

Religious-Magical Ornament of *Kalpataru* Sunan Bonang

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Abstract

Since ancient times, manifestations of divinity have been represented as trees. The tree of life has been known since prehistoric times. In Hindu periods, both faiths revered the tree of life, known as *kalpataru* and *aśvattha* (Bodhi tree). In the Islamic era, the tree of life was adopted in the form of *kekayon*, interpreted from the Arabic word '*khayu*' (will). Historically, *kalpataru* became a symbol of Islamic acculturation imbued with Javanese magical beliefs. The *kalpataru* Sunan Bonang reflects Javanese wisdom, preserving the sacred and supernatural for enlightenment. These sacred and supernatural elements were epistemically disregarded as "metaphysics" by European secularism.

Keywords: Ornament, *Kalpataru*, Sunan Bonang

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1.0 Introduction

In prehistoric times, the tree of life was closely related to animistic beliefs (belief in ancestral spirits) and dynamism (belief in supernatural forces). A large, lush tree appeared grand and mysterious, evoking both fear and reverence. Prehistoric people believed such trees possessed supernatural powers that could fulfil human wishes and prayers. Mountains, hills, and towering trees in the wilderness were symbols of the universe's embodiment in prehistoric beliefs. It was believed that upon death, human souls inhabited another realm (an afterlife) where they merged with the rulers of nature. Souls resided atop mountains, tree peaks, the sky, and the sun, all of which required symbolic representations through specific ornaments representing the cosmos (Ambary, 1998). Ancestors' spirits were considered benevolent and were thus venerated for protection and blessings during life's challenges (Gustami, 1992). Wagner (1967) considered ancestor worship a manifestation of local genius: "...Neolithic man believed in an afterlife. The erection of menhirs and dolmens, etc., obviously served the purpose of honouring the living as well as the dead... When certain ceremonial actions were performed, it was believed the spirit of the dead descended upon the living." When Hindu-Buddhism entered Java, the veneration of the tree of life did not disappear; instead, it underwent syncretism. Both religions revered the tree of life. In Buddhism, the *aśvattha* tree (Bodhi tree) is well-known. The Puhsarang inscription in Kediri explicitly mentions *bodhi waringin*. In the Yupa inscription from East Kalimantan (Kutai), a large tree was referred to as *kalpawrksa*. The ancient Javanese knew it as *kalpataru*—'*kalpa*' meaning desire, and '*wrksa/taru*' meaning tree.

In the Islamic period, Javanese beliefs in the tree of life persisted, evolving into the *kekayon*, which merged with the mountain (*gunungan*). *Kekayon* means wood, and *gunungan* represents a mountain scene with dense forests and various creatures within. The

tree of life was depicted as growing within or merging with the mountain. Thus, *kekayon* evolved as a form of the tree of life, the tree of hope, *aśvattha*, *kalpawṛksa*, and *kalpataru*. Unsurprisingly, Sunan Bonang was inspired to sculpt the *kalpataru* as the supporting pillar for Pendapa Rante. Sunan Bonang was one of the *Wali Sanga* (the Nine Saints) who propagated Islam in Java and was known as a Sufi scholar and expert in religious sciences and literature. He lived around 1448-1525. He was named Bonang due to his frequent use of the *bonang* gamelan in spreading Islam. Suharson and Fitiani (2024) show that transforming glass waste into art can become a spiritual act, where creativity is tied to religious awareness and material ethics. This idea aligns with the study of the religious-magical *Kalpataru* ornament of Sunan Bonang, where visual motifs carry sacred meaning beyond decoration. When linked to Legino et al. (2024), who translate batik symbolism into parametric design, a clear connection emerges: material reuse, sacred ornament, and digital reinterpretation can work together as a contemporary strategy to preserve spiritual aesthetics while innovating form. Through this lens, recycled materials like glass can become carriers of religious-magical motifs such as *Kalpataru*, ensuring that spiritual symbolism lives on through new media and design technology.

