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The Symbolism of the Turtle in Nusantara Philosophy and Its Relevance for Local Wisdom-Based Tourism

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Abstract

The turtle is a strong symbol in Nusantara philosophy, representing resilience, patience, longevity, and balance. These qualities not only hold deep cosmological significance but also offer valuable insights into how we can live in harmony with nature and community. This paper examines the symbolism of the turtle and its application in the tourism industry. Rather than treating symbolism as abstract, this study applies to real-world tourism practices, particularly through the lens of local-based tourism and slow tourism, which emphasises meaningful, immersive, and reflective travel experiences. By incorporating turtle symbolism into tourism strategies, communities can preserve their cultural identity while encouraging environmental responsibility. This approach aligns with global movements toward eco-tourism and responsible travel, providing an alternative to mass tourism. Through literature review and selected case studies, such as the Paloh Coastal Festival in Kalimantan and Sanur Village Festival in Bali, this research illustrates how local rituals, art, and conservation efforts related to turtles can serve both cultural preservation and tourism development. Drawing from symbolic Interaction and Integrating Turtle Philosophy into Tourism -in this case, local-based tourism and slow tourism, this paper argues that turtles -often featured in folklore, ceremonies, and artistic motifs, offer a framework for culturally rooted, environmentally sustainable tourism. These practices not only enrich the tourist experiences but also empower local communities by reaffirming their ancestral wisdom. Ultimately, the study suggests that the turtle's symbolic and environmental importance can serve as a model for tourism that honours tradition, fosters reflection, and supports long-term sustainability in Nusantara.

Keywords

symbolism, Nusantara philosophy, turtle, local wisdom based-tourism, slow tourism

1 Introduction

Turtles are more than just animals with shells; they have vital roles in the ecosystem by both consuming and being consumed by other organisms. When asked to describe a turtle in three words, most people would say "shell, slow, and green." While "shell" is an accurate description since all turtles have shells - even a cartoon turtle-like Squirtle from *Pokémon* has a shell. No other animal on Earth has a shell like a turtle. However, "slow and green" can be misleading. Not all turtles are slow; in fact, many swim swiftly in the water. Similarly, not all turtles are green. While some species do have a greenish hue, most exhibit dull colors, like brown, gray, and black, while others feature vibrant red, orange, and yellow patterns (Fong & Sung, 2017).

Turtles have played an important role in the mythologies of diverse cultures hold significant cosmological importance and offer valuable insights into how we interact with the environment. The turtle's symbolism aligns seamlessly with the concept of "slow tourism," promoting deeper connections between travellers and local cultures and nature. The concept, grounded in local wisdom, aligns with global trends towards eco-tourism and responsible travel, shifting the focus from mass tourism to more personalized and meaningful adventures (Rinzin et al., 2007, p. 111), on the other hand, it allows communities to preserve their cultural identity while encouraging environmental responsibility (Septarini, 2024, p. 16)

This paper explores the profound symbolism of the turtle and its relevance to the tourism industry, particularly in promoting tourism based on local wisdom. By weaving the turtle's philosophical meaning into tourism, this study highlights how it can enhance cultural storytelling and promote sustainable

practices. Through case studies from regions that blend cultural heritage with environmental conservation, we examine how symbolic storytelling can enrich tourists' experiences. The turtle, representing thoughtful and intentional journeys, serves as a powerful metaphor for immersive and reflective travel experiences.

2 Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to explore the symbolism of the turtle in Nusantara philosophy and its application in local wisdom-based tourism. Generally, Mohajan (2018 p. 6) defined Qualitative descriptive research as a method aimed at providing a comprehensive summary of events in everyday terms of those events. So, rather than a purely philosophical analysis, this research focuses on how philosophical symbolism is embedded in real-world tourism practices.

A literature review serves as a foundation, analyzing academic papers, books, tourism case studies, reports, and credible online resources that discuss the philosophical and cultural aspects of turtles, mainly in Indonesian culture. This allows for a comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance of turtle symbolism and its relevance in shaping local-based tourism and slow tourism. foundation supports the analysis of how turtle symbolism can enhance tourism practices. In addition, multiple case studies provide concrete examples of how turtle symbolism is integrated into cultural heritage and environmental conservation efforts. For instance, regions like Paloh and Sanur illustrate how local communities incorporate the turtle's symbolism into tourism initiatives, reinforcing both cultural identity and ecological awareness.

