

## ENGAGING INDONESIAN YOUTH WITH THE MEBUUG-BUUGAN TRADITION THROUGH THE NOVEL "SEHARI SETELAH SEPI"

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This research explores the potential of novel illustrations as an educational medium for the *Mebuug-buugan* tradition, a unique ritual from Kedonganan Village, Bali, which has been increasingly marginalized from the younger generation's knowledge. Through a qualitative approach, this study analyzes how the "slice of life" genre and anime/webtoon visual style can be utilized in the fictional novel "Sehari Setelah Sepi" to bridge the generational gap and promote local cultural heritage. Set in 2017-2018, when the *Mebuug-buugan* tradition was revived, the novel aims to present a relevant and engaging story for Indonesian teenagers. Analysis of literature, competitor research, and Unique Selling Proposition (USP) formed the foundation for designing practical illustrations. Research findings indicate that combining the "slice of life" genre with anime/webtoon visual style can effectively convey complex information about the history and meaning of the *Mebuug-buugan* tradition in a simple yet profound manner. The novel serves as entertainment and an effective educational tool for introducing Balinese cultural values to the younger generation.

*Keywords: Mebuug-buugan tradition, cultural visual communication design, educational novel, novel illustration, teenagers.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Bali is celebrated for its dynamic cultural heritage and thriving tourism sector. While its natural beauty and traditional customs initially drew visitors, the island's cultural depth surpasses the pervasive Hindu influence. Each village harbours a unique cultural identity, contributing to Bali's diverse artistic landscape. The island's governance structure, characterized by the *Desa Adat*, or traditional village system, exemplifies a profound dedication to safeguarding customs and traditions, distinguishing Bali from other Indonesian regions.

Kedonganan village, Bali, is the custodian of the distinctive *Mebuug-buugan* tradition. This significant cultural practice, deeply embedded within the Nyepi festival, originates from the indigenous Kedonganan community (Sudarsana dkk., 2021). While globalization has exerted influence, the tradition has demonstrated resilience, preserving its core values (Febriyantari dkk., 2024). Despite its inception in 1965, historical circumstances led to a period of dormancy. A revival initiated by local authorities in 2016 has positioned *Mebuug-buugan* as a cornerstone for rejuvenating local wisdom in Kedonganan, underscoring Balinese cultural heritage and identity (Sudarsana dkk., 2021). Research has shown that the *Mebuug-Buugan* tradition imparts social, religious, and aesthetic education, aligning with the teachings of *Tri Hita Karana*, which emphasize human harmony with the environment and spiritual beliefs (Santi & Nerawati, 2024). This highlights the educational values embedded within the tradition and its role in transmitting essential values to the community. Nevertheless, the tradition's reach extends primarily within the Kedonganan community, with limited broader recognition.

*Mebuug-buugan* is etymologically linked to the Sanskrit word "*bhur*," signifying earth. Locally interpreted as "*buug*," meaning mud, the tradition involves participants applying mud to themselves and others. This ceremonial act is believed to purify individuals and counteract negative attributes. While immersed in mud, participants undergo a symbolic cleansing process, culminating in a saltwater bath to complete the ritual. Deeply intertwined with the *Nyepi* celebration, *mebuug-buugan* is a religious observance rich in educational significance. *Nyepi*, marking the *Saka* New Year, is characterized by the *Catur Brata Penyepian*: abstinence from fire, work, travel, and entertainment, fostering self-purification. Thus, *mebuug-buugan* emerges as a potent symbol of renewal during *Ngembak Geni*, embodying a harmonious connection between humanity, nature, and the divine and showcasing the community's reverence for ancestral wisdom and cultural heritage (Febriyantari dkk., 2024).

