

# The Semiotics of Banyan Trees – A Study in Denpasar, Bali

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# THE SEMIOTICS OF BANYAN TREES SPACES – A STUDY IN DENPASAR, BALI

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## ABSTRACT

*The concept of Banyan space (spaces under Banyan tree) possesses both secular and ritual values. Secular values are related to the uses of that space for socio-economic activities, such as trading and meeting with friends. Ritual values are related to ritual activities that take place around a Banyan tree as a show of belief in the tree's tenget (sacred) values. Secular and ritual values create the concept of space on Banyan tree, formed based on the elements of space and the conception of the use of these spaces. A system of signs (signifier and signified) mark the values or meanings of sekala and niskala space. This research aims to find out the elements that create the sekala and niskala space by analyzing the system of space signifier and signified. Sekala space is tangible or visible space. Sekala is able to be perceived by five senses. Niskala space is intangible or invisible space. But, it exists and Balinese Hindus believe in its truth. The focus of this research is the system of activities in cases selected by purposive sampling. This research uses qualitative naturalistic method and approach. The results of this research are (1) there are elements (signifier and signified) that create the sekala and niskala space and (2) normative and scientific concepts of Banyan trees as the background for the creation of the sekala and niskala spaces on Banyan trees.*

**Keywords:** *the sekala space, the niskala space, secular and ritual values, space signifier and signified*

## A. INTRODUCTION

Space, especially public space in Denpasar (case study), is used for economic and social activities. For instance, space for trade and social interaction. These activities occur in public spaces that are easily accessible to anyone, which also serve as a place to accommodate both individual and group activities (Hakim, 2003). Activities in the public space are influenced by behavior settings, a stable combination of activities, places and characteristics of the place and have physical, administrative and symbolic boundaries (Adhitama, 2013). Take the use of space under and around the Banyan tree that grows in public areas as an example. Such use of space is caused by its strategic values (its comfort and recognizability) as meeting spaces. Sellers use these strategic values to promote and sell their goods meanwhile, the youth and the locals to socialize, to play, or to talk about something trivial. In addition to that, people also use Banyan space for a ritual space. It is common to see the Balinese Hindu people who live near a Banyan tree give offerings, both regularly and incidentally. In addition, there are rules that regulate the use of space under the Banyan tree, especially of space seen as the "main" space on the Banyan tree.

Strategic values of the space around Banyan trees in Denpasar create spaces with various interests. According to Lefebvre (1991) space is created based on three conceptions: (1) spatial practices, (2) representations of space,

(3) representational space. Real activity in the use of space on the Banyan tree, the conception of space on the Banyan as a space with strategic value, and an illustration of the physical existence of spaces around a Banyan tree are the symbol of that conception. Rapoport (1982) states that space consists of three elements: (1) fixed elements, (2) semi-fixed elements, and (3) non-fixed elements. There are several elements used to identify strategic (secular) and ritual values of a Banyan tree, for instances, *saput poleng* (cloth with chessboard motifs), *pelinggih* (a place to worship the gods), and *tembok penyengker*, a wall separating the ritual and secular space on a Banyan tree. *Warung* (small shops) and chair are examples of semi-fixed elements. Non-fixed elements include space users, namely the local people, street vendors, motorbikes, and cars that do not routinely use these spaces.

The ritual context of the use of space around a Banyan tree is related to the *tenget* (sacred) value of the tree. The *tenget* (sacred) value affects the system of activities carried out by the people living around the Banyan and the community that uses the space (Wijaya, 2017). Sellers (the Balinese Hindu ones) who sell their goods there usually perform a ritual in spaces that they believe to have *niskala* power, such as *pelinggih* or *pelangkiran* on the Banyan tree, a crossroads near the place where the Banyan tree grows, or space near the bridge. Their actions help the community to maintain the cleanliness of the space and to avoid doing something "taboo." As for space users (non-Balinese Hindu), they follow the normative rules. Wijaya also added that there are elements that mark the *tenget* (sacred) spaces as interpretations of the *niskala* spaces of Banyan trees, such as *saput poleng* (cloth with chessboard pattern), *pelinggih*, *pelangkiran*, and *tembok penyengker* (Wijaya, 2009). *Tembok penyengker*, in particular, separates these elements from the space used for secular activities (Wijaya, 2009). This is in line with Eliade's

(1957) about sacred space and profane space. According to Eliade, sacred space is characterized by hierophany in the form of signifiers and rules in the use of the space. The concept of *tenget* (sacred) value as an interpretation of the use of space around a Banyan tree can provide positive space vibration through maintenance of the Banyan space, namely rituals and ethical behavior.