The study also applies theoretical frameworks. Symbolism Interaction of Herbert Blummer is applied to interpret how cultural symbols like the turtle acquire meaning through community rituals, festivals, and storytelling. Sustainability theory underpins the study by aligning turtle symbolism with slow tourism principles, emphasizing ecological balance, harmony with nature, and mindful travel experiences (Denzin, 1992, p. 25). By combining philosophical symbolism, qualitative analysis, and practical case studies, this research demonstrates the real-world application of Nusantara philosophy in tourism rather than treating it as an abstract concept.

3 Symbolism of the Turtle in Nusantara Philosophy

3.1 Symbolic Interactionism of Turtle Symbolism

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical approach to studying human group life and conduct that focuses on how people create and interpret meaning through social interaction. Its core premise is that humans create their worlds of experience by acting on things based on the meanings those things have for them (Denzin, 1992, p. 17). Symbolic interactionism and symbolism are connected through their focus on meaning and interpretation but have distinct approaches. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes how people create and interpret meanings through social interaction. The theory posits that people act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them, with these meanings arising from social interaction and self-reflection.

The capacity for symbolic communication raises human existence to a qualitatively different level, where individuals perceive and respond to their world through a "symbolic screen", that functions as an interpretive framework through which individuals filter and make meaning of their experiences. It operates through cultural symbols, language, and shared meanings that people use to understand their world. This aligns with symbolic interactionism's core premise that humans create their worlds of experience by acting on things based on the meanings they derive through social interaction. This suggests that our perception of reality is not purely objective but is mediated through cultural constructs and social meanings. People interpret experiences through pre-existing cultural meanings and representations that are shaped by society's cultural-making institutions.

When someone encounters a turtle, they may not simply see an animal; they interpret the turtle's significance based on cultural beliefs, personal experiences, or societal meanings (e.g., Fortitude, longevity, or protection) (Jansen, 2009, p. 25). The "symbolic screen" filters their perception, turning the turtle into something more than just a physical being—something imbued with cultural meaning. This framework is particularly relevant in understanding the symbolic significance of turtles across various cultural contexts.

the meanings we attribute to turtles are not inherent but rather constructed through social interaction and interpretation. Turtles have been imbued with a wide range of symbolic meanings, folktales and mythologies. A sense of mystery and awe surrounding turtles has led individuals and communities to construct and negotiate the meanings attached to these animals.

3.2 Symbolism of Turtle in Other Countries

The symbolism of turtles varies across cultures and countries, although often representing longevity, stability, and wisdom, but their meanings can also differ depending on myths, legends, and traditions and have been integrated into activities and therapeutic practices variously.

In many myths, turtles are often seen as symbols of strength, carrying or supporting the world on their backs. The article *"Why Is the World Always on the Back of a Turtle? It's Mythology All the Way Down"* discusses this concept, which was also explored by Edward Burnett Tylor in his comparative studies in 1878. Tylor examined the explored recurring theme of "World-Tortoise", a mythological idea in which a giant turtle supports the world. This concept spans various cultures and mythologies. The World Turtle called the Cosmic or Divine Turtle, is a mythical concept where a giant turtle supports or contains the world. This idea parallels the myths of the World Elephant and World Serpent and is found in Hindu, Chinese, and Native American traditions. This symbolism is rooted in ancient beliefs and serves as a cosmic metaphor in diverse traditions (Grundhauser, 2017).

In Hindu mythology, the world turtle is represented by Kurma, the Second Avatar of Vishnu, who supports the cosmos on his back. This idea reflects the stability and balance that the turtle symbolizes, embodying the universe's foundation (Patyal, 1978, p. 108). Similarly, in Chinese mythology, the turtle is seen as one of the Four Symbols, representing the north and supporting the heavens, signifying endurance and strength (Allan S, 2003, p. 280). Native American legends "The Iroquois Creation Story" also incorporate the word turtle motif, particularly in the creation myths of several tribes. For instance, the Iroquois believe that the world rests on the back of a giant turtle, symbolizing the earth's creation and the interconnectedness of all life (Muhlenberg School District, 2020, p. 40). While varied in their cultural contexts, these myths share a common thread of viewing the turtle as a symbol of resilience and the cosmic order. The enduring appeal of this motif underscores the timeless nature of these narratives and their relevance in understanding human connections to the natural world and the cosmos.