The *Mebuug-Buugan* tradition in Bali constitutes a complex interplay of religious, cultural, educational, and environmental dimensions. It is a microcosm of the intricate relationship between tradition, community identity, and preserving local wisdom amidst contemporary pressures. Despite its rich tapestry of significance, the tradition remains underrepresented in popular media, particularly among younger generations. This lack of exposure jeopardizes its continuity. Concurrent with this, while surrounded by cultural artefacts, Indonesian youth often exhibit a disconnection from their heritage (Sutanto dkk., 2023). With its ability to seamlessly integrate cultural elements into engaging narratives, popular fiction presents a potential avenue for bridging this gap. This approach aligns with the notion of cultural transmission through both factual and fictional mediums, where nonfiction provides direct knowledge, while fiction offers a more implicit form of artistic education (Joubert dkk., 2019). The novel incorporates illustrations, which serve a dual purpose: visualizing scenes and enhancing reader engagement. This visual component, potentially contributing to the novel's commercial success (Wardaya, 2019), leverages the power of visual communication to stimulate the mind, evoke emotions, and capture the reader's attention. Visual symbols, as a distinct form of language, can effectively convey meaning and may even be grasped more readily than traditional written or spoken language.

This research explores the potential of popular fiction as a medium for reinvigorating and safeguarding the *Mebuug-Buugan* tradition. Specifically, it investigates how visual communication design can be integrated into the narrative structure of a novel to effectively transmit the essence of the tradition to a younger demographic. The central research question is how visual communication design can be strategically embedded within a popular fiction narrative to cultivate a profound comprehension and appreciation of the *Mebuug-Buugan* tradition among Indonesian youth.

## RESEARCH METHOD

A mixed-methods approach is employed to comprehensively examine the design of novel illustrations targeting young audiences and their role in preserving the *Mebuug-buugan* tradition. Through surveys and questionnaires, quantitative research will generate numerical data about illustration and novel preferences among the target demographic. This methodology enables the assessment of audience resonance with the novel and its visual components. Conversely, qualitative research, encompassing in-depth interviews, focused observations, and literature reviews, offers a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of the *Mebuug-buugan* tradition. By delving into the nuances of this tradition, researchers can uncover underlying meanings and contexts that inform the development of adequate visual narratives. The integration of these methodologies provides a robust framework for investigating the interplay between visual design, narrative structure, and cultural transmission. This combined approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the audience's perspective and the cultural context, enabling a more informed and effective design process.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The *Mebuug-buugan* ritual, deeply embedded in the Balinese cultural landscape, serves as a microcosm of broader cosmological and societal beliefs. Its significance extends beyond a mere performance, encapsulating profound philosophical and spiritual dimensions. The ritual's use of mud as a central element symbolically represents the human connection to the earth, a fundamental tenet of Balinese cosmology. The subsequent cleansing in the sea mirrors the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth, a core concept in many indigenous belief systems. Moreover, the *Mebuug-buugan* ritual is a powerful tool for forming a community of cohesion and identity. By participating in this shared experience, community members reaffirm their connection to the land, their ancestors, and each other. The tradition's resilience, despite periods of hiatus due to historical upheavals, underscores its deep-rooted importance in the lives of the Kedonganan community (Sudarsana dkk., 2021).

The intersection of culture, spirituality, and health, highlighted by Fatmah (2021), is particularly salient in the context of the *Mebuug-buugan* ritual. The belief in the ritual's efficacy in addressing contemporary challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic reflects the enduring relevance of traditional knowledge systems in modern crises. This interplay between the sacred and the secular, the ancient and the contemporary, is a crucial characteristic of many living cultures.

Recognizing the power of storytelling and the widespread consumption of novels among young people, this study proposes to leverage the novel format as a vehicle for cultural transmission. By immersing readers in the world of the *Mebuug-buugan*, we can foster a deeper appreciation for Balinese culture and its enduring relevance in contemporary society. This approach aligns with broader efforts to utilize popular culture to preserve and promote cultural heritage. Novels uniquely immerse readers in cultural contexts, fostering an organic absorption of information rather than a didactic learning experience. The Xianxia genre is a prime example, where readers develop a keen interest in underlying cultural elements without explicit awareness of the learning process. By seamlessly integrating cultural components into

fictional narratives, authors can cultivate a profound understanding of a particular culture without imposing a sense of obligatory study. This approach aligns with the notion that culture is multifaceted and can be acquired through diverse media, including fiction and non-fiction (Sutanto dkk., 2023).

