

Bali's Last Resort: Writing Ethnography of Balinese Adat

The End of Ethnography?

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Southeast Asia

'Ethnography', writing about the others, has until recently been a genre which is supposed to throw light on anthropological investigations. Ever since its 'post-colonial turn', however, anthropology has become quite different from what went before, as we have now realized that we cannot assume other cultures are absolutely different and detached from those of the anthropologists themselves. As anthropology has been condemned for having exoticized other cultures as commodities for Western consumption, it follows that ethnography, in a conventional sense, is simply impossible. What is meant by the ethnography of Balinese *adat* (custom), however, is not writing about the Balinese traditional way of life, but about how Balinese people interpret their way of life in terms of its historical background.

By Kiyoshi Nakamura

After being in power for many years, President Suharto was finally forced to step down in May 1998. His so-called 'New Order' regime forcibly promoted a programme of development aimed at achieving both economic prosperity and national stability. In the pursuit of realizing these aims, his authoritarian regime too often oppressed local people by ignoring their interests and suppressing their voice, so as to standardize various cultural traditions and bring about arbitrary uniformity in the name of the 'state' and its 'prosperity'. Even though this was done against the local people's will, Suharto's regime was generally permitted to get away with it because of the economic growth, which, it was claimed, was the direct result of his development programme. (The fruits, however, were on the whole enjoyed by his family and cronies). This modernist discourse of development was supplemented with that of traditional values, celebrating family and paternalism. Ideological support for the regime lay in the claim that the interests of the state should precede the rights and interests of the individual citizen, using the metaphor of 'a family', with Suharto as its patriarch and the citizens of Indonesia as its children.

It therefore became very difficult for local societies to justify their desire to resist the 'New Order' regime's development programmes and cultural policies, which aimed for uniformity and standardization at various levels. Under these circumstances, Balinese people responded to the pressures and interventions from the authoritative centre by drawing upon their traditional culture. In Indonesian political discourses, ethnic culture could be preserved as long as it served national interests and developments.

Given the generally accepted assumption that Balinese culture is an amalgam of Hinduism and indigenous customs, we can say that the concepts of tradition have governed the discourse around modern Balinese society within the context of the relation between local societies and the Indonesian state. In Indonesian language, *adat* refers to a somewhat vague, broad concept around tradition and customary practices indigenous to local societies. Incidentally, it seems ironic that an allochthonous word like *adat* has always been used to represent the supposedly autochthonous and traditional cultures of Bali.

Challenges for adat

The requirement to have faith in the only God is stated in the first article of Indonesia's Five National Principles, Pancasila, which the New Order regime exalted as the sole foundation (*asas tunggal*), and which dominated the political discourse. Not only has it been officially sanctioned, it is also imposed on every Indonesian citizen, thus making it obligatory to be a follower of one of the religions approved by the government. Thus, religion is firmly positioned within the state governing apparatus.

Religion in Bali was in a precarious position directly after the Reformasi and Balinese Hindu intellectuals had to strive for official recognition of Balinese Hinduism. In order to convince the Ministry of Religion of the fact that Balinese religion deserved recognition in the new Republic, they had to present the official name of the religion, its holy book, its rituals, and its philosophy to the Ministry. Having established the Hindu organization Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia (The Indonesian Council of Hinduism: PHDI), and using it as their principal agency, Balinese Hindu intellectuals have been making various attempts to 'rationalize' Balinese Hinduism. To take a recent example, the 1991 PHDI congress decided that every Indonesian Hindu should perform a worship called *trisandhya* (a three-times-a-day worship). It should be noted that the very fact that such a decision was made, suggests that this three-times-a-day prayer had rarely (or even never) been carried out before. I myself have never seen the Balinese villagers perform it.

The classification of rituals into five categories, called *panca*



Various books and magazines on Hinduism and Balinese local tradition are sold at a local market place, Gianyar (Bali) on 4 August 2002.

yadnya, seems to be another of the intellectuals' efforts at 'rationalizing' religion. Various authors have inculcated the public with their own version of *panca yadnya*. On the other hand, some rituals are rarely, if ever, mentioned under the rubric of *agama* (religion) as Balinese Hindu intellectuals dismiss certain rituals as *adat*. During my fieldwork, I noticed that there are two distinct types of rituals in villages in the Western Karangasem region. Private rituals that only concern individuals or families include celebrating the anniversaries of family or 'clan' temples and the ceremonies of the life cycle such as marriages, funerals, and other rites of passage. Village or communal rituals comprise the rituals in the village temple (including both temple festivals and agrarian rites) and rites for the purification of the village territory. The private rituals are characterized as more or less pan-Balinese and sanctioned by authorities such as the PDHI, governmental agencies, and leading Balinese intellectuals. The communal or village rituals, by contrast, vary from village to village and are idiosyncratic to each community. If anything, they are part of Balinese traditional culture, or traditional (and heathen) practices, *adat*. Although Balinese intellectuals do acknowledge *adat*, they do not consider tradition to be part of their religion. Consequently, the village rituals are excluded from the Bali-Hindu orthodoxy.