In Korean culture, the turtle holds profound spiritual and psychological significance. Turtles are defined as divine messengers of the Dragon King of the sea, and represent loyalty and wisdom in Korean narrative and fables (Hanifah & Adnyana, 2022, p. 89). It is considered one of the sacred animals alongside the dragon, phoenix, and unicorn, being particularly revered for its prophetic abilities and role as the spiritual messenger (Hwang H, 2020, p. 100). Historically this was exemplified in Korean history when the turtle's prophetic message predicted the fall of the ancient Kingdom of Baekjae, demonstrating a deep connection to Korean spiritual and cultural traditions.

Turtle symbolism in Korea extends beyond mere spiritual representation to encompass psychological transformation and healing. Some example, turtle symbolism is applied in sand play therapy in Korea. For Korean clients, the turtle serves as a protective guide, helping individuals safely confront their unconscious elements. Its presence provides psychological safety through its hard shell, while simultaneously representing the composure and perseverance needed for personal growth. The dual nature of protection and transformation makes the turtle particularly significant in Korean therapeutic contexts, where helps clients integrate the consciousness aspects while maintaining cultural connections to traditional spiritual beliefs (Hwang H, 2020, p. 112).

Likewise in Greek and Roman Culture, the turtle's symbolic significance is most powerfully embodied in its sacred associations with major deities and its role as a mediator between different realms of existence. Its primary significance lies in being a fertility symbol connected to Aphrodite/Venus, the goddess born from the sea, while simultaneously serving as an attribute of Hermes/Mercury (Dougherty, 2019; Shelmerdine, 1984) This dual divine association makes the turtle uniquely positioned as both a feminine divine symbol and a cosmic mediator, bridging the gap between earthly and divine realms. The turtle's role as a connector of matter and spirit reflects the classical understanding of its transformative and integrative powers, though it's worth noting that the available documentation primarily emphasizes Eastern interpretations rather than providing extensive details about Greco-Roman symbolism.

Inspired by myths and traditions across cultures, activities like mindfulness walks encourage individuals to embody the turtle's slow, deliberate pace to foster calmness and grounding. Similarly, crafting turtle-shaped art or objects reflects themes of protection and stability, often used in therapeutic settings or as symbols of home and personal resilience. While activities like "turtle breathing" or visualization exercises

help individuals manage stress and anxiety by retreating into a symbolic “shell” for safety and self-regulation.

3.3 Symbolism of Turtle in Nusantara Philosophy

Besides standing as a powerful symbol of longevity, balance, resilience, and patience, turtles also possess characteristics that represent ecological and spiritual and ritualistic symbolism. These characteristics reflect the deep cosmological beliefs and values held by the diverse cultures within the Nusantara region. The turtle’s slow and steady nature embodies the virtues of persistence and endurance, suggesting that progress and success come through calmness and continuous effort (Rivera, 2020).

The longevity of the turtle, often living for many decades, symbolizes a long and prosperous life. This aspect of the turtle is celebrated in various cultural practices and legends, reinforcing the idea of living a life that is not rushed but thoughtfully paced (Garfield, 1986, p. 296). The balance that turtles maintain in their aquatic and terrestrial habitats is also a metaphor for the importance of living harmoniously with nature and within one’s community.

Another traits of turtle is it embodies resilience and patience, traits that are highly revered in Nusantara societies, often associated with the earth and the cycles of nature. The turtle’s slow and steady nature is seen as a metaphor for enduring challenges and persevering through adversity, reflecting the deep-seated belief that true strength lies not in haste but in the ability to navigate life’s trials with grace and composure. This symbolism teaches the importance of patience, a virtue that resonates deeply within the context of traditional Nusantara values, where communal harmony and respect for natural rhythms are paramount. The turtle’s journey, often depicted in folklore and stories, illustrates the idea that success is not always about speed; rather, it is about the steadfastness of purpose and the willingness to keep moving forward, regardless of obstacles (Rivera, 2020).

