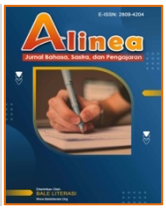
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Analysis of Content, Meaning, and Cultural Values in Balinese Lontar Manuscripts: A Case Study of Gending Gambang at Gambang Kwanji Sempidi

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Abstract
This study examines the content, meaning, and cultural values embedded in a specific corpus of Balinese lontar manuscripts used in the Gending Gambang tradition at Gambang Kwanji Sempidi, Bali. Unlike previous studies that treat lontar manuscripts in a general or catalog-based perspective, this research focuses on an intrinsic case study of a living manuscript tradition that is actively integrated into musical and ritual practice. The main research gap addressed in this study lies in the limited interpretive analysis of lontar manuscripts as contextual cultural texts, particularly in relation to their role in sustaining embodied artistic knowledge in contemporary Balinese society. This research employs a qualitative intrinsic case study design supported by hermeneutic, semiotic, and philological perspectives. Hermeneutics is used to interpret meaning within cultural and historical contexts, semiotics is applied to analyze symbolic structures in the manuscript notation system, while philology supports textual reading and interpretation of the lontar content. Data were collected through interviews, participant observation, documentation, and textual analysis, then analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings reveal that the lontar manuscripts of Gending Gambang function not only as textual artifacts but also as epistemic instruments that transmit musical knowledge, cultural memory, and ritual authority. The meanings embedded in the manuscripts are constructed through symbolic notation systems that require interpretive reading within communal practice. Furthermore, the cultural values identified include religiosity, artistic discipline, social cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of hermeneutic-semiotic interpretation with philological reading within a single intrinsic ethnocultural case study, demonstrating that lontar manuscripts operate as living cultural texts rather than static literary relics. The study contributes to the development of classical literature studies by positioning lontar manuscripts within contextual cultural literacy, ethnopedagogical practice, and community-based heritage preservation. This reinforces the relevance of lontar manuscripts as dynamic knowledge systems that continue to function within contemporary cultural ecosystems.

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Introduction

Lontar manuscripts are part of the intellectual heritage of the peoples of the Indonesian archipelago and hold a significant place in the development of classical literature, culture, and

traditional knowledge systems (Sarasvananda et al., 2023). In a global context, traditional manuscripts are viewed as documentary cultural heritage that preserves not only texts but also collective memory, value systems, worldviews, and social practices of the communities that produced them. Interest in ancient manuscripts has increased along with global awareness of cultural heritage preservation, digitization, and interdisciplinary manuscript studies (Sudarsana, 2022; Nurpratama, 2025). In Indonesia, lontar manuscripts contain knowledge related to religion, customs, law, medicine, arts, ethics, education, and the relationship between humans, nature, and God (Muhaemin, 2024; Nurpratama, 2025). Therefore, lontar studies are not only concerned with preservation but also with interpreting meaning and cultural values embedded in the text (Nugraha & Laugu, 2021; Muhaemin, 2024).

In the national context, the study of lontar manuscripts is increasingly important because Indonesia possesses a rich manuscript tradition that has not yet been fully read, documented, or interpreted in relation to contemporary cultural life (Nurpratama, 2025). Many manuscripts are physically threatened due to tropical climate, humidity, insects, mold, and inadequate storage (Muhaemin, 2024). In addition, there is a decline in the ability to read ancient scripts and understand manuscript languages, which limits access to their cultural meaning (Ariyani et al., 2024; Hapsari, 2024). This condition risks reducing lontar manuscripts to mere artifacts rather than living cultural sources (Sari et al., 2025; Muhaemin, 2024).

