

Bali is a battlefield Or the triumph of the imaginary over actuality

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Abstract

The idea of Balinese culture as a unique, largely timeless, harmonious synthesis of religion, custom and art is remarkably resistant to historical and contemporary evidence to the contrary. Such a hegemonic vision, however imaginary, conveniently underwrites both local politics and tourism, and so national and global capitalism. Against this ideal of Bali-as-Paradise, a critical analysis suggests a quite different metaphor—Bali-as-a-battlefield—in many instances to be more appropriate and accurate. To understand why the Arcadian myth has proven so attractive to both Balinese and foreigners, we need to examine the work done by social imaginaries. Hypostatizing, essentializing, then mythologizing, a largely imaginary monolithic ‘Balinese culture’ delivers a docile population which not only accepts, but enthusiastically embraces, their increasing alienation and their subjection to the political and economic forces of capitalism.

Key words: Balinese culture, social imaginaries, critical analysis, Bali as a battlefield

Abstrak

Ide budaya Bali sebagai sesuatu yang unik, sebagai sesuatu yang abadi, sebagai sintesis harmonis dari agama, adat dan seni ternyata sangat tahan terhadap bukti-bukti sejarah dan kontemporer untuk mengatakan kebalikannya. Visi hegemonik namun imajiner itu terletak baik pada politik lokal maupun pariwisata, serta juga pada kapitalisme nasional dan global. Berlawanan dari gagasan ideal ini, dari “Bali-sebagai-Paradise”, sebuah analisis kritis menunjukkan metafora “Bali-sebagai-medan-perang”, dalam banyak hal, menjadi lebih tepat dan akurat. Untuk memahami mengapa mitos Arcadian ini terbukti begitu menarik untuk Bali dan orang asing, kita perlu memeriksa pekerjaan yang dilakukan

oleh imaginaries sosial. Hipostatisasi, esensialisasi, dan kemudian mitologisasi, sebuah imajinasi monolitik ‘budaya Bali’ memberikan populasi jinak yang tidak hanya menerima, tapi antusias merangkul, meningkatkan keterasingan mereka dan tunduk kepada kekuatan politik dan ekonomi kapitalisme.

Kata Kunci: Budaya Bali, imaginari sosial, analisis kritis, Bali sebagai medan perang

Bali dikenal luas karena keunikan budayanya, kekhasan yang tumbuh dari jiwa agama hindu yang tidak dapat terlepas dari adat, tradisi, dan keseniannya dalam masyarakat yang bercirikan sosial religius... Sejalan dengan bergulirnya sang kala, budaya Bali tidak menolak kemajuan teknologi sepanjang teknologi tersebut menguatkan budaya bali. Oleh karena visi Dinas Kebudayaan Provinsi Bali adalah Pelestarian, Pengembangan, dan Pemberdayaan Kebudayaan Bali, menuju Bali yang maju, aman, damai, dan sejahtera (Opening statement on the Dinas Kebudayaan Provinsi Bali website by its head, I Ketut Suastika SH.).¹

Culture...has always been an idea *post factum*, a notion oriented towards the past (to ‘custom’ and ‘tradition’), descriptive of a state of affairs (and often of a status quo), a nostalgic idea at best (when it mixed the study of exotic societies with regret) and a reactionary ideologue at worst (Fabian 1991: 192).

Somewhere Covarrubias tells a *Just So* story about Bali. After the Gods had relinquished the island to humans, belatedly they realized that it was perfect. To prevent Balinese enjoying flawless paradise, they sent them dogs. Not to be outdone, Westerners subsequently inflicted far more devastating damage by bequeathing Culture to Bali. When politicians, government agencies, the tourist industry and the local and international arts’ crowds vie to outdo one another in trumpeting Bali’s unique culture,² you know that

1 Bali is widely known because of the uniqueness of its culture, its special characteristics which grow out of its Hindu religious spirit which cannot be separated from custom, tradition, and its art in a society which is characterized as social-religious... In accordance with the evolving times, Balinese culture does not reject technological progress provided that the technology mentioned strengthens Balinese culture. So the vision of the Balinese Provincial Culture Service is the Conservation, Development and Empowerment of Balinese Culture heading to a Bali which is progressive, safe, peaceful and prosperous.