In addition to the *tenget* (sacred) value, a Banyan tree also has thermal value as the tree is able to provide comfort and shade to the users of the space. Wijaya (2009) states that Banyan tree is a type of forest tree with a large, shady canopy, which enables the tree to protect the spaces below it from direct sunlight. It is for this reason that the space around a Banyan tree becomes a magnet for the production of economic and social spaces. Its comfort triggers the production of space for various activities and functions, such as trading activities, social interaction, playground, a base for ojek (motorbike taxis) or *pedagang bermobil* (sellers who use car or mini truck to sell their goods), and other activities. The relation between the activity system, the natural setting of space, and the Banyan anatomy form the elements of space as signifiers and signified as well as mental functions of space.

Belief in the existence of Banyan trees is contained in *tri hita karana*, the concept of harmony between humans and God, humans with each other, and humans with environment (Peters & Wardana, 2013). Human relations with the environment (the Banyan tree) are characterized by ritual elements on the tree as well as ritual activities carried out by the local community and users of the Banyan space. It is a way to respect the *tenget* (sacred) values of the tree and also to maintain the balance between the Banyan tree and the surrounding space. The concept of "balance" on the Banyan tree is characterized by *saput poleng* that wraps the tree trunk (Rupawan, 2008). Respect for the *tenget* value is based on the concept of the original belief of the Nusantara that the universe is inhabited

by spirits and spirits, this concept of belief bring up attitudes and behaviors and symbolic (Suantika, 2007). If that concept is connected to the anatomy concept of the Banyan tree, in which the tree is capable of producing thermal aura in the surrounding areas, the result will be the *tenget* concept, which acts as a control to maintain the Banyan thermal aura through the ritual elements on the tree. The ritual elements are markers of the *niskala* space as the Banyan core spaces, which provide thermal vibration for the *sekala* (secular) space. *Saput Poleng* elements and ritual activities in Banyan trees is a concept of local wisdom in protecting the environment (Banyan tree). Like Wibowo's statement that environmental problems have a very close relationship with local wisdom (Wibowo, Wasino, & Setyowati, 2012).

The *sekala* and *niskala* spaces in a Banyan space are the result of the belief on the *tenget* concept of a Banyan tree as well as the thermal concept of the Banyan space. Signs of the value and the nature of space can be divided into two: signifier (the physical existence) and signified (the mental concept) which are often referred to as the semiotics of space (Saussure, 2013). The *sekala* and *niskala* spaces of a Banyan tree are characterized by the physical existence and the meaning behind that existence. The *sekala* space is interpreted as a space for economic and social activities, while the *niskala* space is a space for rituals.

The aim of this research is to examine the elements that mark the *sekala* and *niskala* spaces in the context of the signifier and signified of space as well as the system of connection between the two spaces. This research used interpretive, qualitative, naturalistic methods. This method is based on empirical studies which include empiric sensual (the five senses), empiric emic (public truth), empiric ethic (idealization of reality), empiric logic (thought), and transcendental (belief or related to divinity). The results of the research are (1) there are elements forming the *sekala* and *niskala* spaces as the signifier and

signified behind these elements; and (2) the normative and scientific concepts of Banyan trees as the background for the formation of *sekala* and *niskala* spaces of Banyan trees.

## **B. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **1. Research Paradigm**

This research used qualitative naturalistic paradigm. The qualitative naturalistic paradigm views the source of truth as coming from *empiric* sensual (the five senses), *empiric* logic (thought), *empiric* ethic (idealization of reality), *empiric* emic (public truth), and transcendental (belief or related to divinity) (Muhadjir, 2000). This research involved: (1) observation of the phenomena in each case, specifically the setting of space as well as activities (which are still natural without theoretical interference) using the Banyan space, (2) understanding each activity and spatial use through positive and normative knowledge of Banyan space, (3) formulating every phenomenon that occurs in Banyan space in the form of tentative themes, (4) validating these tentative themes with information from space users (sellers and the local people), and (5) drawing a fundamental conclusion from the phenomena that occur in the Banyan space i.e. the *sekala* and *niskala* space.