While non-fiction offers direct knowledge transmission, fiction excels at subtly infusing cultural nuances into engaging storytelling. The intrinsic elements of a novel—plot, characters, and setting—serve as conduits for reflecting and transmitting cultural values and beliefs (Christian & Anggrianto, 2023). Consequently, novels possess the potential not only to entertain but also to shape cultural perceptions and foster a sense of connection with the depicted society. Literature, including novels, is a robust cultural transmission and preservation medium. By delving into the intricacies of society through the characters, settings, and narratives presented in novels, readers are exposed to diverse cultural norms, values, and traditions. This exposure can lead to heightened awareness and understanding of the nuances of a particular culture, fostering empathy and respect for cultural differences (Králiková dkk., 2021). Through this immersive experience, readers can develop a deeper appreciation for the complexities and richness of a culture, contributing to broader cultural understanding and community engagement.

### **The Visual Dimension of Cultural Transmission in Novels**

Visual elements and illustrations constitute a potent medium for conveying cultural information within the narrative framework. Beyond aesthetic appeal, these visual components are cognitive catalysts, stimulating imagination and emotional resonance. Illustrations enhance readers' comprehension of cultural nuances, traditions, and landscapes by bridging the gap between textual description and mental visualisation. The efficacy of visual elements in communicating complex information is underscored by research in psychology, sociology, and computer science (Rizvic dkk., 2019).

The strategic deployment of visual elements is paramount in effectively communicating cultural nuances. Illustrations should seamlessly integrate with the narrative, resonating with the target audience while illuminating obscure cultural references. This synergy between text and image fosters a profound appreciation for the story's cultural context (Rahmadiva & Sutanto, 2023). However, the judicious use of illustrations is imperative. An overabundance or incongruent visuals can disrupt the reading experience, while a dearth of visual support may hinder readers' imaginative engagement (Sutanto, 2022). The optimal approach lies in a balanced integration of visual elements that complement the narrative without overshadowing it, ultimately enhancing the overall reading experience.

The synergistic relationship between text and image in conveying cultural information has far-reaching implications. Firstly, it challenges the conventional dominance of written text, emphasizing the significance of interpreting visual data and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Secondly, integrating visual elements in various contexts showcases the diverse applications of visual elements in conveying cultural nuances and identities (Zhuang, 2023).

In conclusion, the findings from the literature research collectively emphasize the multifaceted nature of visual literacy in conveying cultural information. By carefully considering the interplay between text, image, and reader, authors and designers can harness the power of visual storytelling to create culturally rich and immersive narratives. This interdisciplinary approach offers a promising avenue for exploring the complex dynamics of cultural transmission and reception in the contemporary literary landscape.

## Introducing the Mebuug-Buugan Tradition through a Young Adult Lens: The Illustrated Novel "Sehari Setelah Sepi"

The illustrated novel, "Sehari Setelah Sepi", targets young adults aged 19-25 and falls within the slice-of-life genre. Set against the backdrop of Bali in 2016-2017, a period marked by both technological advancement and the revival of the dormant *Mebuug-buugan* tradition, the novel introduces readers to this cultural practice and offers a glimpse into contemporary Balinese social and cultural life. The narrative centers around Balinese characters, serving as a representation of the younger generation in the region.

This approximately 100-page work features a unique blend of narrative storytelling and illustrations within each chapter. A total of 100 pages is considered an ideal length for the Indonesian teenage target market, who have relatively low literacy levels and limited attention spans (Nabila dkk., 2023). Therefore, the novel is created to be not too long and designed with illustrations to ensure that readers can enjoy the content from beginning to end as seen in Figure 1.