Based on the description above, the research problems can be formulated as follows. Why did Sunan Bonang, a highly revered wali, create the *kalpataru*, which is inherently associated with Hindu concepts of divinity? How is the *kalpataru* of Sunan Bonang visually represented and symbolically transformed? The answers to these questions aim to reconstruct the transformation of the symbols and meanings of the Tree of Life, the *kalpawṛksa*, and the *aśvattha* tree into Sunan Bonang's *kalpataru*. In addition, this study seeks to address the theoretical gap regarding the origin of Sunan Bonang's *kalpataru* through visual analysis.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Kalpataru

There is a thematic and conceptual relation between *Kalpataru* and the *Tree of Life*. The tree of life relates fundamentally to prehistoric beliefs in the dualism of existence. There are two opposing poles of existence, and new life arises from the union (marriage) of these opposites. This union necessitates a third element: the middle world, the supernatural, the ambivalent realm. This connecting axis is the *axis mundi*—the tree or the tree and mountain (Sumardjo, 2002). Dualism is represented through symbols such as the serpent (underworld) and the bird (ancestral spirit ascending to heaven), with the tree of life linking the two—a sacred wish-fulfilling tree (Soedarso, 1991). The Dayak people believe in the deities of the upper and lower realms. Above them stands a singular divinity encompassing both realms, symbolised by the tree of life as the source of all life, akin to *Brahman* in Hinduism. The tree is depicted branching and adorned with jewels and fabrics (Hoop, 1949). It symbolises the universe's entirety, serving as humanity's source of life. In Hindu belief, this is called *kalpataru* (Herusatoto, 2003), also known as *kalpawṛksa* (Sedyawati, 2013). This celestial tree grants all desires. It is said Śrī Kṛṣṇa brought the *Pārijāta* tree (another variant of *kalpawṛksa*) from heaven to earth (Titib, 2001).

In India, the tree of life symbolises the universe's creative force. Hinduism represented solar power mythologically as *Garuda*—half-bird, half-human, embodying *Surya*'s principle. The sun scorches and dries the earth until the blessing of rain arrives. The principle of water is symbolised by the winding serpent (Schulberg, 1976). Thus, India's tree of life comprises elements of tree, bird (sun), and serpent (water), aligning with prehistoric dualistic cosmology. Many explanations describe the symbolism of the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life represents the tree of existence, interpreted as a pillar of universal life, such as the arrival of spring or a period of growth. Beyond its representation of nature, the Tree of Life also symbolises the celestial tree, or the *axis mundi*. It is envisioned as a mythical, powerful, and sacred tree. In Hinduism, a tree known as *kalpawṛksa* is revered as a celestial or divine tree (*devaloka*), believed to grant any wish or desire. The Tree of Life does not physically grow in the human world but only exists in the divine realm where the gods reside.

The Tree of Life is often equated with the lotus flower, a symbol in Buddhism representing purity and flawless perfection untouched by impurity (Fraser-Lu, 1985). It also symbolises eternal continuity in another realm, embodying unity and the oneness that refers to the divine nature of God as the creator of the universe (Kartiwa, 1987). The Tree of Life, also referred to as *kalpataru*, serves as a symbol of the universe and its contents, a source of life for humanity (Herusatoto, 2003). As a tree, it is widely associated with being a "living tree"—a source of happiness, greatness, the origin of creation (*pohon purwaning dumadi*), and the ultimate origin and goal of life (*pohon waringin sungsang*) (Haryanto, 1995). The Tree of Life is correlated with the middle world (*dunia madya*), implying fertility and prosperity. Sukarto (1986) further explains it as a tree capable of giving life or livelihood to humankind. In ancient times, this tree was often connected to certain beliefs. Its function was clear: to provide shelter and protection and to strengthen the community's spirit and faith. Sometimes, it is referred to as the "tree of heaven" (*hemelboom*), due to its lush growth in the celestial realm.

2.2 Kekayon

The *Lara Jonggrang* temple features the distinctive "Prambanan Motif". Moertjipto (1991) explains that it comprises three niches: the central one containing a lion, flanked by niches with *kalpataru*, resembling the *kekayon* in wayang puppetry. *Kalpataru* grows from a vase amid lush foliage with two blooming lotus motifs and is flanked by *kinara-kinari* figures. Moertjipto highlights: first, *kalpataru* as a lotus blooming from a spiralled stem in a vase; second, *kalpataru* as a prototype for the *kekayon* in Islamic-era wayang puppetry. However, the belief in a tree fulfilling desires does not exist in Islamic teachings. The Quran mentions trees, notably *sidrah muntaha*—linked to the Prophet Muhammad's ascension from earth to the heavens through seven layers to the ultimate tree, *sidratul muntaha*. Al-Qusyairi (2006) explains *sidrah* as the tree and *muntaha* as the utmost limit, a resting place for martyrs' souls, beyond which only the Prophet Muhammad may pass. It is adorned with all kinds of jewels. This symbolism echoes the tree of life and *kalpataru*—a heavenly, adorned tree.

