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The Dominance of Sasak Culture in Cultural Diffusion with Bali on Lombok Island

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of Sasak culture on the process of cultural diffusion within the Balinese community on Lombok Island. The research aims to analyze how cultural exchanges occur and identify the dominant cultural force shaping these interactions. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with cultural figures and observations in several multicultural villages. The findings reveal that cultural diffusion between the Sasak and Balinese groups occurs through both cultural and political interactions, particularly in areas such as agricultural practices, clothing traditions, and religious rituals. Although Balinese culture has a strong presence, Sasak culture emerges as more dominant by selectively adopting, modifying, or resisting external cultural elements. This dominance is not merely a reflection of numerical majority but also the result of symbolic power, historical positioning, and the ability of Sasak communities to negotiate cultural identity. The study highlights how the Sasak culture does not passively absorb influences but instead engages in a dynamic process of selection and reinterpretation. Consequently, cultural diffusion on Lombok represents not only exchange but also symbolic domination, resistance, and the reconstruction of identity. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural resilience and the dynamics of interethnic relations in Indonesia.

Keywords: Cultural Diffusion, Dominance, Sasak Tribe, Balinese Tribe, Resistance

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A. INTRODUCTION

Lombok Island sits at a historical crossroads where the Sasak, the island's indigenous majority, have interacted intensively with neighboring Balinese communities for centuries. Those interactions were not incidental; they unfolded through episodes of conquest, migration, trade, shared agriculture, and everyday life in the neighborhood. Beginning with Balinese incursions linked to the Gelgel polity in the early seventeenth century and intensifying under subsequent Balinese rule in parts of Lombok during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cultural traffic moved in both directions. Out of that long contact zone emerged what observers often refer to as "cultural diffusion": the circulation, adaptation, and re-signification of ideas, practices, and symbols across group boundaries. Yet diffusion on Lombok has never been a simple story of unilateral influence. While the Balinese presence was politically powerful for extended periods, Sasak communities consistently selected, reworked, and, at times, pushed back against incoming elements, asserting their own tastes, norms, and meanings. This article focuses on that agency: the ways Sasak culture has been dominant in shaping the terms, tempo, and textures of diffusion with Bali on Lombok Island.

Historically, Balinese rule established important institutional and ritual channels through which practices were transmitted. Irrigation associations, temple calendars, and administrative routines linked villages and valley systems, turning water, labor, and ritual into shared concerns. The famed Subak-style irrigation management, while bearing strong Balinese signatures, was adapted into Sasak agrarian landscapes and governance logics, aligning with preexisting communal labor (gawe) and reciprocity patterns. Similarly, expressive forms circulated. Performance genres, such as cepung, moved across ethnic boundaries and were retooled for new purposes: satire, critique, or moral storytelling. Everyday lifeways show parallel patterning as well, from communal feasts (megibung/gibungan) to martial play and masculinity contests (Balinese gebugand Sasak peresean). Even marriage customs reveal a palimpsest of shared concepts and divergent codes, with Sasak merariq (elopement) and Balinese merangkat indexing overlapping values about alliance, autonomy, and honor while remaining culturally distinct.

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Against this background, the notion of "dominance" requires careful definition. In popular discourse, dominance is often equated with political control or demographic size. In cultural analysis, however, dominance is also symbolic and discursive: whose narratives set the frame? Whose meanings "stick"? Which group's categories of value about piety, propriety, bravery, hospitality, or refinement become the default yardsticks? On Lombok, we argue that Sasak culture has often functioned as the matrix within which borrowed or shared elements are localized, judged, and made to "fit." This dominance is visible not as a loud assertion but as a quiet centripetal pull. Practices arriving from Bali are domesticated through the Sasak language, law (awik-awik), and ritual horizons; they acquire Sasak timbre, are slotted into Sasak life-cycle events, and are measured against Sasak ideals of social harmony (rukun), honor (malu), and balanced obligation (begawe). Conversely, elements perceived as dissonant with local sensibilities are trimmed, muted, or allowed to fade, revealing the everyday politics of selection that underscore cultural sovereignty even in asymmetric historical conditions.

Theoretically, this study positions diffusion not as passive "borrowing" but as negotiated translation. Concepts from cultural sociology and anthropology, such as acculturation, syncretism, symbolic domination, and cultural brokerage, help illuminate the Lombok case. Rather than imagining a one-way flow from a politically stronger group to a weaker one, we attend to selective uptake, creative recombination, and the strategic deployment of meanings by Sasak actors. "Dominance" here thus refers to a patterned capacity: the Sasak ability to host external forms while re-inscribing them with local values, to regulate what enters and how it circulates, and to articulate a recognizable Sasak identity that remains resilient amid the heavy traffic of signs and practices.