Religious rituals must be conformed to modern religion while other customs and practices are enclosed in *adat*. This has had serious consequences, although it is quite understandable considering the Balinese struggle to obtain the official recognition of their religion. Its official recognition has in effect made Balinese Hinduism more a part of state apparatus than a belief. Whereas the Balinese understood their culture as an integral unity of Hinduism (*agama*) and customary practice (*adat*) and used it as a means to counter the Indonesian state, Bali Hindu religion (*agama*) has been on the government bandwagon against Balinese tradition (*adat*).

Adat was not so compatible with the modern state apparatus as religion was and, under the New Order, local tradition seemed to be in a precarious position. Studies in the 1970s argued that *adat*-based communities had become increasingly dependent on the Indonesian state agencies. Unlike other provinces in Indonesia, Bali had retained its traditional communities alongside administrative units. Though an administrative unit had no official relation with a customary village or with an irrigation society, in practice they were closely related because the customary village obtained financial aid from the organization for village development. This organization was established under the guidance of the Department of Internal Affairs and was headed by the administrative village head. Likewise, it was predicted that a traditional chief would become increasingly dependent on the

administrative chief, and that his function as chief would be attenuated.

Subjected to administrative authorities on a national scale, and excluded from religious affairs by the Balinese Hindu intellectuals, Balinese *adat* seemed to be in an awkward position. However, due to the fact that 'the cultural traditions of Bali [had been] the major asset for the tourist promotion of the island' (Picard 1990: 37-74) since the beginning of the development of tourism in Bali under colonial rule, Balinese culture or tradition could occupy a special position even under the repressive New Order regime. Traditional culture became a commodity that could be offered to the tourism market, which would eventually contribute to the success of the development plan. Rituals dismissed by the authorities as heathen practices are indeed quite often supported by the traditional land tenure system, which is also a part of *adat*: the image of Balinese culture has undergone commoditization to bring revenue to the state. Thanks to Bali's international fame as a tourist resort, Balinese people could attempt to weave a discourse of resistance against authoritative regime and its ideology by appropriating *adat* as a last resort.

The 'appropriation' of adat

There is no such thing as a timeless essence of a culture though there are those who claim to have it: indeed, every ethnic identity tends to draw on the assumption that some such essence exists. The 'appropriation' of traditional culture such as *adat* is neither confined to the Balinese, nor limited to a certain period such as the Suharto or colonial era, but rather, so I believe, ubiquitous and general rule. It should be noted, however, that the particular history of Balinese society made it more prominent there than in other societies in Indonesia. The Dutch Indologists found 'real' Bali in the village communities which, they assumed, retained indigenous pre-Hindu elements, and held Hindu court culture to be a remnant of ancient (pre-Islamic) Javanese culture. Then and now, Balinese society is represented as living in a timeless tradition, which should be commoditized, whether in the interest of tourism or scientific investigation. Despite its marginalization by religion and government institutions, Balinese *adat* as a myth constructed under Dutch colonial rule has continued to flourish even under the pressure of the Indonesian state. Under the ongoing influence of decentralization towards regional autonomy, contemporary Balinese, increasingly acknowledge the great importance that *adat* has for them and appropriate it progressively more.

The proliferation of mass media attention for Balinese culture and *adat*-related issues also reflects this process. Regional media has a greater opportunity to promote local identity, because it bears closely on the needs of the local people. Ever since the closing years of the New Order regime, during which the 'Open Policy' allowed more media freedom, and after its collapse, various local media have emerged all over the Republic. Notably, the newly emerged Balinese magazines and tabloids concentrate on Balinese culture and, in particular, on Balinese Hindu religion and *adat*. The ethnography of *adat* should be written in such a way that it sheds light upon such situations as those that existed under the colonial rule or the New Order regime, and those in the post-New Order era, not in a way that tries to depict an essence of Balinese culture in timelessness. Realist ethnography of conventional anthropology might be destined to die (Clifford 1988), but the description of a particular setting, in which tradition is reconstructed, is still needed. <

References

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