

# Bali: Living in Two Worlds

Review >  
Southeast Asia

How enduring can paradise be? Although it was published in 2001, the socio-cultural problems discussed in *Bali: Living in Two Worlds*, seem all the more poignant and burdened with implications since the devastating bombing in Kuta-Legian on 12 October 2002. The immediate impact of the attack far surpasses these problems, but this (still) timely compilation of essays, compositions, poetry, and photographs nonetheless offers a very contemporary 'critical self-portrait in order to bring up questions about present-day and future cultural, social and ecological developments of Bali' (p.10). The 'two worlds' of the title refers, on this level, to the negotiating point between Bali's often romanticized past and its possible futures.

By Laura Noszlopy

This book can best be appreciated as a response to the issues raised in two earlier publications: Michel Picard's *Bali: Cultural tourism and touristic culture* (1996) and Adrian Vickers' *Bali: A paradise created* (1990). Most of the essays in the new book simultaneously celebrate and commiserate the results of that creation and seek to further challenge the residue of 'paradise' mythology while proffering diverse views on Bali's possible futures. With its multiple voices, (there are fourteen contributors, including several of Bali's most prominent intellectuals and social commentators), there emerges a selective, but interdisciplinary, account of the debates and discourses that are

of current concern on the island and which are relevant to both academics and the more general reader. The contributions and, in particular, Rama Surya's photographs, portray an exceptionally 'traditional', though thoroughly 'globalized' society, undergoing rapid transformation; this is proposed as the meeting or collision of 'two worlds'. The articles display a tough realism borne of intimate knowledge combined with academic distance, thus acknowledging the bittersweet contradictions that are so apparent and disturbing in contemporary Bali. The main premise that runs throughout the collection is that Bali is no longer the paradise it was once perceived and represented to be and that various forces, especially tourism development, are threatening

the Balinese quality of life. All maintain, in their own ways, that there is 'a shocking discrepancy between the exotic Bali image of glossy tourist brochures and a more than unpleasant reality of the present-day life in Bali' (p.10).

This 'unpleasant reality' is highlighted in a series of essays on little-discussed, and occasionally taboo, topics such as prostitution and drug abuse (Sugi B. Lanus) and the widespread misappropriation of land for 'development' (Putu Suasta). Degung Santikarma discusses the way that an inflated and obscured sense of 'Balinese culture' can be used as an excuse for xenophobic violence and as 'a system of control and exclusion' (p.35). IGR Panji Tisna comments upon the increasing havoc wrought by environmental pollution and the tourist industry, while I Ketut Sumarta discusses the Balinese language as a central, but seriously threatened, aspect of local culture. I Gde Pitana provides an incisive analysis of the increasing tensions between competing factions of the PHDI, the Indonesian Hindu Council (Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia), while Cok Sawitri discusses changing gender roles in the performing arts, to mention but a few. The anthology also includes poems by Cok Sawitri, Oka Rusmini, and Alit S. Rini, which offer alternative perspectives on being 'a woman of Bali' (p.139).

Rama Surya's photographs complement the text and portray a similarly ambivalent view of urban Balinese adaptations to Indonesian, transnational, and cosmopolitan modernity. In particular, the portrait of a young Balinese couple in full garb, 'The dream of



the golden age. Balinese couple' (p.71), both 'traditional' (*pakaian adat*) and global fashion MTV-style (sunglasses and nose-stud) effectively captures that tension and just avoids the dichotomizing that is typical of overt 'tradition' versus 'modernity' imagery. Similarly, Coca-Cola and holy water are juxtaposed in what appears to be a fairly functional and comfortable coupling, despite the implicit critique of consumerism and globalization in what, perhaps, 'should be' a more 'spiritual' place (see photo). For me, one of the most powerful images is of the provincial capital's busiest crossroad junction, on the way to Kuta, where a signpost, funded by the *Bali Post* newspaper and perched between advertisements and Hindu shrines, impotently reads '*Jaga Bali*' ('Protect/guard Bali') as the traffic hurtles past 'Between Coca-Cola, religion and neurology, Denpasar' (pp.92-93).

While the anthology explicitly seeks to challenge the enduring, but stale, stereotype of Bali as paradise, many of the contributions, perhaps understandably, still read like a lament to paradise lost, despite their claim that paradise was never really there to begin with. It is, in the words of Urs Ramseyer, 'an admonishing book' (p.13). This critical rewriting of the tourist mirage is not, however, without precedent. Very little scholarship of the past two decades, at least, has unquestioningly romanticized the state of affairs in Bali. That there are contrasts and

contradictions, tensions, and repercussions, emerging from uneven commercial growth and socio-political change, is little surprise and, to an informed audience, not all that controversial.

The real quality of this book is the diversity of the contributions and, indeed, the editors' achievement in bringing them together in this fresh format. Although, in recent years, Indonesian writers have been more widely published in translation, this book will be of real benefit to international scholars and students, as well as to the lay-reader, because it offers unique perspectives that can only derive from an everyday, personal engagement with the subjects discussed, both as familiar relatives and anthropological 'others'. It is a pity that some minor English translation errors occasionally distract from the otherwise excellent overall quality of the contents and presentation. It might also be appropriate to consider translating and publishing it in Indonesian, thus making it more accessible to local readers. Such comments aside, this particular venture towards 'living in two worlds' has, I think, been a success. <

- Ramseyer, Urs and I Gusti Raka Panji Tisna (eds.), *Bali: Living in Two Worlds*, Basel: Museum der Kulturen (2001), pp.194, ISBN 3-7965-1873-7, ill.

## References

- Picard, M. *Bali: Cultural tourism and touristic culture*, (Translated by Diana Darling), Singapore: Archipelago Press (1996).
- Vickers, A. *Bali: A paradise created*, Hong Kong: Periplus Editions (1990).

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Coke bottle as holy water receptacle. Sanur. (p.68)