The turtle’s remarkable ability to traverse both land and water symbolizes a profound sense of balance and harmony, a characteristic that has captivated human imagination across cultures and epochs. This duality serves as a powerful reminder of the necessity to maintain equilibrium in every facet of life whether it be between work and rest, progress and tradition, or humanity and nature. The turtle’s slow and deliberate movements remind us that haste can often lead to imbalance. In a fast-paced society where the pressure to achieve can overshadow the need for reflection and self-care, the turtle teaches us the value of taking our time, assessing our surroundings, and making thoughtful decisions. This approach not only fosters personal well-being but also enhances our relationships with others and the environment.

The ecological symbolism of turtles highlights the urgent need for environmental stewardship within our communities (Abroorza A. Yusra et al., 2022, p. 121). The decline in turtle populations, driven by factors such as habitat destruction, pollution, and climate change, underscores the fragility of our ecosystems. For example, the nesting habits of turtles are intricately linked to the health of beach ecosystems, where their eggs contribute to nutrient cycling and support various species. Urging us to take action in safeguarding the delicate balance of nature, turtles remind us that every species, no matter how small, plays a vital role in the web of life (WWF Indonesia, 2023).

Several Nusantara myths and legends believe turtles support the world or the cosmos, a concept that resonates deeply within the region’s rich cultural narratives. This belief underscores the turtle’s role as a foundational and stabilizing force, symbolizing endurance and wisdom. This cosmological significance highlights the turtle’s importance in the broader philosophical and spiritual understanding of the universe. In many Nusantara traditions, the turtle is not merely a creature of the earth but a bridge between the terrestrial and the divine, embodying the interconnectedness of all life forms. Its slow, deliberate movements are often interpreted as a reminder of the need for reflection in the face of life’s challenges, reinforcing the idea that wisdom often comes with time. For some communities, the turtle is revered during rituals that honour ancestors, symbolizing the continuity of life and the importance of respecting one’s heritage. This reverence is further reflected in art and folklore, where the turtle frequently appears as a guide or protector, illustrating the belief that it safeguards not only the physical world but also the spiritual realms (Stasch, 1996, p. 365).

The turtle plays a significant role in various spiritual and ritualistic contexts within Nusantara cultures, embodying deep symbolic meanings that resonate across different communities. In his article, Westerlaken (Westerlaken, 2016, pp. 89-92) examines the intersection of cultural practices and conservation efforts in Bali, focusing on the use of green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) in traditional ceremonies and as a delicacy. Despite being an endangered species, green turtles are deeply embedded in Balinese culture, symbolizing the island’s spiritual foundation. The article highlights the challenges of balancing cultural traditions with the need for conservation, including the illegal trade and capture of turtles. Efforts by local authorities and

conservation projects to protect these turtles are also discussed, showcasing the ongoing struggle to preserve both cultural heritage and biodiversity.

Despite the case, there are some examples of how the turtle's symbolism is embedded in Indonesian culture. In Balinese cosmology, the giant sea turtle Bedawang Nala is believed to carry the world on its back, symbolizing the earth and its stability. This myth is a part of the broader Hindu cosmological beliefs that intertwine with Balinese traditions. Bedawang Nala represents the foundation of the world and the natural order, reflecting the importance of balance and harmony in life. Similarly, in Kalimantan, the Rutun Penyu batik, together with Hiu Taliyasan, Kuntul Perak, The first and second Tenglawan Amplek Motif, serve as decorative art motif represents simplicity and humility, core values in the local culture. This motif is an artistic expression and a cultural heritage that teaches valuable life lessons (Widyadhana, 2024). Additionally, turtle hold significant meaning in various ceremonies and rituals across Indonesia. As practiced by some Tridarma followers at Klenteng Kwan Sing Bio (KSB) in Tuban, East Java, they perform the Ciswak or Fung Shen Ritual, by releasing turtles which are blessed with prayers and mantras to dispel misfortune in life. The ritual believed to bring good luck and blessings (Safuwani, 2016). This practice reflects the deep respect and reverence for turtles and their significance in local belief systems.