### **2. Steps of Research**

- a. Conducting a participant observation, in which the researcher took a position as a space user (a traveler) and observed every activity as well as the use of space in the Banyan tree.
- b. Conducting unstructured interviews by taking a position as part of the setting of the space in order to find natural and impartial information.
- c. Finding units of information from the observed phenomena, formulating (inducing) tentative themes, and testing the level of saturation through unstructured interviews.
- d. Connecting the findings through local concepts and space in architecture as well as the system of space signifier and signified in architecture.

e. Drawing interpretative conclusions.

### C. DISCUSSION

#### 1. Elements of Signifier and Signified of the *Sekala* Space

Banyan tree's natural characteristics, such as its large anatomical structure, its wide and shadowy canopy, and its capability to produce oxygen, create many communal spaces with various functions (economic and social activities). Economic activities carried out under a Banyan tree include buying and selling by sellers who have settled there for years. These activities begin because local people use the space under the Banyan tree as a place to gather. The space under the Banyan tree then develops from a place to gather with friends to a place with strategic values. This causes the creation of new spaces or

developments of spaces that already exist there from the start. These spaces include vendors who sell their goods using vehicles (vehicles with two wheels or four wheels), which are not permanent.

This creation of space consequently gives people more spaces to carry out social activities. As stated by Wijaya that the space around the Banyan tree is used as a space for social interaction (Wijaya, 2018). Those who live around the Banyan tree, as well as those who live in other areas, often use these spaces to carry out recreational activities in the afternoon or evening. For instances, young people or adults chatting and discussing something trivial, mothers accompanying their children to play, children making and flying kites during windy weather, or people buying and enjoying food from the vendors.

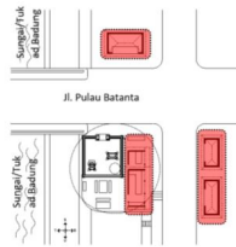


Figure 1. Setting of Signifier of Space for Economic Activities in Case 1 (Source: Author, 2019)



Figure 2. Setting of Signifier of Space for Economic Activities in Case 2 (Source: Author, 2019)

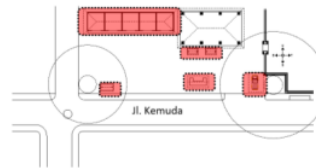


Figure 3. Setting of Signifier of Space for Economic Activities in Case 3 (Source: Author, 2019)



Figure 4. Setting of Signifier of Space for Social Activities in Case 1 (Source: Author, 2019)



Figure 5. Setting of Signifier of Space for Social Activities in Case 2 (Source: Author, 2019)

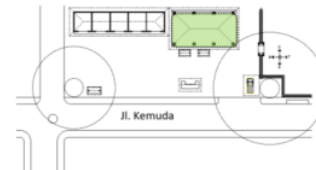


Figure 6. Setting of Signifier of Space for Socio-economic Activities in Case 3 (Source: Author, 2019)

These spaces accommodate secular activities, which include activities carried out regularly and freedom regarding the use of the space (the *sekala* space). The

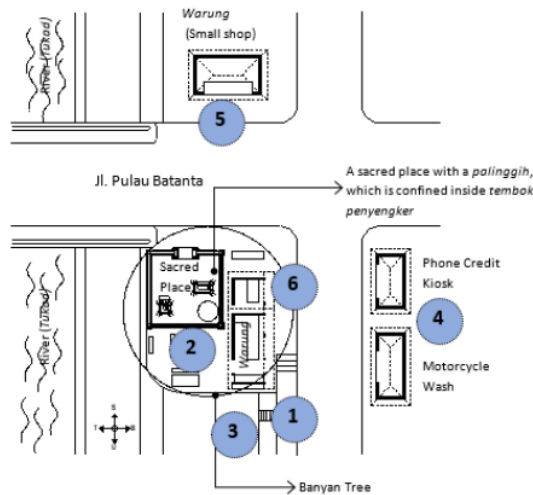
*sekala* space, in this case, refers to a space used for activities without strict regulation, most likely recreational activities. Additionally, the *sekala* space



