted using a descriptive-interpretive method from a discourse analysis perspective, viewing the text as a phenomenon capable of triggering both social and religious change, and through hermeneutics, where each part reflects the whole and vice versa. Sugiharto (2025: 111) explains, in accordance with Heidegger's view, that meaning is always open to reinterpretation; it cannot be reduced to a single interpretation but is dynamic—that is, it undergoes continuous expansion, *aletheia*, *disclosure,* or revelation. Furthermore, this article also examines Śaivism and Brahmanism, drawing some comparisons with contemporary religious phenomena in Bali. The story of Lubdhaka in the *Śiwarātrikalpa* text in question is a work by Mpu Tanakuṅ that has undergone philological study by A. Teeuw et al. (1969). The story within it is sought to be understood hermeneutically from a comparative literary perspective as a reflection to gain a clearer view of the Śaivistic ritual

praxes conducted within Balinese Hinduism.

II. Discussion

2.1. The Story of Lubdhaka in *Śiwarātrikalpa* by Mpu Tanakuṅ

The story of Lubdhaka in *Śiwarātrikalpa* (cf. Agastia, 1982: 18–23; Yasa et al., 2012: 15–24; Teeuw, 1969: 7–12) begins with a depiction of the daily life of the main character, Lubdhaka, a hunter living in the mountains (forest) with his wife and children. Lubdhaka is portrayed as a figure who, since childhood, has never practiced virtue or righteousness but instead lives by killing animals in the forest—such as deer, rhinoceroses, and elephants—to provide for his family. He lives a simple life, without feeling guilty about his actions.[4]

On a day of great cosmic significance—the 14th day of the dark half of the seventh month (*panglong ping 14 sasih kepitu, bulan Magha* 'the fourteenth day of the seventh month of *Magha'*)—Lubdhaka went hunting alone into the forest, dressed in bluish-black garments. He traveled northeast, passing through deserted villages and large, ruined sacred sites, which signified the decline of religious and social life at that time. He wandered all day but did not find a single animal to hunt. As night fell, Lubdhaka arrived at a vast lake (*ranu*), in the center of which stood a natural *Śivalingga* (*nora ginawe* 'unmade *lingga* of Śiva').

Exhausted, hungry, and thirsty, Lubdhaka decided to rest by the lake, hoping that some animals would come to drink there. However, by the time night fell, his hopes had not been fulfilled. To avoid danger from wild animals, he climbed a bael (*bilva* or *maja*) tree growing by the lake's edge, fully alert, carrying his bow and arrows ready to shoot. All night long, Lubdhaka fought off drowsiness by plucking bael (*bilva*) leaves one by one and dropping them down. Unintentionally and without realizing it, the leaves fell precisely onto the Śiwalingga in the middle of the lake. This action, though unintentional (*tanora minahā*), turned out to be a form of worship of Lord Śiva on the night of *Śiwarātri*, as explained in Canto 5.5, as follows.

dadi wêkasan mapet panalimur harip mata sakeṅ takut makêjêpa

[4] Similar to the stories of King Ashoka in India and Jetsun Milarepa in Tibet.

pinipik ikan rwan iṅ maja nirantara-n tinibakênya riṅ wway adalêm
ri dalêm ikaṅ taṭāka hana teki rakwa Śiwaliṅga nora ginawe
yata kahanan ikaṅ sakalawilwaparṇa tumibā tanora minahā

Translation:
He finally sought a means of warding off the heaviness in his eyes out of fear of falling asleep.
So, he plucked the leaves of the bael tree and, without ceasing, dropped them in the deep water.
In the midst of the pool, now, there was a lingga of Siwa, not fashioned by human hands.
And that was where all the bael leaves fell, although he did not mean it so. (adapted from Teeuw et al., 1969: 81).

When dawn broke, Lubdhaka climbed down from the tree and returned home. He was joyfully welcomed by his wife and children, though they were disappointed that Lubdhaka had not brought back any game. A few years later, Lubdhaka fell ill and eventually passed away.

After his death, Lubdhaka's spirit was intercepted by Yama's forces (Kiṅkara, Caṇḍa, Pracaṇḍ, Kāla, and others), who intended to take him to hell as punishment for the sins of killing animals during his lifetime. However, Lord Śiva, who was aware of Lubdhaka's deeds on the night of *Śiwarātri*, commanded the Gaṇas ('Śiva's army,' consisting of Nandana, Urdhwakeśa, Gaṇaratha, and so on) to free Lubdhaka's spirit and bring him to Śiwaloka ('the realm of Śiva'). A battle ensued between Yama's army and Śiva's army, which was ultimately won by the Gaṇas. Lubdhaka thus attained salvation and eternal bliss in Śiwaloka thanks to the *Śiwarātri* fast he had observed, even if unintentionally.

The central conflict in the story of Lubdhaka is the tension between sin and forgiveness, between karmic justice (*karmaphala*) and divine mercy, and between consciousness and unintentionality or unconsciousness. Lubdhaka, as a hunter who makes his living by killing animals, is considered morally and religiously sinful. After his death, Lubdhaka's spirit faces the threat of punishment in hell by Lord Yama, in accordance with the law of *karmaphala*, which asserts that every evil deed will result in suffering in the afterlife.