4 Integrating Turtle Philosophy into Tourism

The symbolism of the turtle in Nusantara philosophy provides a unique lens through which local wisdom can be woven into modern tourism practices.

4.1 Local-Based Tourism

Local-based tourism emphasizes the importance of engaging with the local community and culture. Cultural traditions, as part of ancestral heritage, contain local wisdom that can be utilized to empower communities, promote peace, and enhance welfare. Tourism rooted in local wisdom encourages ethical and moral values like cooperation, tolerance, nature conservation, and cultural appreciation by protecting, transmitting, and transforming cultural practices. Local values are significant to residents, representing specific rules or principles upheld by their communities. Local wisdom is distinct, developed, and shaped according to the community's particular conditions, incorporating the knowledge, insights, norms, and values that are creatively and dynamically adopted by the community (Magfirah & Muhaimin, 2023, pp. 26-28).

By integrating the turtle philosophy, tourism initiatives can be designed to foster deeper connections with local traditions and environments. This approach not only benefits the local economy but also promotes cultural preservation and environmental stewardship. As seen in events like the Paloh Coastal Festival, community involvement in activities such as turtle conservation creates a sense of ownership and pride among locals (WWF Indonesia, 2023).

Turtles hold significant cultural value in many Indonesian communities, symbolizing endurance and wisdom. Incorporating turtle symbolism into local tourism can include activities such as storytelling sessions, traditional dance performances, and art exhibitions that highlight these cultural narratives. For example, the Rutun Penyu batik motif in Kalimantan represents simplicity and humility, values that can be showcased through cultural tours and craft workshops, providing tourists with a rich, immersive experience (Smith, 2009, pp. 89-104).

Educational programs focusing on turtle conservation and local wisdom can be integrated into tourism packages (Tisdell & Wilson, 2005). Visitors can participate in guided tours led by local experts who share insights into the life cycles of turtles, their habitats, and the traditional knowledge associated with them. Such initiatives not only educate tourists but also empower local communities to become ambassadors of their cultural and natural heritage, ensuring the sustainability of these practices (Weaver, 2006).

Furthermore, Eco-tours focusing on the natural habitats of turtles provide tourists with a unique chance to connect with both nature and local cultures required. These tours might include activities such as turtle-watching, habitat restoration projects, and beach cleanups, similar to those held during the Paloh Coastal Festival. Promoted as sustainable travel options, these tours contribute to environmental preservation and support local communities (WWF Indonesia, 2023).

4.2 Slow Tourism

Slow tourism promotes a deeper, more meaningful travel experience, emphasizing quality over quantity. By integrating the turtle philosophy, slow tourism initiatives can encourage travelers to adopt a pace that allows for reflection and a genuine connection with their surroundings. The turtle's attributes of perseverance and longevity align perfectly with the principles of slow tourism, promoting a travel model that values immersion over rapid consumption (Watson, 2019).

Turtle symbolism can be used to promote mindful travel practices that encourage tourists to take their time exploring destinations. Activities such as guided meditation sessions on the beach, yoga retreats, and nature walks can help travellers connect with the environment and themselves. Slow tourism experiences that emphasize relaxation and contemplation can lead to a more fulfilling and rejuvenating travel experience (Inkson & Minnaert, 2018).

Accommodations that embody the principles of slow tourism can integrate turtle philosophy by offering eco-friendly lodgings that blend seamlessly with the natural environment. Resorts and guesthouses can provide educational materials on turtle conservation and organize activities that allow guests to participate in local environmental efforts. This approach not only enhances the guest experience but also reinforces the importance of sustainability in tourism (WWF Indonesia, 2023).

Slow tourism provides the perfect platform for cultural immersion, allowing travelers to spend extended periods in a destination and engage with local traditions. By incorporating turtle-related activities, such as participating in traditional ceremonies or learning about local folklore, tourists can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of turtles. This immersive experience fosters a greater appreciation for the destination and its cultural heritage (Watson, 2019).

Integrating the philosophy of turtles into tourism not only enriches the travel experience but also supports cultural and environmental sustainability, offering a model for responsible and meaningful tourism.