does not have a category of space users. In other words, the *sekala* space is related to "worldly" activities. Based on the nature of its activities, the manifestation of the *sekala* space is classified into two aspects: economic and social. The manifestation of the *sekala* space is (1) a zone consists of warung (small shop) under or around a Banyan tree; (2) a zone consists of street vendors who routinely sell their goods around the tree; and (3) parking lot for vehicles of the buyers and travelers. The *warung* (small shops) around the Banyan tree are semi-permanent or semi-fixed, made of simple wooden and bamboo construction. The dining place is made of simple materials as well (some even use residual material). As for street vendors, including those who use vehicles and cart to display their goods, and the *lesehan* vendors (vendors who sell food or other goods while sitting on the floor or the mat), they use the remaining empty spaces. In contrast to the warung (small shop), street vendors do not have a clear space since they are not permanent or non-fixed. Additionally, it is common to find many sellers with different types of goods in one street vendors' zone. The third realization of the *sekala* space is a parking lot that uses empty spaces to

park vehicles. The nature of parking space is not fixed to only one zone. It can change depending on the numbers of buyers and travelers in that space.

The *sekala* space is also used for social activities by utilizing the existing spaces under the Banyan tree, such as the river banks, sidewalks, and the *warung* (small shop) zone. For instance, people can use the existing spaces (the fixed elements) to sit and gather while having a chat with their friends or family. In the first case, the travelers use the sidewalk or river embankment as a place to sit while enjoying snacks sold by the nearby *warung* (small shop). Social activities also occur in spaces provided by the warung (small shop) owners, in which the travelers interact while enjoying food and drinks sold in the *warung* (small shop) or young people, who come by motorcycles, meet their friends. These young people also like to use empty space to hang out. Normally this meeting takes place at noon or late afternoon. Other existing space, such as the river embankment, is often used by children and young people as a playground, especially during the "kite season" due to its wide space.

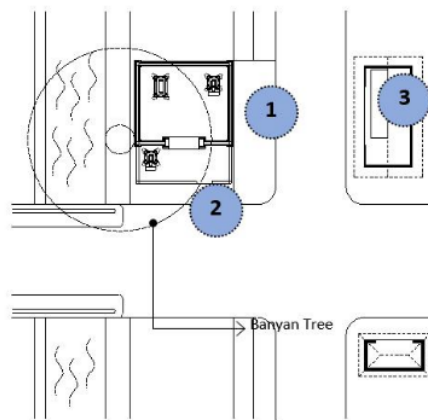


**Explanation:**

1. Setting of space where young people meet and hang out
2. Setting of space of people who buy food in the *warung* (small shop)
3. Setting of space for flying kites
4. Setting of space for phone credit kiosk
5. Setting of space for warung (small shop) that sells snacks and a base for *ojek* (motorbike taxi) drivers.
6. Setting of space for *warung* makanan (small shop that sells food)



Figure 7. Setting of Space Utilization (Signifier and Signified) around the Banyan Tree in Case 1  
Source: Author, 2019



**Explanation:**

1. Setting of space where young people meet and hang out
2. Setting of space for selling activity
3. Setting of *warung makan* (small shop that sells food)



Figure 8. Setting of Space Utilization (Signifier and Signified) around the Banyan Tree in Case 2  
Source: Author, 2019

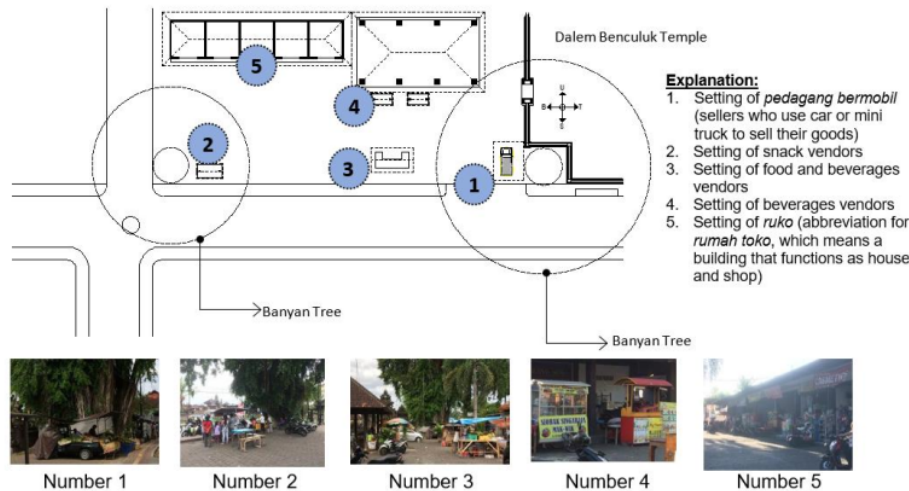


Figure 9. Setting of Space Utilization (Signifier and Signified) around the Banyan Tree in Case 3  
Source: Author, 2019