According to Banuharli (2003), in Indonesia, the Tree of Life appears in various forms and expressions. The *gunungan*, which encapsulates the cosmos, manifests in multiple forms, such as the *gunungan* or *kayon* in shadow puppet theatre (*wayang kulit*). In *wayang*, the Tree of Life takes the form of a triangular-shaped *gunungan*. This *gunungan*, or *kayon*, holds the same meaning as the sacred Tree of Life. In Java and Bali, the Tree of Life motif within the *kayon* or *gunungan* was further developed and refined during the Islamic period. Mountains are believed to be sacred places, homes to spirits and gods. The term "*kayon*" or "*kekayon*" is related to the word "*kayu*" (wood), which can be interpreted as "wood" or "the tree of desire". In practice, the main decorative element of a *kayon* is indeed a tree. Some suggest the word "*kayon*" originates from the Arabic "*khayun*", meaning "life". Thus, *kayon* also carries the meaning of "source of life". These parallels suggest thematic continuity between the prehistoric tree of life, the Hindu *kalpataru*, and the Islamic *sidrah muntaha*.

3.0 Methodology

This research employs a qualitative method through historical and aesthetic approaches. The historical approach is used to understand the kalpataru Sunan Bonang artefact in relation to traditional Javanese worldviews embedded within it. Fischer (1994), an art historian, explains that there are three key aspects to studying ancient Javanese art and culture: myth, ritual, and symbol. Holt (1967) agrees, emphasising the continuity amidst change and the transformation of artistic expressions. The aesthetic approach focuses on morphological aesthetics, namely, studying the principles of visual organisation. Feldman (1967) states that the principal aspect of visual organization is unity, as ultimately, art is made to be seen. Primary data were obtained through observation and interviews. Observation was conducted directly on-site with in-situ photography. The research object is a four-branched wooden pillar known as kalpataru, originating from the Sunan Bonang cemetery complex and currently part of the Museum Kambang Putih Tuban collection since 1984. Technically, this kalpataru functioned as the central pillar supporting the Pendapa Rante, located in the second courtyard before the paduraksa gate leading to the third courtyard, where Sunan Bonang's grave lies.

Visual data analysis was conducted based on conceptual findings related to motifs or themes, forms (visualisation of ornaments), and presentation (how the ornaments are displayed). The researcher analysed the concepts of creation and history of the kalpataru ornament and further examined the specific relationship between prehistoric dualistic beliefs, Hindu cosmology, and Islamic teachings. There is a connection between the visual aspects of the ornament and the teachings' concepts manifested through symbolic forms.

4.0 Findings



Fig. 1: Kalpataru Sunan Bonang
(Source: Museum Kambang Putih Tuban, captured by Nizam, 2024)

The *Kalpataru* in the collection of Museum Kambang Putih Tuban (see Figure 1) originates from the Sunan Bonang cemetery complex, located in Kutorejo subdistrict, Tuban. It is made from teak wood (*Tectona Grandis*). The height is 180 cm, with the first branch measuring 80 cm in length, the second branch 77 cm, the third branch 70 cm, and the fourth branch 55 cm. The diameter of the lower trunk is 38 cm. According to information from Museum Kambang Putih, based on carbon-14 dating (used to determine absolute chronology) through radiocarbon dating techniques via AMS (Accelerator Mass Spectrometry) conducted by Beta Analytic Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory in Miami, Florida, USA, on August 8, 2014, it was revealed that this kalpataru was created between the years 1445 and 1525. Therefore, this *kalpataru* was crafted during Sunan Bonang's lifetime. Technically, this *kalpataru* functioned as a supporting pillar or central post (*soko tunggal*) for the Pendapa Rante located in the second courtyard of the Sunan Bonang cemetery complex. This four-branched wooden structure is intricately carved with ornamental lotus scrolls and sacred buildings representing places of worship from various religions, including Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Tri Dharma (Confucianism), as well as animistic beliefs (Figures 1 and 2 by Akhmad Nizam, 2024).