2 As the opening quotation shows, so doing confers on culture at once the properties of an abstract noun, an organism, a transcendental agent and a

something has gone badly wrong. As a gift, Culture, together with an array of linked concepts, is a poisoned chalice. Pointing out that, predicated of Bali, culture is an empty signifier is unlikely to change much, because deeply entrenched interests are invested in fostering, preserving and defending the fantasy.

This obsession with culture is inextricable from the state of scholarship on Bali. For so small a place, it is disproportionately awash with professed experts and students. How is this possible given the voluminous literature in Dutch and the difficulties of the different levels of Balinese language, quite apart from *kawi* and, obviously, Indonesian? While a limited knowledge of Balinese might be acceptable for researchers on the government sector where Indonesian is the working language, for the study of daily life and custom, let alone religion and theatre where people are commenting to themselves on their own lives, command of Balinese would seem a *sine qua non*. Yet such expertise is the exception rather than the rule, presumably because mastering Balinese language and literature takes years, indeed decades. Faced with these demands, despite the deep deficiencies, many scholars seem happily to conclude that Indonesian—or sometimes even English—is a quite adequate medium of inquiry. How charmingly neo-colonial that Balinese should have to explain and interpret their own practices to foreigners not only in foreign registers but using alien concepts such as culture, art and meaning.³ As James Clifford noted, to

collective subject, while simultaneously hypostatizing and reifying it.

This article was originally presented as a paper at a panel on *Bali: representations of culture* at the International Bali Studies Conference on *Bali in global Asia: between modernization and heritage formation*, July 2012. The aim was to problematize both culture and its representation, as well as to avoid the simplistic, but to some strangely satisfying, phrase ‘Balinese culture’, which by being made a grammatical subject, like the expression ‘the Balinese’, makes it also the subject of articulation. Once you reify and essentialize Balinese culture, or even just ‘Bali’, it becomes perilously facile to sum up the resulting gallimaufry as paradise or whatever.

- 3 Although Vickers pointed out nearly twenty years ago (1989) that Bali was a nice example of the invention of tradition, the cultural paradise juggernaut rattles merrily on. As it happens, the term culture in Indonesian, *kebudayaan*, is a postcolonial neologism and its usage deeply entwined with power/knowledge (Hobart 2000). In talk of art and theatre, anachronism rules. One of the key figures in branding Bali (notably Ubud) as artistic, the late Cokorda Gedé Agung Sukawati once explained to me that he and other Balinese had no idea what the early tourists were talking about when they demanded art, *seni*. To fill this vacuum, they had to persuade Walter Spies

back their hegemonic claim to expertise, anthropologists had radically to simplify the complexity and diversity of people's social and linguistic practices (1988: 30-31). They did so by creating an imaginary, holistic, totalizable object, 'culture' which, conveniently, was unproblematically encompassable by the trained Western mind but not to 'the native informant'.⁴ This latter then veers between an object to be mined and an authority on particularities to be venerated. For Bali, most talk of culture is simply a *reductio ad absurdum*. Especially for theatre and the arts, such invocation of culture is often depressingly uncritical. So, in the name of respecting, celebrating or promoting Balinese culture, scholars who do so unwittingly or otherwise become deeply complicit in, if not public relations' advocates for, complex political, economic and personal agendas. Reflecting on Bali's popularity as an intellectual playground, it is hard to avoid concluding that a significant factor is that the entry standards are so low.

What, though, is so wrong with culture? After all, commonsensically it underpins a multi-billion dollar industry, which keeps Balinese and many others busy making money from tourists, quite apart from fueling the visual and performing arts'

to leave Yogyakarta for Bali. Raffles far earlier had remarked on this lack.

The arts are little practised..., the natives have not generally learned the art of painting or printing... Their principal manufacture is in *krises* and warlike instruments; they make fire-arms, and ornament the barrels, but purchase European locks (1817: 234).