Methodologically, the article builds on qualitative descriptive work: interviews with cultural bearers, village leaders, performers, and religious figures; observations in multiethnic hamlets where temples stand near mosques and where markets, schools, and rice terraces form shared spaces of life; and close reading of local chronicles, family histories, and ritual scripts. This multi-sited, dialogic approach foregrounds emic categories—how participants themselves name, justify, and critique practices—and traces how the same element can be differently coded in Sasak and Balinese discourse. The aim is not to produce a museum catalog of

"influences," but to map processes: adaptation, resistance, accommodation, and recalibration over time.

Substantively, we pay special attention to three arenas where diffusion is visible and consequential: (1) agrarian organization and ritual calendars tied to water, harvest, and communal labor; (2) expressive cultures—music, dance, spoken narrative, and performative combat that travel easily across festival circuits; and (3) kinship and lifecycle rites, especially courtship, elopement, and marriage, where ethical ideals, gender expectations, and inter-household politics are negotiated in public view. In each domain, we ask: Which scripts set the template? Which meanings prevail when interpretations diverge? How do Sasak communities leverage language, law, and religious authority to "own" practices that bear foreign signatures?

The significance of this inquiry is twofold. First, it re-centers the Sasak agency in a historical narrative that too often treats Balinese rule as culturally definitive. By showing how Sasak actors curated, filtered, and redirected cultural flows, the article complicates stories of influence and dependence. Second, it contributes to broader debates in Indonesian cultural studies about how local majorities sustain identity in plural settings without erasing difference. Lombok's lived pluralism—mosques and temples sharing soundscapes, cuisines cross-pollinating, and festivals overlapping calendars—demonstrates that resilience can look like gracious hospitality coupled with firm editorial control over meaning. In that sense, the dominance of Sasak culture does not entail the silencing of Balinese presence; instead, it marks the capacity of Sasak communities to keep the cultural conversation anchored in their own terms.

Lombok provides a laboratory for observing the diffusion of cultural authorship. The historical weight of Balinese power and the persistence of Balinese heritage on the island are undeniable. Yet the everyday textures of life reveal a Sasak-centered grammar that organizes what is kept, how it is transformed, and what it comes to signify. By tracing those grammars in practice, this article argues that the Sasak have not merely endured cultural contact; they have actively engaged in it.

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B. METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to provide an in-depth description of the cultural diffusion process between the Sasak and Balinese communities on the island of Lombok. This approach was chosen because it can comprehensively explain social and cultural phenomena through the meanings assigned by social actors in their interactions. Data collection was conducted in a natural setting, allowing the researcher to gain a direct understanding of the dynamics of cultural interactions taking place in the field. Data collection techniques included participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation (Cresswell, 2013). Participatory observation was conducted in several multicultural villages in Lombok that serve as spaces for interaction between the Sasak and Balinese communities, particularly in agricultural practices, clothing traditions, and religious rituals.

Meanwhile, in-depth interviews were conducted using purposive sampling, a method that involves selecting informants considered most relevant to the research focus. These informants included cultural figures, religious leaders, and community members actively involved in cross-ethnic cultural practices (Paisun et al. 2025). These interviews aimed to explore the experiences, perspectives, and strategies of the Sasak community in responding to the influence of Balinese culture. Documentation, including local archives, historical records, and recordings of cultural activities, was used to reinforce field findings. All data collected were analyzed using an inductive approach, in which researchers gradually interpreted the meaning of empirical data to identify patterns, themes, and concepts that answered the research questions.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Sasak Nation as an Ancient Nation

According to the source, the Sasak people are a very ancient people. This claim is important to establish the premise that the Sasak people have little need to adopt any culture outside their own. Why is it called an ancient people? According to the source, the Sasak people have existed since the time of Noah. This can be seen in their rice barns. The source cited research stating that rice barns are among the oldest

architectural structures in the world, dating back over 5,500 years. According to the source, this date coincides with the lifetime of Noah and his people.