As classical literary texts, lontar manuscripts possess unique characteristics because they integrate textual, material, spiritual, and cultural dimensions. In Bali, lontar manuscripts contain knowledge of religion, ethics, medicine, ritual practices, cosmology, social order, and the arts. Research on Balinese lontar metadata shows that these manuscripts preserve knowledge systems, traditions, history, beliefs, and cultural practices passed down across generations (Bhandesa et al., 2022; Abdurahman et al., 2026). Within classical literary studies, lontar can be understood as cultural texts that reflect moral values, spirituality, social harmony, and artistic worldview (Arsana et al., 2026; Cahyaningrum & Ardhana, 2023). In this study, the object is specified as the lontar manuscript of Gending Gambang at Gambang Kwanji Sempidi, not Balinese lontar in general.

The main issue in this study is the gap between the existence of lontar manuscripts as cultural heritage and the limited interpretive understanding of their content, meaning, and cultural values. Previous studies have focused on preservation, digitization, cataloging, metadata, transliteration, and documentation of manuscripts (Zakiyyah et al., 2022; Wedia & Septia, 2023). Although digitization improves access, it does not fully explain the cultural meaning contained in the text (Rachman, 2024; Qorib et al., 2026). Therefore, there is still a need for interpretive studies that position manuscripts as literary and cultural texts, particularly in the case of Gending Gambang at Gambang Kwanji Sempidi.

From a socio-cultural perspective, lontar manuscripts contain values that function as moral guidance and cultural identity for the community. In the context of Gending Gambang at Gambang Kwanji Sempidi, the manuscript is closely related to Balinese artistic tradition, ritual expression, and cultural continuity. Studies show that lontar literacy practices in Bali contribute to strengthening identity, spirituality, and tradition (Handayani, 2024). In addition, lontar collections such as those in Dukuh Penaban contain extensive knowledge on medicine, history, art, and social life (Laras, 2021). Thus, lontar manuscripts function as cultural instruments that shape social behavior, moral orientation, and collective identity (Antari & Anadhi, 2025).

From an educational perspective, lontar manuscripts are important sources of local wisdom that can be integrated into character education. Values such as ethics, religiosity, discipline, and social responsibility are widely found in lontar texts and can be contextualized in modern learning systems (Ardiyasa et al., 2024). In relation to Gending Gambang at Gambang Kwanji Sempidi, the manuscript also reflects artistic knowledge and cultural transmission through performance tradition. Therefore, philological study should not stop at transcription but must extend to interpretive analysis of meaning and cultural function (Antari & Anadhi, 2025).

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the content, meaning, and cultural values in the lontar manuscript of Gending Gambang at Gambang Kwanji Sempidi. The focus is on interpreting textual meaning and cultural values embedded in the manuscript using an interpretive qualitative approach. This study contributes theoretically to classical literary studies, philology, anthropology, and cultural studies, and practically to education, cultural preservation, and strengthening local identity in Bali (Juniawan & Wiguna, 2023).

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design because the focus of the research is a single, specific, and context-bound case, namely the lontar manuscript tradition associated with Gending Gambang at Gambang Kwanji Sempidi. The intrinsic case study is used when the case itself is of primary interest and requires in-depth understanding within its real-life cultural context (Lim, 2025). In this study, the case boundary is clearly defined as the lontar manuscript used as the basis of Gending Gambang notation, its interpretation process, and its transmission within the Gambang Kwanji tradition in Kwanji Village, Sempidi. Thus, this research does not aim to generalize lontar manuscripts in Bali, but to deeply interpret a single cultural-literary case.