Interestingly, while *seni* is glossed in Indonesian as 'art', the term is not *kawi*, nor in Malay where it was 'fine, thin, clear... graceful or lightly built' (Wilkinson 1959: 1072) from which the step to art-as-what-is-refined seems plausible. Likewise, the Indonesian for theatre, *téater*, is Dutch; *sandiwara* is also a neologism; and *pertunjukan* as a show or performance derives from *tunjuk*, index finger, to show or point. As Theodoridou argued, it is not self-evident in what sense Balinese engaged in something they are so often identified with, namely theatre (2012). And, while so many *soi-disant* experts are profitably engaged in the business of interpreting Balinese culture, the indiscriminate use of meaning results in the term being largely vacuous (Hobart 1983). Few outsiders seem to realize that Balinese deploy a sophisticated set of criteria for evaluating statements and actions, which are quite distinct from and incommensurate with European usage (e.g. Hobart 1999: 126-31).

- 4 It is not coincidence that Margaret Mead was a leading proponent of this simplistic concept of culture, which she helped to impose on Balinese. Contemporary researchers are, of course, following in illustrious footsteps. Clifford Geertz, the father of interpretive anthropology, belatedly admitted that he did not speak Balinese.

industries. As a long-term strategy however, as Time Magazine's *Holidays in Hell*⁵ noted, it risks killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. But does it really matter whether we call what is supposedly distinctive about Bali 'culture' or not? Much depends on what knowledge is for. If you are a politician, businessman or pseudo-scholar on the make, then invoking culture, no matter how vapidly, is a free asset that you can milk so long as it makes you money and you ignore the long-term consequences. For those of more reflexive inclination, understanding how Bali has been imagined, what drives the rapid change and how seemingly innocent ideas are implicated becomes of immediate interest.

At issue here is the difference between common sense and a critical sense of culture. When Raymond Williams famously remarked that 'culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (1983: 87), his point was that, in Gramsci's terms, such common sense usage is ideological (1971: 625). So, casual use of such terms is far from innocent: rather they reinforce a particular political-economic order. The outcome of talking uncritically about culture and cognate terms such as tradition, religion, community, indeed Bali, is that Balinese and foreign commentators are unwittingly engaging in reiterating a singular hegemony. My purpose here is to examine this hegemony and its implications.

The opening quotation from the Dinas Kebudayaan treats culture as the central figure of a set which includes custom, tradition, art, religion, spirit, which singly and together are uniquely identifiable with and predicated of twin subjects: 'Bali' and 'the Balinese'. The terms are mutually defined, and so circular and tautological. Each term and the relationships between them, as generally used, are distinctive in connoting structure, coherence, integration, encompassment, non-contradiction and freedom from conflict.

Most Western writers assume that the Balinese view of the cosmos is firmly ordered and harmonious, and that human beings must attempt to imitate and therefore bring about that order again in this world. For these writers, the main aim of temple ritual and much else in Balinese culture is to prevent a sinking chaos, which is the absence of order (Hildred Geertz 1994: 95).

5 Time World, 9th. April 2011.

In short we are offered a vision of an ideal, exquisite harmony of perfectly synchronized interlocking parts. Difference, incoherence, misunderstanding, contradiction, antagonism, conflict and violence stem from alien forces; or else are external circumstances to be overcome—chaos to be worked upon. This worldview is articulated by the conventional translation of the phrase from the Sutasoma, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, as ‘Unity in Diversity’.