The elements forming the *sekala* space around the Banyan tree are:

- a) Fixed elements: the existing elements under or around the Banyan tree used by the local people to carry out social and economic activities. For examples, (1) the sidewalk by the river embankment for a place to hang out, chat, or play (Figure 7 No.1); (2) the empty space by the roadside for a parking lot, *warung* (small shop), or simply a base for the street vendors (those who use cart or motor vehicles) where they can display their goods (Figure 8 No. 2).
- b) Semi-fixed elements: the elements around the Banyan tree which are not permanent, considering their physical condition. However, the way they use the space is permanent, similar to the food and beverage *warung* (small shop) that take form of vernacular buildings, which commonly use functional wooden materials for a place of trade (Figure 7 No. 4, 5, 6, and Figure 8 No. 3).
- c) Non-fixed elements: consist of (1) carts of the street vendors who stay under the Banyan tree; (2) motor vehicles used to display the goods; (3) seasonal fruit sellers who put the

fruits they sold around the Banyan tree; (4) the travelers' vehicles parked under the tree (Figure 8 No. 2; and Figure 9 No. 1, 2, 3, 4).

Those spaces are the signifiers of space on the Banyan tree, signifying the tree as a public space for economic and social activities. Space used for these activities is not influenced by rules, which, normatively, constitute interpretations of the *sekala* space on the Banyan tree. Then, the examples mentioned previously and the natural characteristics of a Banyan tree, the creation of those spaces is influenced by the thermal conditions produced by the tree. Comfortable, cool, and easily recognized space perceptions (cognitive mapping) become the underlying factor for the creation of those spaces (both economic and social). In addition, belief in *tenget* (*niskala*) values of a Banyan tree help the sellers to sell more of their goods through ritual governance on the place.

## 2. Elements of Signifier and Signified of the *Niskala* Space

The Banyan space, with its thermal value and cognitive mapping, creates the



concept of space as a place for economic and social activities. Furthermore, in the context of the local culture, the tree's anatomical characteristics create a perception that the Banyan tree has ritual (*tenget*) values. Banyan tree's *tenget* value is a normative concept in controlling or maintaining Banyan ecosystems from acts of damage. The belief in the *tenget* value manifests in the elements that signify the *niskala* space on the Banyan tree.

Figures 13 and Figure 14 show that *pelinggih*, *saput poleng*, and *tembok*

*penyengker* mark the *niskala* space on the Banyan tree. On the other hand, figure 15 shows that *pelangkiran* and *kain poleng* on the Banyan trunk mark the *niskala* space. As signifiers, those attributes affect the existence of Banyan anatomy and Banyan space (control of space use and damage to the Banyan). The signifiers of the *niskala* space on the Banyan include *saput poleng* (chessboard patterned cloth) and *canang* (offerings) on the Banyan, which signifies the existence of *tenget* space and protection of the tree itself.

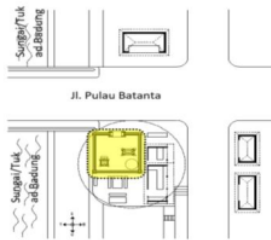


Figure 10. Setting of Signifier of Space for Rituals in Case 1  
(Source: Author, 2019)



Figure 11. Setting of Signifier of Space for Rituals in Case 2  
(Source: Author, 2019)

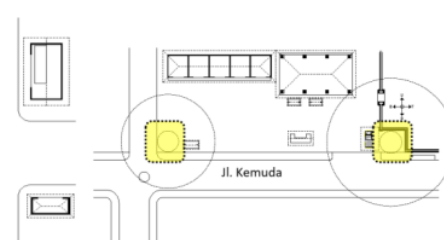


Figure 12. Setting of Signifier of Space for Rituals in Case 3  
(Source: Author, 2019)