5 Case Studies

The case studies and examples discussed in this section illustrate how turtle symbolism can be seamlessly incorporated into different facets of the tourism sector. By embracing the turtle's philosophical meanings, tourism initiatives can provide experiences that are both culturally enriching and environmentally sustainable, appealing to both tourists and local communities. These initiatives not only boost the authenticity and attractiveness of tourism offerings but also support the preservation of cultural and natural heritage in the Nusantara region.

5.1 Paloh Coastal Festival (Festival Pesisir Paloh)

The Paloh Coastal Festival (FESPA) 2024 was held from June 27 to July 1 in Temanjuk Village, Sambas Regency, West Kalimantan, promoting responsible tourism and environmental conservation. Paloh Beach, a natural tourist destination with 63 km of coastline, is known as "Paradise at the End of Borneo" and serves as a major nesting habitat for green and hawksbill turtles. Since 2009, WWF Indonesia has been involved in turtle conservation efforts at this site, reporting over 2,000 green turtle nests annually. Activities at this year's festival included beach cleanups, turtle hatchling releases, night beach monitoring, and educational programs, all aimed at fostering environmental awareness and protection.

Cultural activities such as traditional music, dance, and crafts celebrated turtle symbolism, highlighting their significance in local wisdom tourism. Turtles, deeply embedded in West Kalimantan's traditions and folklore, symbolize longevity, resilience, and protection. The community's batik motif, Rutun Penyu, reflects these cultural values, with the turtle representing simplicity and humility. This annual event not only attracts tourists but also emphasizes the importance of environmental conservation and the preservation of cultural heritage.

5.2. Sanur Village Festival (SVF)

The Mertasari Beach Festival 2024, held from October 16-20, 2024, at Mertasari Beach in Sanur, Denpasar, is a vibrant celebration showcasing Balinese culture and environmental consciousness. This event features

an array of activities, including traditional Balinese dances, music, and art performances, offering a glimpse into the island's rich cultural heritage. Additionally, the festival includes a food festival that highlights local delicacies, providing attendees with a taste of Bali's culinary delights. The festival also underscores environmental stewardship through activities such as beach cleanups and turtle hatchling releases, emphasizing the community's dedication to ecological preservation.

A diverse range of activities further enriches the festival experience. Photo contests and exhibitions celebrate the natural beauty of Sanur and its surroundings, while the kite exhibition presents various kite designs and flying competitions that add colour to the skies. Children can enjoy a dedicated kids' ground with activities and games tailored for them, and creative displays like body painting and ice carving showcase artistic talents. Guided by the Balinese philosophy of Tri Hita Karana, which promotes harmony between humans, nature, and the divine, the Mertasari Beach Festival not only entertains but also educates and inspires a commitment to cultural and environmental sustainability.

Nusantara region can offer a unique and enriching travel experience that is both culturally and environmentally sustainable by integrating the symbolism of the turtle into tourism strategies. This approach not only preserves the cultural identity of local communities but also promotes responsible and mindful tourism practices that align with global movements towards eco-tourism and responsible travel.

6 Conclusion

The research presented in this paper illuminates the profound symbolism of the turtle in Nusantara philosophy and its potential applications in the tourism industry. By examining the turtle's rich tapestry of meanings, the study highlights how these cultural symbols can inform and enhance modern tourism practices. The turtle's symbolism offers a unique framework for promoting slow and mindful travel, aligning with the principles of local wisdom-based tourism. This approach encourages tourists to engage more deeply with local cultures and environments, fostering a travel experience that is both enriching and respectful. By integrating the turtle's symbolic meanings into tourism strategies, as seen in events like the Paloh Coastal Festival (FESPA) and the Sanur Village Festival (SVF), destinations can enhance cultural authenticity and sustainability.

Tourism operators and policymakers can leverage the turtle's symbolism to develop initiatives that promote cultural heritage and environmental stewardship. This includes creating community-based eco-tours, hosting cultural festivals like FESPA and SVF, and incorporating symbolic storytelling into tourism experiences. Such practices not only enrich the tourist experience but also support the preservation of cultural and natural resources.

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