The source explained that when the roof of a rice barn is viewed upside down, it resembles the hull of a boat. This means that the Sasak people built their rice barns by adopting the hull design of the boat created by Noah. According to the source, Sasak is synonymous with Islam, and the Sasak people have been practicing Islam for thousands of years, as the Sasak people are descendants of Noah's people who survived the Great Flood. This view reflects what Clifford Geertz calls a form of "local Islam," a model of Islam closely intertwined with cultural symbols and distinctive local narratives (Geertz, 1968). Although the informant's statement is narrative-mythological, it can be understood within the context of cultural identity construction. Anthony D. Smith states that origin myths, or myths of origin, play a crucial role in strengthening ethnic and national identity through collective narratives that confer spiritual and historical legitimacy on a group (Smith, 1986).

Another clue lies in the meaning behind the name of a renowned Sasak mythological figure, Dewi Anjani. According to the informant's research, the name "Anjani" is not derived from Sasak or Kawi, but is instead a loanword from the Arabic anjaina/najjaina (we saved or we enshrine a great secret). This Arabic word appears in the Quran in verses relating to the story of Noah. The informant added that in certain communities on the island of Lombok, Dewi Anjani is called by another name, Nabi Ingsun (literally "my prophet").

According to the source, the word "Dewi" in the Kawi language does not mean woman, but rather indicates qualities of refinement and gentleness. This, we believe, aligns with the figure of Noah, who invited his wife and children into the ark and asked for their forgiveness in the final moments before the flood engulfed the entire land, even though Noah knew they were among those who had deviated from God's path. In conclusion, Dewi Anjani is a respectful name given to Noah for saving the Sasak people in the ark, teaching them the teachings of monotheism, and also as a legacy of collective memory of their origins as the ancient people of the archipelago. In line with Robert Redfield's theory that "local religions are shaped by the collective history of a society," this integration of local cultural symbols with elements of global religion also demonstrates a strong cultural force (Redfield, 1953).

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For the informant, declaring the Sasak people as an "old nation" and "identical to Islam" is to correct a major misconception that the Sasak people of ancient times embraced Hinduism or dynamist animism. This assumption is what leads many to believe that Bali has exerted its influence on the Sasak people, even though Bali's presence in Lombok lasted less than a hundred years. This statement aligns with the views of local historians such as Aziz Ahmad Amir (2009), who noted that the Sasak form of Islam is highly distinctive and not simply a result of Hindu-Balinese acculturation, but rather a continuation of deeply rooted local Islamic practices (Aziz, 2009).

According to the informant, this is impossible. This impossibility is evident in the way the Sasak refer to God with the term Neneq Kaji. Ne is an ancient Sasak word meaning "mine," and Neq means "deep heart," while Kaji refers to supernatural powers, sacredness, ability, strength, and supreme glory. Neneq Kaji can be interpreted as "the almighty God is my only precious possession; he reigns in my heart." The way the Sasak refer to God clearly demonstrates their monotheistic faith. Even the word Sasak itself comes from the word saq saq, which means "the one" or "the only one." According to sources, calling the Sasak ancestors Hindu or of animist-dynamic beliefs is a persistent slander and misunderstanding. Semantically, this term also indicates a monotheistic and personal concept of divinity. This concept aligns with Clifford Geertz's findings in his anthropological study of religion in Java and Bali, which found that community belief systems often have a strong local identity and differ from formal religions considered universal (Geertz, 1973).

Changes in the Sasak Nobility System

According to the source, the Balinese culture that likely influenced the Sasak people is the nobility system. However, long before the Balinese arrived, the Sasak people had experienced cultural diffusion with Java. The source explained that in the past, before the 14th century, there were no kingdoms on the island of Lombok; only a form of community called a kedatuan, led by a Pengulu/Lokaq. The Pengulu's duties were limited to being a tribal chief who led all aspects of the lives of the residents of the kedatuan, from agriculture and social etiquette to religious rituals and even martial arts. There was no caste system within the kedatuan. The Pengulu served more as a spiritual leader than an administrative one (Shaleh, 2007).

The nobility system was introduced and adopted by the Sasak people in two stages. The first stage was Javanese adoption. Sometime in the 14th century, according to the source, a Javanese princess (most likely a princess of the Majapahit Empire) came to Lombok with her attendants to study with the Pengulu. Gradually, the princess grew comfortable in Lombok and refused to return to Java. She also fell in love with her teacher. She converted to Islam, married, and settled in Lombok, accompanied by her guards. The nobility system was first adopted by the Sasak people of the Majapahit entourage.

However, the nobility system implemented in Lombok was inspired solely by Islamic teachings and was more a societal appreciation of one's social services, rather than the concept of royal blood. The Sasak nobility system was open, meaning anyone could be elevated to nobility, and nobility did not automatically produce children of nobility. The second stage was Balinese adoption. Bali did not create a new nobility system, but transformed its open nature into a closed one. Bali prohibited free elevation to nobility. According to Bali, nobility was a matter of blood, not social services. Bali did this because it did not want the open Sasak nobility to produce new figures of resistance. According to sources, Bali appointed new nobles and granted them extensive land, resulting in their obedience to Bali and the preservation of the new nobility system. This inherited nobility system from Bali persists to this day.