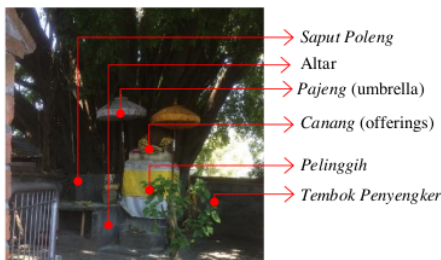


Figure 13. Elements of Signifier of Ritual Space in Case 1  
(Source: Author, 2019)

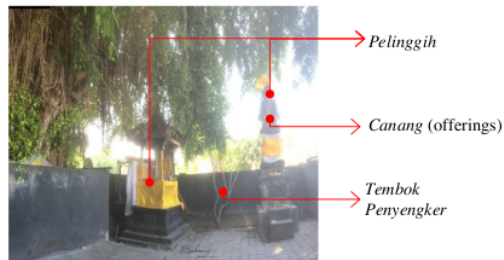


Figure 14. Elements of Signifier of Ritual Space in Case 2  
(Source: Author, 2019)

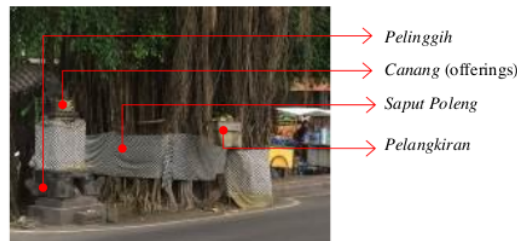


Figure 15. Elements of Signifier of Ritual Space in Case 3  
(Source: Author, 2019)

Elements of the *niskala* space in the Banyan tree are:

- a) Fixed element: (1) *pelinggih* (a place to worship the gods), a space for regular and incidental ritual activities; (2) *pelangkiran* is a space for worship installed on the tree trunk, with simple design and shape; (3) *saput poleng* as a general attribute wrapped around the Banyan trunk; and (4) *tembok penyengker* as a border that separates the inner space (the *niskala*) from the outer space (the *sekala*). These signifiers constitute a hierophany of the *niskala* space (*tenget*), which is characterized by elements for ritual activities as well as rules for entering these spaces.
- b) Semi-fixed elements: (1) umbrellas or *tedung* as attributes of space installed on the Banyan tree during ceremonial activities; and (2) yellow and white *wastra* at the *pelinggih* which signify periodic ritual activities.
- c) Non-fixed element: *banten* (offerings) placed on the Banyan tree or the *pelinggih* as a form of respect for the tree's *tenget* values.

These elements are the signifiers of the *niskala* space, signifying the ritual space that is bound by local rules in its use. In other words, the *niskala* space in the Banyan tree means a space used for ritual (non-secular) activities.

### 3. Synthesis: Signifiers and Signified of the *Sekala* and *Niskala* Space

Secular activities, specifically economic and social activities, are the signifiers of the *sekala* space in the Banyan tree. The elements forming these spaces consist of fixed, semi-fixed, and non-fixed element as well as activity system which are not

bound by local rules, in the sense that space is public except for semi-fixed elements as the communal space of the sellers. Secular and public meaning of these spaces is the signified of the *sekala* space, a space that, considering its representation of space and representational space, has strategic values and existence of space (economic and social) which are still maintained to this day.

In addition to the *sekala* space, there are the signifiers of the *niskala* space in the form of fixed, semi-fixed, and non-fixed elements such as *pelinggih* and *pelangkiran*, *saput poleng*, *tembok penyengker*, and *banten*. Furthermore, there are rules in the use of the *niskala* space. For instance, women or men who experience *cuntaka* (the state of being "not sacred") cannot enter the space. There is also another rule that state those who enter should at least use traditional Balinese belts (*senteng*). These elements are representations of space (signified) of the *niskala* space (*tenget* value) or hierophany of the *niskala* space bound by local rules. Additionally, the representational space as a *tenget* space is still maintained until now.

Thus, the system of signifiers and signified in Banyan space is an interpretation of a system of activities, both secular and ritual. Secular activities are manifested as *sekala* space, while ritual activities are manifested as *niskala* space. The meaning of the two spaces is represented as the core (the *niskala* space) and the periphery (the *sekala* space), which influence each other in the context of local cultural values and natural values.