The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of meanings, experiences, and socio-cultural contexts embedded in the manuscript tradition (Lim, 2025). The research was conducted in Kwanji Traditional Village, Sempidi Subdistrict, Mengwi District, Badung Regency, Bali, from January to April 2026. The data corpus in this study consists of: (1) the lontar manuscript(s) related to Gending Gambang notation, (2) oral explanations of the Gambang Kwanji tradition, (3) performance practices of Gending Gambang, and (4) supporting cultural documentation related to transmission and interpretation of the manuscript. Research informants included custodians or owners of lontar manuscripts, senior Gambang Kwanji drummers, traditional leaders, gamelan practitioners, and academics or lontar researchers. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement and knowledge of the manuscript and Gending Gambang tradition, and snowball sampling was applied to identify additional relevant informants. This approach ensures that data are drawn from individuals with situated expertise in the specific case under study (Lim, 2025; Kekeya, 2021). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, documentation, and literature review. Interviews focused on the content of the lontar manuscript, the meaning of notation signs, interpretive practices, and cultural values embedded in Gending Gambang (Magaldi & Berler, 2020; Naz et al., 2022). Observation was conducted on manuscript handling, reading practices, notation interpretation, and musical performance practices within the Gambang Kwanji tradition (Mariyana, 2021; Mariyana et al., 2022). Documentation included photographs of manuscripts, field notes, recordings, transcriptions, and local terminological records.

The data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2020). In this study, the analytical categories were specifically defined as: (1) textual content of the lontar manuscript, (2) meaning construction in notation and performance context, and (3) cultural values embedded in the Gending Gambang tradition. These categories ensure alignment between the case boundary, data corpus, and analytical focus. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources, methods, and theories, member checking, and audit trails. These strategies were applied to maintain credibility and consistency of interpretation across textual, observational, and interview data.

Results And Discussion

Results

The research findings indicate that lontar plays a significant role in the transmission of traditional artistic knowledge, particularly in the practice of Gambang karawitan in Kwanji Sempidi. Based on thematic analysis of observations, visual documentation, and interviews with artists and tradition

bearers, the lontar manuscript in the Gending Gambang tradition at Gambang Kwanji Sempidi functions as an epistemic and legitimating device that structures musical knowledge, authorizes interpretive decisions in performance, and mediates intergenerational transmission of gending practice, thereby positioning the manuscript as an active cultural mechanism that sustains continuity between historical knowledge systems and present-day artistic praxis. Rather than functioning merely as a physical artifact, the material form of the lontar manuscript reflects a culturally embedded inscription practice in which the use of lontar leaves and Balinese script engraved through traditional scratching techniques constitutes a material medium for preserving and transmitting encoded musical knowledge. In the context of Gending Gambang at Gambang Kwanji Sempidi, this physicality should be understood not as a descriptive feature, but as part of a broader manuscript epistemology that legitimizes musical knowledge through embodied writing practices and culturally situated material traditions. This material form indicates that the lontar is an ancient literary artifact that preserves the intellectual legacy of past societies.



Figure 1. Notation of Gambang Music Using Lontar Manuscripts in the Gambang Kwanji Sempidi Ensemble [Source: Documentation by I Nyoman Mariyana, 2025]

1. The Content of Lontar Manuscripts as a Representation of Traditional Knowledge

The content of lontar manuscripts not only contains textual information but also records how ancient societies understood life, nature, social relationships, religion, and cultural practices. In the context of classical literary studies, the content of these manuscripts can be interpreted as a form of documentation of local knowledge passed down through language, symbols, and specific narrative structures. The information contained within is often not conveyed directly, but through symbolic expressions, metaphors, proverbs, behavioral rules, or guidelines related to the social order of the community. This indicates that lontar manuscripts serve a didactic function, namely imparting values to their readers.

> "*The content of lontar manuscripts is usually not as straightforward as modern books. It must be understood gradually because it uses a lot of figurative language and archaic terms*" (Informant 2, a reader of lontar manuscripts).

The interview excerpt reflects a fundamental principle in classical literary hermeneutics that meaning in lontar manuscripts is not immediately accessible through literal reading but is constructed through layered interpretive processes involving figurative expression, symbolic representation, and archaic linguistic structures. From a hermeneutic perspective, this condition situates lontar as a culturally encoded text in which meaning is mediated through historical language systems and culturally specific semiotic conventions. Consequently, interpretation requires not only linguistic competence in Balinese script and lexical forms, but also contextual sensitivity to the socio-religious and historical frameworks in which the text was produced. Within this framework, lontar functions as

a repository of implicitly transmitted cultural values, moral philosophy, and traditional knowledge systems that become intelligible only through interpretive engagement rather than surface reading.