This transformation can be viewed from the perspective of cultural theory as a form of cultural hegemony, as explained by Antonio Gramsci. Cultural hegemony is the domination of a ruling group through the regulation of values, social structures, and societal perceptions, in addition to physical force. This process demonstrates that local social systems not only change but also collapse due to symbolic and political manipulation (Gramsci, 2003).

Culture Adopted by Bali from Sasak

The source rejected the notion that the Sasak people adopted Balinese culture due to its similarities to the Sasak culture. However, this is not true. According to the source, the following are examples of Balinese culture that were actually adopted from the Sasak:

Bebet and Sapuq, the bebet is a cloth worn by the Sasak people in the past as a belly band, symbolizing "restraining lust," as according to Islam, the source of lust is the stomach. The sapuq is a patterned cloth artistically tied to cover the crown (semanget), inspired by the high position of the human crown in Sufism. The Sasak people have hundreds of sapuq tying styles, and the udeng, beloved and adopted by Bali, is just one of them. However, today, these headbands are more synonymous with Bali than Sasak.

Buak Lekoq and Kemenyan, the accusation that the Sasak people adopted Balinese culture is also caused by a misunderstanding about the use of buaq lekoq and incense. However, according to the source, the use of buaq lekoq and incense is a universal culture that has been around for thousands of years. The Sasak people highly respect the four elements of life: water, fire, air, and earth. In any Sasak ceremony, an earthen jug filled with water and a burning ember sprinkled with incense to create fragrant smoke must be available. All of these represent the four elements of life. Likewise, the use of buak lekoq and areca nut is special because when combined, they form a red color. This symbolizes the Sasak people's hope to be close to God, as in Islam it is said that God is closer than the veins (veins). According to the source, this tradition is precisely what the Balinese follow in their offerings at the temple.

Kemaliq, Kemaliq are sacred places held sacred by the Sasak people. Kemaliq are essentially places possessing immense life energy, as, according to the Sasak, they were once sanctified by saints of God as places of worship or remembrance. Kemaliq are characterized by trees, stones, and springs. For the Sasak, the first kemaliq in Islam is the Kaaba, marked by a black stone. On the island of Lombok, famous kemaliq are the Loang Baloq tomb (marked by a tree and a tombstone) or the Lingsar spring. The Sasak people habitually visit kemaliq, and according to sources, this tradition is also followed by the Balinese. The author's sources suggest that Bali is even attempting to seize, claim, and control the Lombok kemaliq through cultural strategies to make the Lombok people think they are Balinese. Muslims would even be accused of imitating Hinduism if they visited kemaliq.

Subak System and Pekaseh, Another example suggested by the informant that the Sasak people should not accept as Balinese is the subak and pekaseh systems in

agriculture. Many consider them Balinese culture adopted by the Sasak, as generally the pekaseh must be Balinese. According to the informant, it is worth considering that in 1800 Balinese people came to Lombok to escape Dutch rule, seeking permission to farm and even learning farming from Lombok people. The informant did not provide a definitive explanation, but according to him, although the words subak and pekaseh are Balinese, the system belongs to the Sasak people.

Cultural Dominance and Resistance

The relationship between the Sasak and Balinese peoples on Lombok Island is dynamic and complex, not only culturally but also politically. History records that the Karangasem Kingdom ruled Lombok from the 18th to the late 19th century. This domination not only brought a new political structure but also elements of Balinese culture into Sasak society. However, the process of cultural diffusion was not always one-way; many Balinese elements were adopted and internalized by the Sasak people.

The influence of Balinese social structures on the local social structure of Lombok demonstrates this process of cultural domination. Changes in the nobility system are one of the most obvious components. Before the arrival of the Balinese, the Sasak people recognized a leadership system led by a Pengulu (leader) or Lokaq (leader). This leader relied on local wisdom and spiritual leadership rather than caste. This structure demonstrated an egalitarian society based on the recognition of social and religious values (Shaleh, 2007).

However, this system changed under Balinese rule. The Balinese nobility system is highly closed, with titles granted solely through lineage. According to the source, the primary goal of these changes was to control the social mobility of the Sasak people to prevent the emergence of new resistance figures from among the common people (Gramsci, 2003). Furthermore, Bali granted land to the new nobility, creating a layer of local elites loyal to Balinese rule. This strategy aligns with Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, which states that domination is not only enforced by force, but also through the social structures and values that shape society.