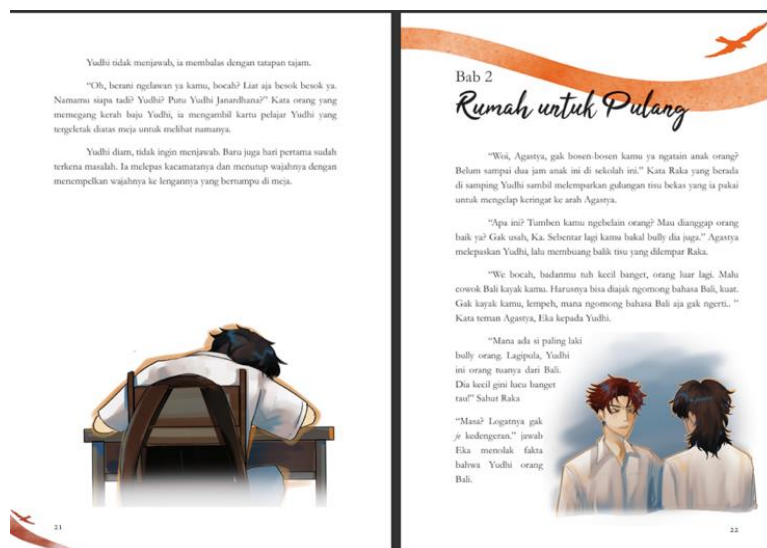


Figure 1. Page sample

(Source: author documentation)

The novel "Sehari Setelah Sepi" utilizes a vibrant webtoon-anime aesthetic to engage young readers. The choice of digital illustration techniques in webtoon comics is grounded in several compelling reasons. Firstly, digital illustration techniques offer high flexibility in crafting visually engaging and high-quality visuals. Illustrators can swiftly and precisely alter, refine, or modify visual elements like colour, shape, or composition. This enables greater freedom in development and experimentation, allowing illustrators to create a more prosperous and more imaginative visual world in webtoon stories (Lim, H., & Park, 2021).





Figure 2. Widya and Saras wearing traditional clothes

(Source: author documentation)

The illustration in Figure 2 depicts two women wearing *kebaya*. *Kebaya* is a traditional Balinese attire commonly worn by Hindu devotees for prayer. *Kebaya* comes in various colours, but the colour typically worn for prayer is white, symbolizing purity in prayer.



Figure 3. Raka wearing traditional clothes

(Source: author documentation)

The illustration in Figure 3 depicts a man wearing traditional attire. This traditional attire is considered "*semi-formal*" as it incorporates a shirt as the upper garment but still utilizes *udeng* (headband) and *kamen* (waistcloth) for the lower garment. Unlike traditional attire worn at customary or spiritual ceremonies, which typically involve wearing a shirt as the upper garment, this attire is commonly worn by Balinese people at informal or relatively relaxed gatherings such as communal work, meetings, discussions, and, in this case, making *ogoh-ogoh*.



Figure 4. *Ogoh-ogoh* illustration

(Source: author documentation)

The illustration in Figure 4 depicts an *ogoh-ogoh*. *Ogoh-ogoh* itself represents *bhuta kala*, typically portrayed as a frightening figure. For Hindus, *ogoh-ogoh* statues symbolize humanity's negative traits and the universe's negative aspects. After being paraded, *ogoh-ogoh* is destroyed by burning it during the grand purification ceremony known as "*tawur agung kesanga*" before Hindus observe the "*tapa brata penyepian*" austerity.



Figure 5. *Mebuug-buugan* illustration

(Source: author documentation)

The illustration in Figure 5 is the core of the novel "A Day After Quietness", the *mebuug-buugan* tradition. The sketch depicts characters playing in the mud, part of the *mebuug-buugan* tradition. The *mebuug-buugan* tradition is found in the Kedonganan Village, Bali. This tradition is celebrated one day after *Nyepi* with the aim of self-purification. The tradition begins by covering the body with mud and then rinsing it off at Kedonganan Beach.