2. The Significance of Lontar Manuscripts as the Community's Collective Memory

Lontar can be conceptualized as a cultural memory apparatus that mediates the relationship between past and present by preserving not only textual content, but also embodied knowledge systems, social imaginaries, and culturally situated worldviews transmitted across generations. In this sense, lontar does not function merely as an archival record, but as an active medium of cultural continuity through which traditions, social norms, and ritual–artistic practices are continuously reinterpreted within contemporary community life. Within the framework of cultural memory studies, this positions lontar as a dynamic site of meaning production rather than a static historical document. In an interview, a traditional leader stated,

> "*If there were no lontar manuscripts, many old stories and teachings could be lost. Lontar manuscripts are like a reminder so that we do not lose touch with our ancestors*" (Informant 3, traditional leader).

This quote demonstrates that lontar serves as a repository of the community's collective memory, as it preserves the stories, teachings, values, and knowledge of ancestors that form the foundation of cultural identity. The phrase "so that we do not lose touch with our ancestors" underscores that lontar is not merely understood as a relic of the past, but as a bridge connecting the current generation to the intellectual and spiritual heritage of past communities. In relation to classical literature, the lontar is a vital medium that records worldviews, norms, moral teachings, and local wisdom in the form of traditional texts. Therefore, the existence of the lontar ensures cultural continuity by enabling traditional values to be recognized, studied, and passed down to future generations.

3. Cultural Values Contained in Lontar Manuscripts

The results of the analysis show that the dominant cultural values include religious values, ethical values, aesthetic values, educational values, social values, and conservation values. Religious values are evident in teachings about the relationship between humans and God, ancestors, and spiritual forces believed to govern the balance of life. Ethical values are evident in the advice regarding behavior, duties, courtesy, and social responsibility. Aesthetic values emerge through the use of symbolic language, the structure of expressions, as well as the beauty of the script's form and the lontar material itself. Educational values are evident in the function of the lontar as a traditional learning resource, while social values are evident in the involvement of families, traditional leaders, and the community in preserving the manuscripts. One informant stated,

> "*Learning lontar is not just about learning to read the script, but also about learning etiquette, patience, and respect for our ancestral heritage*" (Informant 4, cultural practitioner).

This quote indicates that learning lontar is not merely about the technical ability to read the script but also encompasses the cultivation of attitudes and cultural values, such as etiquette, patience, perseverance, and respect for ancestors. In relation to classical literature, lontar serves as a medium for moral and cultural education, preserving the life teachings of past societies. Therefore, the process of studying lontar not only fosters an understanding of the text but also instills the noble values that form part of the identity and ethics of the communities that cherish them.

4. The Lontar as a Symbol of Cultural Authority

In traditional societies, the lontar is often cited as a reference to establish the validity of a teaching, ritual, story, or cultural practice. The existence of the lontar lends legitimacy to both orally transmitted knowledge and practices carried out in social life. Thus, the lontar occupies an important position as a trusted source of reference. Interview data indicates that the community tends to view

the contents of lontar as knowledge possessing sacred value and must not be treated carelessly. Another informant stated,

> "*Not all lontar can be opened at any time. There are lontar that must be handled according to specific rules because their contents are considered sacred*" (Informant 5, community leader).

This quote implies that lontar manuscripts are not merely viewed as ordinary texts but also as cultural artifacts possessing sacred value and must be handled in accordance with customary rules or specific beliefs. Not all lontar manuscripts can be opened, read, or interpreted carelessly because some of their contents are considered sacred and relate to spiritual teachings, rituals, or knowledge holding special authority within the community. In relation to ancient literature, this indicates that lontar manuscripts serve not only as traditional written works but also as living cultural texts within the belief systems of their supporting communities. Therefore, an understanding of classical literature must take into account the relationship between the text's content, its sacred value, the rules of interpretation, and the cultural authority that governs its use.