However, this conflict reaches a turning point when Lord Śiva, full of compassion, recalls Lubdhaka's actions on the night of *Śiwarātri*. Although performed unintentionally, the acts of staying awake all night, fasting, and picking up bael leaves that had fallen on the Śivalingga were considered the fulfillment of the primary *Śiwarātri vrata.* Lord Śiva commanded the Ganas to free Lubdhaka, leading to a battle between Śiva's army and Yama's army. This conflict was not only physical (a battle between two armies) but also symbolic—affirming the struggle between rigid justice and compassionate forgiveness.

Story Elements	**Brief Description**
Main Characters	Lubdhaka (the hunter), his wife and children, Lord Shiva, Lord Yama, the Ganas, and the Kinkara-bala
Setting	Mountains, wilderness, a lake (*ranu*) with the Śivalingam
Time	The 14th night of the waning moon in the seventh month (*panglong ping 14 sasih kapitu*, *Siwaratri* night)
Meaning of the Conflict	The conflict between sin and forgiveness; karmic justice (*karmaphala*) and divine compassion; awareness and unintentionality.
Resolution	Lubdhaka is freed by Lord Shiva, taken to Śiwaloka, and attains eternal salvation.
Moral Message	Forgiveness, spiritual transformation, the power of the *Siwaratri* fast, introspection, and balance between mind and body
Cultural Context	The adaptation of the *Śivaratri* Ritual from India to Java-Bali, the Celebration of *Śiwaratri*, and the Preservation of Local Traditions
Key Symbols	The *bilva* or bael tree, the Shivalinga, a lake (as the *yoni*), and dark blue clothing

2.2. The *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* by Mpu Tanakuṅ as Orthodoxy and Religious Discourse in Balinese Hindu Orthopraxis

The *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* serves not only as a literary work but also as a text intended to disseminate the teachings and practices of *Śiwarātri* in Java, Bali, and the Nusantara. However, it should be noted that the *Śiwarātrikalpa* employs Old Javanese, which was the language of the royal court but retained a local character, despite efforts to adapt Sanskrit into the local language. Through the story of Lubdhaka, Mpu Tanakuṅ seeks to present a narrative that emphasizes the power of forgiveness, spiritual transformation, and the openness of the path to virtue for anyone, regardless of background or past sins. This story is also rich in symbolism that continues to be interpreted and celebrated in the Balinese Hindu tradition, particularly during the *Śiwarātri* celebration, such as tonight.

The *Śiwarātri* ritual, which forms the core of the Lubdhaka narrative, originates from the traditions of South India, specifically from the territory of the Vijayanagara Empire—ruled by a devout follower of Śiva—during the 15th century (Teeuw et al., 1969: v; 20).[5] Mpu Tanakuṅ, who is believed to have had direct interaction with Indian traditions, wrote *Śiwarātrikalpa* as an effort to introduce and adapt this ritual into the context of Old Javanese culture. In the Indian tradition, a similar story is also found primarily in *the Padmapurāṇa*, in the *Uttarakanda* section, through the tale of Nisada in a conversation between King Dilipa and Bhagavan Vasistha—in the *Śiwarātrikalpa,* the term *"nisada"* also appears twice in Canto 19. Similarly, a similar story is found in the *Śiwapurāṇa*, in the *Jnanasaṁhita* section regarding the story of Rurudhruha in a conversation between Rsi Suta and the other Rsi; in the *Skanda Purāṇa,* in

[5] As explained by Nihom (1997: 109), "This not only further supports—though it does not yet irrefutably prove—the position of the editors of *Śiwarātrikalpa* that this poem may provide evidence of influence from the South Indian Saivism of Vijayanagara in East Java during the late classical period of the fifteenth century, but also suggests that one should investigate the hypothesis that such 'Agamic' rites may not have been part of Saivism in the Archipelago prior to their introduction around this time; if not, indeed, by the *Śiwarātrikalpa* itself."

the Maheśwarakhanda section regarding the story of Canda in the conversation between Rsi Lomaśa and the other Rsi; and in the *Garudapurāṇa*, in the *Pūrwakanda* section regarding the story of King Sundarasaneka—which has been documented by Teeuw et al. (1969: 170; 186–87; Yasa et al., 2012: 21–26)—is also mentioned in Agastia (1982: 21), who emphasizes the power of the *Śiwarātri brata* in expiating sins and bringing salvation.