The colour palette, as seen in Figure 6, reflects the characters' youthful nature and the narrative's overall tone. The combination of orange and blue represents the transition from day to night, especially during sunset. Orange is often associated with the warmth of the sun and the heat of the daytime, while blue is often associated with the twilight sky and the darkness of the night that follows. Merging these two colours in a picture or design can beautifully portray this transitional moment, capturing the atmosphere from sunset to the serene twilight sky (Meilani, t.t.).

## Color Pallette



Warna utama yang digunakan adalah color pallette dengan range warna senja menyesuaikan suasana yang terasa hangat dan tenang

Figure 6. "Sehari Setelah Sepi" color pallette

(Source: author documentation)

This character is created based on the diversity of Indonesian society, particularly in Bali, which consists of various skin tones, body shapes, and personalities. As seen in Figure 7, the character is designed to be a teenager to align with the slice-of-life theme of the story and target the Indonesian teenage market aged 17-25, allowing them to relate to the content and conflicts of each character. There are four main characters, focusing on one main character and four other supporting characters.



Figure 7. Character fullbody

(Source: author documentation)

### **Character Breakdowns:**

Character design is a fundamental tool in constructing multifaceted characters within a narrative. Figure 8 compares Yudhi and Raka, two primary characters in "Sehari Setelah Sepi."





Figure 8. Raka and Yudhi close up

(Source: author documentation)

Yudhi, depicted on the left, is physically characterized by a diminutive stature and distinctive round glasses, which visually correlate with his introverted personality. His body language and written expressions within the novel further reinforce this shy demeanour. In contrast, Raka, positioned on the right, is distinguished by a taller frame, darker complexion, long hair, and facial scars, creating a visually striking and assertive presence. His physical attributes mirror his outgoing and carefree personality, exemplified by his facial expressions and writing style.



Figure 9. Rama and Yudhistira close up

(Source: author documentation)

Figure 9 introduces two additional characters: Rama and Yudhistira. Rama is depicted with a relatively understated visual appearance compared to the previously described characters. His short hair, lack of bangs, and a single mole are minimal distinguishing features. This simplicity contrasts with the more elaborate designs of the other characters and aligns with Rama's easygoing personality, conveyed through expressive body language and facial features. In contrast, Yudhistira shares some physical similarities with Raka, notably their long hair. However, Yudhistira's character is portrayed as quiet and introverted, reflected in a less expressive facial demeanour and the inclusion of glasses as a visual cue for his reserved nature.



Figure 10. Widya and Saras close up

(Source: author documentation)

Figure 10 introduces two female characters who serve as foils to the protagonist. Distinct visual attributes distinguish these supporting characters. The character on the left possesses short hair and an expressive demeanour, while the character on the right, characterized by glasses and tied hair, exudes a calm disposition. For clarity, the character wearing glasses is named Saras, and the one with short hair is Widya.



Figure 11. Eka and Agastya close up

(Source: author documentation)

Figure 11 introduces two secondary male characters who serve as foils to the protagonist. In contrast to the protagonist's typical Indonesian high school student appearance, characterized by black hair, these characters exhibit a more rebellious aesthetic with their vibrant red and blonde hair. This visual contrast symbolically represents the characters' divergent personalities, with the unconventional hair choices alluding to a spirit of teenage nonconformity. The characters are named Eka and Agastya, respectively. Eka, positioned on the left, possesses dark skin and blonde hair, while Agastya, on the right, has fair skin and red hair.



Figure 12. "Sehari Setelah Sepi" book cover

(Source: author documentation)

A well-designed novel cover draws in readers with visual cues (Sinaga & Triyanto, 2020). These elements can create a miniature world that hints at the story's content and central theme. The cover, as seen in Figure 12, represents the tradition of "*mebuug-buugan*" in Kedonganan, Bali. The main character takes the spotlight, with only their face showing, while supporting characters are shown with their backs turned. A character visibly covered in mud signifies the "*mebuug-buugan*" tradition, which involves using mud. Additionally, the presence of a temple emphasizes the novel's setting in Bali.