5. Limitations in the Transmission of Lontar Knowledge

Although lontar possesses high cultural value, research findings indicate challenges in its transmission process. Not all young people are able to read lontar script, understand the ancient language, or interpret the symbolic meanings contained within it. Knowledge of lontar remains heavily dependent on specific individuals, such as manuscript owners, sulinggih, pemangku, practitioners of ancient literature, or academics. The fragile physical condition of lontar also poses a challenge, as the manuscripts are easily damaged if not properly maintained. An informant remarked,

> "*Many young people today are interested in seeing lontar, but few can actually read them. If they aren't taught, eventually they'll just be objects*" (Informant 6, lontar enthusiast).

This quote implies that while lontar manuscripts currently still attract the attention of the younger generation as a cultural heritage, this interest is not always accompanied by the ability to read the script, understand the ancient language, and interpret the manuscript's content. If the process of knowledge transmission is not actively pursued, lontar manuscripts risk becoming mere artifacts or collection items devoid of living meaning within society. In the context of classical literature, this indicates that the value of lontar lies not only in its physical form but also in the ability of future generations to read, understand, and apply the teachings, stories, and cultural values contained within it. Therefore, the preservation of ancient literature must encompass literacy education, an understanding of the cultural context, and the transmission of meaning so that lontar manuscripts continue to function as a source of knowledge, not merely as relics of the past.

Overall, the research findings indicate that lontar manuscripts, as ancient literature, possess three primary dimensions: the textual dimension, the cultural dimension, and the educational dimension. The textual dimension pertains to the manuscript's content, language, script, and the structure of expressions used. The cultural dimension relates to the significance of lontar as a symbol of identity, collective memory, and the legitimization of tradition. The educational dimension relates to the values that can be passed on to future generations. These three dimensions are interconnected and demonstrate that lontar cannot be understood merely as an ancient artifact, but as a living text that embodies the worldview of the communities that support it.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the view that lontar manuscripts in classical literature studies should be understood as cultural texts, not merely as philological artifacts. From a classical literature perspective, texts do not exist in isolation but are always linked to the social, religious, and customary contexts, as well as the value systems of the communities that produced them. The content of the lontar, which contains teachings, advice, symbols, and local knowledge, indicates that classical literature functions as a medium for cultural transmission. Thus, the interpretation of the lontar must

be conducted contextually, that is, by considering the relationship between the text, the manuscript's owner, the reader, oral traditions, and the accompanying social practices.

The findings of Hapsari (2024) highlight the significance of Balinese lontar as carriers of ancestral values that contribute to cultural preservation and the religious life of the community, while also repositioning lontar as sources of knowledge beyond their sacred material status. However, this study argues that such a perspective remains largely general and has not sufficiently accounted for how meaning is constructed through specific textual traditions and performative contexts. Building on this limitation, the present research advances the discussion by demonstrating that the interpretation of content, meaning, and cultural values in lontar is not uniform but operates through interrelated layers: the textual layer as a system of encoded teachings, the symbolic layer through which lontar functions as a marker of cultural identity, and the performative layer in which the practice of reading and transmitting lontar becomes a mechanism of intergenerational cultural reproduction. This layered analytical model extends previous findings by situating lontar interpretation within a more context-specific framework grounded in the Gending Gambang tradition at Gambang Kwanji Sempidi.

Findings regarding lontar as a form of collective memory are also related to broader discussions on manuscript preservation and cultural heritage management. Sarasvananda et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of metadata management in Balinese lontar to ensure systematic documentation and accessibility, while Citrawati and Putra (2024) highlight digitization, cataloging, and digital archiving as strategies to prevent the disappearance of lontar from the public knowledge domain. However, this study argues that such preservation-oriented approaches remain insufficient if they do not incorporate interpretive engagement with the cultural meanings embedded in the manuscripts. To address this limitation, the present study proposes a three layer interpretive framework consisting of text, identity, and transmission, which is understood through a contextual hermeneutic reading that connects textual meaning with lived cultural practices. In this framework, the textual layer refers to the encoded knowledge within the lontar manuscript, the identity layer relates to how the manuscript constructs and reinforces collective cultural identity, and the transmission layer concerns the performative and social processes through which meaning is continuously reproduced across generations. Through this hermeneutic approach, lontar preservation is repositioned not only as a technical or digital practice, but also as a cultural interpretive process in which meaning is actively sustained within community life.