Fig. 2: (a) Ancestor Statue; (b) Hindu Temple; (c) Chinese Temple Building; (d) Buddhist Vihara; (e) Mosque; (f) *Kalpataru* Lotus Scroll
(Source: Museum Kambang Putih Tuban, captured by Nizam, 2024)

4.1 Ancestral Worship

Representation of ancestral worship appears at the tree's lowest trunk. Carved here is a squatting figure with bent knees and a slightly bowed head (see Figure 2a). This figure symbolises the worship of ancestral spirits. When the Javanese still adhered to animistic-dynamistic beliefs, it was thought that ancestral spirits resided in large trees in the wilderness and on hills, which were considered abodes of deities. Furthermore, it was believed every object possessed inherent power. Alongside these beliefs, the Javanese people remained deeply tied to various natural forces believed to influence their survival.

4.2 Hindu Temple

A representation of a Hindu sacred structure is depicted in full, including the base, body, and roof. Positioned slightly above the ancestral figure, the temple is square in plan. The temple base features seven ascending steps flanked by triple-tiered side walls. Each temple side includes shallow niches, with worn *kala* heads still discernible. The eleven-tiered roof is clearly structured with shallow separating lines between each tier. Each tier features convex mouldings, which are now worn and partially damaged. From bottom to top, the roof tapers upward with a cubic peak (as shown in Figure 2b).

4.3 Chinese Temple (*Kelenteng*)

The representation of a Chinese sacred building appears akin to a stilted house supported by five pillars atop a podium, not directly on the ground. This podium elevates the structure, signifying its importance and sacredness, and is positioned higher than the Hindu temple (as presented in Figure 2c). According to Museum Kambang Putih, this is identified as a Tri Dharma or San Kau (*Kelenteng*) sacred building. Its floor plan is rectangular, with a pyramidal roof.

4.4 Buddhist Monastery (*Vihara*)

Due to damage, the representation of a Buddhist sacred structure positioned above the Chinese and Hindu temples is incomplete. The remaining base suggests five pillars supported the building; however, only three remain visible (two rear, one central), while the front pillars have disappeared. The flat, tiered roof shows traces of five receding levels, identifiable as *chattra* (umbrella) atop a stupa, typically signifying Buddhist worship spaces such as vihara, temples, or *chaitya* (see Figure 2d).

4.5 Mosque

The representation of an Islamic sacred building takes place on a square floor plan supported by pillars on stilted foundations, complete with a pool and gate (as displayed in Figure 2e). The right-side floor is higher than the left; the lower portion is the terrace, and the interior is slightly elevated, reminiscent of *langgar panggung* mosques found in traditional Javanese homes. The body of the building shows eroded parts, including a protrusion on the right suspected to be the *mihrab* (prayer niche). The roof, partially eroded, retains nine visible shingle layers. The front features a gate adorned with a single-eyed *kala* motif above a basin-like pond—a common feature in ancient Indonesian mosques. The mosque stands beneath a lush *kolang-kaling* (sugar palm) tree, linked to the legend of Lokajaya, who was awestruck when Sunan Bonang transformed *kolang-kaling* into gold.

Interestingly, beneath the mosque is a depiction of a *bonang*, a traditional Javanese brass musical instrument with a central raised dome used as the striking surface. The presence of this instrument carved beneath the mosque signifies the role of Sunan Bonang himself and symbolises his Islamic preaching through music. He is said to have created this instrument and composed *gending* (Javanese songs) for da'wah.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Javanese Philosophy of Life

As a cultural product of ancient Java, *kalpataru* aligns with Javanese life philosophy. The life principles guiding the Javanese encompass inner and outer peace, righteousness as individuals, harmony within the environment and the cosmos, and preserving sustainability, peace, and beauty in the microcosm, macrocosm, and the divine universe created by God. *Kalpataru* as a life concept is closely tied to cosmology, which is the relationship between micro-macro-meta cosmos and is rooted in Hindu thought. According to Dharsono (2004), the macrocosm situates humanity within the universe, requiring awareness of one's place within the cosmos. Eiseman (1990) similarly notes the interconnectedness of nature, humanity, and the Creator as a unified whole, compelling humans to uphold harmony, preserve nature, and worship or unite with the Divine, referred to as *Gusti Kang Murbèng Dumadi* or *Sang Hyang Akarya Jagat*. Symbolically, the Tree of Life, or *kalpataru*, is associated with the source of life and connected to a Javanese expression: *sangkan paraning dumadi*, a philosophical outlook on origin, identity, awareness, and life's purpose. This reflects humanity's hope for achieving perfection in life. It also represents the Javanese worldview that everything in existence, including human beings, originates from one source—God the Creator. This belief places God Almighty as the ultimate and absolute source of life and truth.