In Java, this *kakawin* became one of the primary texts used to educate the public about the importance of the *Śiwaratri* observance; according to Teeuw et al. (1969: 6), there is an interaction between *layaṅ* (sacred texts) and *wayaṅ* (theater) to help the public better understand religion, as well as an interaction between authoritative, orthodox literature and ceremonial practices as expressions of orthopraxis—connecting the text with its contemporary context through performances and rituals.[6] Mpu Tanakuṅ wrote *Śiwarātrikalpa* with the aim of educating the people, during the Majapahit era, about the importance of *the Śiwarātri* fast and the power of forgiveness in Śiva's teachings. Through the beautiful form of the *kakawin* and a touching narrative, Mpu Tanakuṅ successfully combined elements of literature, religion, and moral education into a single work. He also emphasized the importance of understanding the symbolic meaning and philosophical messages behind the story, rather than merely enjoying the beauty of the rhythm or wordplay.

The *Śiwarātri* celebration in Bali involves a series of rituals, including fasting (*upawasa*), staying awake all night (*jagra*), and observing silence (*monabrata*). Balinese Hindus pray, read lontar manuscripts, meditate, and intensify their worship of Lord Śiva. Harari (2023: 319) identifies meditation as the 21st lesson: focusing on things close at hand. This practice aims to control desires, cultivate self-awareness, seek forgiveness for sins, and strive

[6] See: Armstrong, Karen. (2021) *The Lost Art of Scripture: Seni Membaca Kitab Suci*. Jakarta: Mizan.

to eliminate suffering—which is a mental reaction caused by one's own thoughts—to redirect them toward better things in the future (Harari, 2023: 323; 328). In a social context, *Śiwaratri* also serves as a moment of family and community togetherness to support one another on the spiritual journey.

The symbols in the Lubdhaka story—such as the bael tree, the Siwalingga, and the lake—are the things closest to us on the darkest night of "the 14th day of the seventh month." It is there that awareness is ceaselessly trained toward bodily sensations; we become more attuned to the contents of our thoughts and emotions and come to terms with our self-identity (Wibowo, 2024: 595). Generally, it can be understood that light, the symbol of enlightenment, is actually brightest when the night is darkest. The bitter taste of bael or *maja* (*Aegle marmelos)* can represent suffering; the natural Śiwalingga (*nora ginawe*) as a symbol of the presence of Lord Śiva or self-awareness itself; the lake (*ranu*) as a symbol of *the yoni* or *shakti*, representing a body in turmoil like water (or knowledge); and the bluish-black clothing (the ideal attire at night to remain unseen) worn by Lubdhaka symbolizes readiness and courage to face inner darkness (*Śiwarātri* or Śiva's Night, the darkest night of the year). All the symbols present represent the self that is ready for change until it finds its true self by reflecting on the story of Lubdhaka.

Therefore, broadly speaking, the theme of the Ludhaka story is contemplation as the path to liberation from suffering within the Śaivistic tradition. From this, a perspective may emerge that the story of Ludhaka in Mpu Tanakuṅ's *Śiwarātrikalpa* has a Buddhist-oriented Śivaism, just as there is the Śivaistic text *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan*—serving as a guide for *Kabodan* ('Buddhism') in Bali—in addition to the Buddhist-oriented *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan.*[7] Of course, this still raises further questions: Is the *Śiwarātri* ritual in Bali today oriented toward that Buddhist-influenced

[7] See: Kandahjaya, Hudaya. (2020). *The Sacred Text of Saṅ Hyaṅ Kamāhāyanikan: Text and Translation.* West Jakarta: Dian Dharma Publishers.

Śaivaism, or does it instead predominantly reflect Brahmanic Śivaism?[8] Although the *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* mentions the name of King Suraprabhāwa of the Girīndra dynasty and was composed during the Majapahit era, the story of Lubdhaka is more oriented toward the general public, particularly those who at that time may have still been hunter-gatherers. Isn't the story of Lubdhaka a source of motivation and a path to salvation for hunters? When compared to the present day, with its various professions that yield "ultimately monetary" rewards, the question arises: what should today's generations do? How should they go about it? Certainly, if this question is answered through the character of Lubdhaka, Mpu Tanakuṅ affirms that the path of Śiva is always open to anyone, including those whose lives are occupied with the "hunt" for material sustenance to support their livelihoods.

III. Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, the central theme of *the Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* is a quest that culminates in forgiveness on the Śivaistic path. However, analysis reveals that this forgiveness is of a meditative nature, achieved through full concentration on what is close at hand—namely, the bael leaf—thereby maintaining or attaining full awareness in the pitch-black midnight. In this regard, the *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* advocates thoroughly understanding Śiva, even without deliberate intent (*tinora minehā*). This prompts further, deeper reflection on Balinese Hindu religious rituals, which today tend to emphasize phenomena of a more Brahmanic nature rather than a Buddhist one. Therefore, the *Kakawin Śiwarātrikalpa* by Mpu Tanakuṅ seeks to offer an alternative path that is simpler and more meditative in its full

[8] See: Bronkhorst, Johannes. (2015). The Historiography of Brahmanism. Article in *History of Religion: Narrating a Religious Past.* Bernd-Christian-Otto, Susanne Raw & Jörg Rüpke (eds.). Berlin-Boston: Walter de Gruyter, pp. 27–44. See also: Bronkhorst, Johannes. (2017). Brahmanism: Its Place in Ancient Indian Society. Article in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

awareness.

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