Promotional merchandise, including bookmarks, keychains, photocards, pins, notepads, and pouches (Figure 13), has been developed to complement the illustrated novel *Sehari Setelah Sepi*. With visual merchandise, we can create engaging product presentations, stimulate interest, and produce desired displays. This is aimed at captivating and enchanting consumers who view them (Ginting, 2010).



Figure 13. Merchandise product

(Source: author documentation)

Merchandise is created to align with the target market and the items they commonly purchase (Natadajaja dkk., 2009). The target market typically uses accessories such as keychains and pins. Additionally, bookmarks are created to support the novel, serving as book dividers. Moreover, since most of them are students, other merchandise like pouches and memo pads are aimed at fulfilling the target market's need for writing tools. As seen in Figure 14, the colour of each merchandise item is tailored to the characters, ensuring consistency with

their traits. For instance, yellow for Yudhi, dark blue for Raka, purple for Yudhistira, orange for Rama, jade green for Saras, pink for Widya, red for Agastya, and lime green for Eka.



Figure 14. Bookmark design

(Source: author documentation)

After completing the novel illustration design for "Sehari Setelah Sepi," the researcher conducted a series of interviews and a survey to evaluate the design. Interviews were conducted with 1). Afsha Nugie, a webtoon author of "Pasar Kangen" set in Yogyakarta and a graduate of Visual Communication Design from ISI Yogyakarta; 2). Stefanus Cahya Ferdian, an illustrator known for his "slice of life" themed works on Instagram (@joiie\_e), 3). Sabrina Katya is a webtoon author and illustrator of "GINKGO" who has been creating webtoons since 2019. These individuals were chosen for their expertise in webtoon creation and illustration, and their experiences align with the themes and style of "Sehari Setelah Sepi." A survey was also administered to a sample of 55 respondents, exceeding the initial target of 50 individuals aged 17-25 who expressed interest in illustrated novels about Indonesian, particularly Balinese, culture.

The evaluation of the novel's visual elements through expert assessment and respondent feedback yielded overwhelmingly positive results. The cover design was highly appealing, with 92.3% of respondents and unanimous specialist approval. The illustrations effectively resonated with the target audience, employing a webtoon/manga style that aligned with the preferences of young adults, particularly females. These visual elements successfully conveyed the narrative content and authentically represented the cultural context of the *Mebuug-buugan* tradition and Balinese setting.

The overall design was praised for its readability and contribution to the storytelling experience. Character design was particularly effective, with distinct and memorable characters that enhanced the narrative. The novel's layout successfully evoked the desired atmosphere, reflecting the slice-of-life genre and the emotional spectrum of the characters.

In conclusion, the visual components of the novel have effectively communicated the essence of the *Mebuug-buugan* tradition and the broader Balinese cultural context. The positive feedback from experts and respondents validates the design choices and suggests that the visual elements have successfully engaged the target audience.

## CONCLUSION

This study developed the novel "Sehari Setelah Sepi" as a strategic approach to introduce the *Mebuug-buugan* tradition to Indonesian teenagers, bridging the gap between tradition and contemporary youth culture. By employing a webtoon-style illustration and creating relatable characters, the novel effectively engaged the target audience. This approach was validated by positive feedback from both respondents and experts regarding the visual



appeal of the cover, the suitability of illustrations, and the overall readability of the novel. The characters were deemed memorable and representative of the target audience. The novel's success in engaging young readers while conveying cultural information underscores the potential of popular fiction as a powerful tool for cultural preservation. However, further research is necessary to assess the long-term impact of this approach and to explore the efficacy of different storytelling formats for similar initiatives. Developing educational resources and incorporating interactive elements could enhance the novel's potential as a cultural learning tool. By demonstrating the effective integration of cultural elements into a popular narrative, this study contributes significantly to the field of cultural visual communication design. The positive reception of the novel suggests that this approach holds promise for preserving and promoting cultural heritage among young audiences. Future research should delve deeper into audience reception, exploring the factors that contribute to the success of this novel, and examining the potential for applying these findings to other cultural contexts.

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