Theoretically, this study offers the understanding that lontar manuscripts, as ancient literature, can be read as multidimensional texts. Lontars not only contain content but also embody symbolic meaning, cultural values, and social functions. This concept expands the study of ancient literature from a mere analysis of textual structure toward an analysis of the relationship between text and cultural life. In this context, lontar can be viewed as an epistemological medium—that is, a tool used by traditional communities to construct, preserve, and pass down knowledge. This perspective is significant because it positions ancient literature not as a static relic of the past, but as a source of knowledge that can still contribute to cultural studies, education, and local identity.

Practically, the findings of this research have implications for manuscript preservation, cultural education, and the development of local literacy. First, lontar manuscripts need to be systematically documented through digital photography, transliteration, translation, content description, and documentation of the cultural context of their use. Second, the teaching of classical literature in schools and universities can utilize lontar as a learning resource rooted in local wisdom. Third, indigenous communities, cultural institutions, and academics need to collaborate to develop training programs for reading lontar script, manuscript discussions, and community-based archiving. Thus, the preservation of lontar does not stop at the rescue of objects but moves toward strengthening the cultural literacy of the community.

A critical reflection on the research findings suggests that lontar occupies a paradoxical position. On the one hand, lontar is revered as a sacred heritage and a symbol of cultural identity. On the other hand, this reverence is not always accompanied by the ability to read, understand, and actualize its

values. This situation indicates that the sacralization of lontar can serve as a force for preservation, but it can also become an obstacle if it distances lontar too far from the community's learning spaces. Therefore, a balanced approach is needed between respecting the sacred value of lontar and providing responsible educational access.

This study has limitations because it focuses on the reading of the content, meaning, and cultural values within specific lontar manuscripts; thus, the results cannot be generalized to the entire lontar tradition in Bali or the Nusantara. Future research could expand the scope of study by comparing several lontar manuscripts from different genres, such as narrative lontar, medicinal lontar, chronicle lontar, kakawin lontar, or lontar related to traditional arts. Subsequent research could also develop an interdisciplinary approach integrating philology, literary anthropology, ethnography, cultural education, and digital humanities. In this way, the study of lontar as ancient literature can continue to evolve as a field of research that not only explores texts from the past but also revives cultural values for the present and the future.

Conclusions

Based on the research findings, the main conclusion of this study is that lontar manuscripts in the examined case function not merely as textual artefacts of ancient literature, but as culturally embedded texts that actively transmit and sustain local knowledge systems and value structures. In this specific context, the manuscripts demonstrate a multi-dimensional role in which textual content is inseparable from its cultural and educational functions, reflecting how written heritage continues to operate within living community practices. The contribution of this study to classical literature and lontar manuscript studies lies in its case-specific reinterpretation of manuscript function. Rather than reiterating general classifications commonly found in previous scholarship, this research provides empirical insight into how lontar manuscripts operate within a localized socio-cultural setting, thereby expanding interpretative approaches in philological and manuscript studies toward more context-sensitive readings.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need for strengthened preservation strategies that integrate cultural literacy, formal and informal educational programs, and community-based manuscript conservation initiatives. Such approaches are essential to ensure that lontar manuscripts are not only preserved as physical heritage but also remain meaningful as living sources of knowledge and cultural identity.However, the study is limited by its focus on a single case study and a restricted corpus of lontar manuscripts from a specific cultural and geographical context. As a result, the findings cannot be fully generalized to other lontar traditions without further comparative research across different manuscript collections and regions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors must state that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this paper.

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