Domination is not always perceived as a good thing. Symbolically and structurally, the Sasak people exhibit various forms of cultural resistance. The cepung

performance art is one of the most prominent forms, according to Nining Nur Alaini. According to her, cepung is a literary form that challenges the authority of the Balinese Kingdom and is used to criticize the ruler's policies through satire and local cultural symbols. Furthermore, cepung serves as a tool to convey the social aspirations of the Sasak people culturally (Alaini, 2020).

Identity claims also demonstrate resistance. According to the source, the Sasak are an "old nation" that has adhered to monotheism since the time of the Prophet Noah. They even refer to God as Neneq Kaji, a reference to the concept of monotheistic divinity in Islam. He claims that the Sasak people never practiced Hinduism, and that Hindu elements only emerged as a result of pressure exerted by Balinese rule during the colonial period. Stuart Hall illustrates the rearticulation of cultural identity in this statement. Identity is shaped by history, conflict, and social representation, according to Hall (Hall, 2013).

Furthermore, Sasak culture resists Balinese influence, while also negotiating and creating a hybrid culture. For example, many believe that the custom of elopement, known as merariq, originates from Balinese culture (merangkat). However, these terms and practices have long existed in Sasak society, according to the interviewees. Similarly, the communal eating tradition, called "gibungan" in Sasak and "megibung" in Bali, is also known. Both terms demonstrate the interplay of cultural patterns that produce hybridity, which Homi Bhabha describes as a "third space" where identity and culture are renegotiated and not entirely owned by either party (Bhabha, 1994).

Kemaliq, sacred sites considered to possess high spiritual power, is another example of symbolic domination. One source stated that the Balinese attempted to claim the Sasak kemaliq as their own tradition to demonstrate that the pilgrimage and sacredness of the site originated from Hinduism rather than local Islam. Some believe this was a symbolic attempt to reframe Lombok's cultural history and make it part of Balinese culture (Mohammad, 2014).

Sasak resistance, however, did not necessarily mean a complete rejection of outside influences. Islamic values and Sasak customs were used to adopt and develop many aspects of Balinese culture. For example, the Balinese learned the subak farming method from the people of Lombok in the 19th century. Although the word

"subak" is Balinese, the irrigation system used for agriculture was constructed collectively. Cultural diffusion in this situation shifted from domination to a space of interconnection and adaptation (Aziz, 2009).

This dynamic demonstrates that cultural domination and resistance can occur symbolically and not always directly. Depending on the strength of social structures, the resilience of local identities, and strategies of cultural representation, cultural elements can be accepted, rejected, or recontested during the diffusion process. Sasak and Balinese cultures demonstrate the ability to persist and change despite external cultural and political domination.

D. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of field data obtained through interviews, supported by a theoretical framework and literature review, it can be concluded that cultural diffusion between the Sasak and Balinese communities on Lombok Island occurred through both peaceful (cultural) interactions and conflict (structural/political). This interaction resulted in the exchange of cultural elements, such as clothing, udeng (traditional headdress) and bebet (traditional headdress), agricultural systems, and rituals, which were widely adopted by the Balinese. In contrast, the Sasak community was only influenced by the nobility system.

Before the arrival of the Balinese, the Sasak social system was egalitarian and open. However, the Balinese transformed it into a closed, descent-based nobility system, which was used to suppress potential resistance. This strategy represents a form of cultural hegemony, as explained by Antonio Gramsci, where power operates not only through coercion but also through control of value and social structures. Nevertheless, the Sasak community demonstrates cultural resistance through the cepung (a traditional Javanese dance) performance art, religious symbols such as Neneq Kaji, and the narrative that they are an ancient nation and have been Islamic since ancient times. This represents a form of rearticulation of cultural identity, in line with Stuart Hall's theory. Sasak identity is shaped through historical processes and responses to external domination.

Furthermore, the relationship between the Sasak and Balinese has produced distinctive hybrid cultural forms, such as merariq, megibung, and subak. According

to Homi Bhabha, the culture formed in these interactions is the result of negotiations in a third space, not a one-way domination. Thus, cultural diffusion between the Sasak and Balinese is not a one-sided domination relationship, but rather a complex process encompassing exchange, symbolic domination, resistance, and the reshaping of cultural identity. Sasak culture is not passive, but rather active in selecting, rejecting, and negotiating the cultural elements that enter its territory.

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