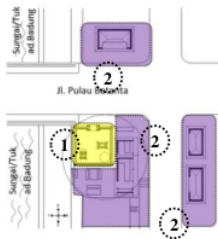


Figure 16. Setting of Signifier of the *Niskala Space* (no.1) and the *Sekala Space* (no.2) Case 1 (Source: Author, 2019)

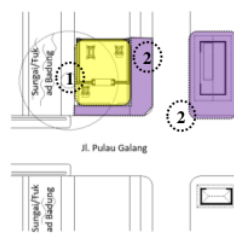


Figure 17. Setting of Signifier of the *Niskala Space* (no.1) and the *Sekala Space* (no.2) Case 2 (Source: Author, 2019)

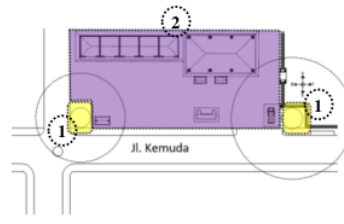


Figure 18. Setting of Signifier of the *Niskala Space* (no.1) and the *Sekala Space* (no.2) Case 3 (Source: Author, 2019)

#### D. CONCLUSION

Spatial elements related to the socio-economic and ritual aspects namely fixed, semi-fixed and non-fixed elements are the signifiers of *sekala* and *niskala* space. The elements related to the socio-economic aspects are interpreted as *sekala* space that is not bound by the rules in its use. On the contrary, the ritual aspect is bound by the local rules regarding its use of the space. Furthermore, the *niskala* space is the core of the *sekala* space since the *niskala* space, as a system, maintains the existence of the Banyan tree and its capability to produce thermal spaces under and around it. This affects the strategic value of the Banyan space as a socio-economic space. Additionally, the signifier and signified of space on Banyan tree are a system of (1) spatial practices: socio-economic and ritual spaces; (2) meaning of space (representations of space): elements of the space; and (3) symbols of space (representational space): elements of the space. The practice, meaning, and symbols of these spaces form a unity in the spatial system of the Banyan tree, which is influenced by its anatomical aspects of the Banyan tree and the belief in its tenget value.

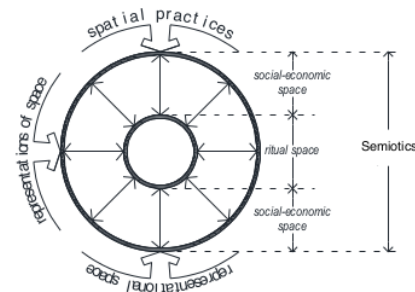


Figure 19. Conception of Semiotics of Banyan Trees Spaces in Denpasar (Source: Author, 2019)

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#### Glossary:

**Banten:** Banten is an offering to gods, but contains more items such as fruits, traditional/ceremonial snacks, and so on.

**Banyan tree:** Banyan tree is considered as a sacred tree by Balinese Hindus due to the spiritual energy it possessed.

**Canang:** Offerings to the gods usually consist of colorful and fragrant ceremonial flowers, betel nut, slices of bananas, slices of sugar cane, and so on. These items are tucked in a woven basket made of young coconut leaf.

**Cuntaka:** the state of being “not sacred.” When someone is going through *cuntaka*, she/he is prohibited from entering the sacred area. *Cuntaka* is caused by death, menstruation (for women), and so on.

**Niskala:** Intangible, invisible. But, it exists and Balinese Hindus believe in its truth.

**Pelangkiran:** *Pelangkiran* is a place to worship the gods, but smaller and simpler. It is usually made of wood.

**Pelinggih:** Pelinggih is a place to worship the gods and usually made of stone.

**Saput/kain poleng:** *Saput/kain poleng* refers to black and white squared cloth, the motifs resembling a chessboard pattern. Its colors represents a unity consist of two opposing forces (for examples: positive and negative, day and night, and so on) that build the world.

**Sekala:** Tangible, visible. *Sekala* is able to be perceived by five senses.

**Tembok penyengker:** Walls usually made of stone, brick, or concrete to separate sacred area from profane area.

**Tenget:** Sacred, magical

**Wastra:** *Wastra* is considered to be some kind of “clothes” for the pelinggih. It is usually wrapped around the pelinggih during religious ceremonies.



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PAGE 1

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PAGE 2

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PAGE 3

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PAGE 4

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PAGE 5

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PAGE 6

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PAGE 7

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PAGE 8

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PAGE 9

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PAGE 10

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PAGE 11

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