The fundamental goal of human life is the pursuit of happiness, prosperity, peace, and safety—both in this world and the hereafter. Harmony, balance, and unity between human life (microcosm) and the universe (macrocosm) are essential to realising life's ultimate purpose as God's creation. Human efforts to approach the Divine through worship are tangible manifestations of spiritual awareness. Such awareness fosters the belief that God is the centre and origin of all life. This ultimately creates a harmonious relationship between humans and their Creator—*manunggaling kawula-Gusti*, the union of the servant with God. This profound life perspective inspired the visualisation of *Kalpataru* Sunan Bonang. Its existence embodies rich symbolism concerning *sangkan paraning dumadi*. Faiz (2023) clearly defines this philosophy as knowing one's origin and ultimate return—akin to the Quranic verse, “*Innā lillāhi wa innā ilaihi rāji'ūn*” (Indeed, we belong to Allah, and to Him we shall return) (QS Al-Baqarah [2]: 156). The Javanese approach everything with this awareness, realising that nothing in this world is eternal and ultimately returns to Allah. Hence, every action—eating, drinking, socialising, fulfilling duties, practising religion, or travelling—must be assessed for its alignment with approaching God.

Notably, the placement of religious symbols seems carefully considered: from the ancestral statue at the base, progressing upward to the Hindu temple and Chinese kelenteng, then to the Buddhist vihara, and finally the mosque with its pool and ornate gate. The mosque's prominence is further emphasised by the selection of a four-branched central tree—a hidden allusion to the number five, symbolising the five pillars of Islam or the five daily prayers.

5.2 Kalpataru

The *kalpataru* ornament stands distinct among the sacred structures. Without it, this would not rightly be called *kalpataru* Sunan Bonang. Its spiral shape resembles a question mark, ending in a lotus bud (as depicted in Figure 2f). Despite its simplicity, this is the oldest, most enduring ornamental heritage from India, impressively presented in Java. Unlike the Prambanan temple's *kalpataru*, which emerges from a vase filled with *amṛta* (water of life), *kalpataru* Sunan Bonang grows from rhizomes. The *kalpataru* Sunan Bonang intentionally avoids growing from a vase by eschewing direct Hindu connotations. Instead, the lotus grows from rhizomes—nodes producing new shoots and roots, leaving the parent root submerged in muddy water. Thus, *kalpataru* Sunan Bonang signifies leaving worldly darkness and striving toward enlightenment, upheld by the five main pillars. This enlightenment differs from European rationalism, which Horkheimer (2002) critiques as stripping the world of magic and overthrowing myth with knowledge, resulting in desecralisation, profanation, and secularisation.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Guidance and invitations, if delivered explicitly, may incite unrest. Art, however, conveys them subtly. Such is the power of *kalpataru* Sunan Bonang, deftly guiding the Hindu *kalpataru* from worldly mire toward enlightenment, anchored to the five pillars (daily prayers). Thus, *kalpataru* ornaments in Java symbolise the cosmic pillar, a bearer of life's seeds. In Java, *Sang Hyang Akarya Jagat* (Allah), the religious-magical, the sacred, and the supernatural have never died. Religion remains vital. There are no metaphysical phantoms in

Java, for religion's metaphysical dimensions guard against nihilism. Therefore, art, especially derived from religious experience, continues to inspire, as seen in Kalpataru as a manifestation of Sangkan Paraning Dumadi.

However, given the ornament's distribution across diverse media and techniques and regional variations, further research is warranted, particularly on its dissemination. Such studies are essential to gaining a comprehensive understanding of *kalpataru* concepts within Javanese culture and their manifestation in ornamental art—whether carved in wood or other materials.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research contributes to religious and cultural studies by highlighting how Javanese spiritual wisdom preserved sacred symbols through syncretism. The study also challenges Western secular views by reaffirming the value of indigenous metaphysical knowledge.

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