What relationship though does this model have to what is going on in contemporary Balinese society, inextricably involved as it is in the nation state of Indonesia and global capitalism? Put another way: whose account is it? And what kind of interests does it serve? As Tom Hunter noted of the period when the Sutasoma was written, *kakawin* literature ‘represents the interests of royal and priestly actors with a large stake in maintaining a fixed symbolic order’ (2007: 27). If enunciations in Java historically served the élite’s interests, why should they not in contemporary Bali? Rather than accept the current account of culture as self-evident, incontrovertible fact, perhaps we should ask a few questions. Who has articulated this harmonious vision of Balinese culture? What relationship does it bear to other characterizations? Under what conditions were such accounts produced? And what is at issue in such representations of so complicated an actuality as Bali as variously appreciated by different participants?⁶

Pythagoras in place

Richard Fox has linked the provenance of the Pythagorean vision of Bali to the New Order’s State Ideology, Pancasila, and argues how this came to be implemented locally through the Balinese Hindu Dharma Council, Parisada Hindu Dharma (2011: 55-58). While depicting Bali as an unspoiled harmonious paradise fits longstanding European fantasies about remote places (Ardener

6 A more intriguing question is what are the circumstances under which the different kinds of representations of Java and Bali came about that occur in the pre-colonial literature? Regrettably I am not qualified to answer this. Because Bali geographically is an island, it would be simplistic to assume that Bali refers exclusively and exhaustively to a definite place and all, or most, of its inhabitants. As Jim Boon noted (1977), Bali played an important role in European imagination before anyone knew anything about it—and has continued to do so.

1987, Vickers 2012) and predates the New Order's use of culture to depoliticize Indonesians,⁷ another aspect of Fox's argument deserves attention. It is the crucial role of the mass media in articulating meticulously engineered portrayals of Bali, which, like all such representations, are more significant for what they omit and disarticulate than for the necessarily reductive figures that they foreground. The use of synecdoche enables Bali to be conveniently summed up as 'culture'. What is quite remarkable is that both Balinese and foreign intellectuals mostly continue to pretend that it is adequate to talk about Bali as if the mass media were irrelevant or dismissible as simply one consideration among many. To do so overlooks the extent to which, since the 1980s, Balinese (and others) have been bombarded with tightly crafted depictions of themselves and their society, and have learned to recognize themselves in these accounts.

The massive simplification that broadcast media enable—and indeed require in order to work—is a necessary condition for representations of Bali as some divinely ordained fit between a geographical place and a homogeneous culture, art and religion.⁸

7 Doubtless there is more to be said on the dissemination of ideas of balance and harmony, but this would involve not only a reading of Indonesian and European sources but, perhaps more important, an analysis of Balinese theatre performances. As recordings of this last are relatively recent, we have little idea how such notions were disseminated, if at all, in pre-colonial times.

The extent to which religion in Bali relies on mass mediation should be obvious from the programming of Bali TV. More broadly, a study of some 8,000 recordings in the Balinese Television Project archives made between 2000–2007 of programmes about the arts, society and religion on TVRI Denpasar and national television, shows an interesting distribution of synonyms for harmony. The Javanese term *rukun* was used in 13 broadcasts: significantly all were religious. The term occurred nowhere else. *Harmoni(s)* occurred in 22 broadcasts, again overwhelmingly religious. Most widely found was *seimbang* (in 38 programmes), mostly again in religious programmes, but also those about government development. Aficionados of Bali as a harmonious culture will be cheered to learn that their vision was espoused by the former Governor, Ida Bagus Oka, who managed to get both harmony and balance into his opening address to the 1991 Arts Festival. Broadcasting performing arts is, of course, a crucial means of disseminating official, but increasingly hegemonic, representations of culture.

8 My mentor in the study of Bali, Christiaan Hooykaas, used to protest against the provincial government's tidying and sanitizing religion by arguing instead that, in terms of texts and practice, it should be designated Agama Tirtha, the religion of holy water (e.g. 1964). Failing that, it could best be labelled as Hindu-Buddhist. At every turn fluidity and contextually

As Adrian Vickers found it necessary to remind readers: ‘The physical boundaries of “Bali” have always been problematic’ (2012: 301). From their slave raids of the eastern islands to their impact on the language of Batawi, Balinese have long been a presence across Indonesia, as in turn have been other societies in Bali.⁹ So Balinese attempts to airbrush Javanese out of, say, their political history or the performing arts require selective amnesia.¹⁰ Just as Bali is not a neatly circumscribed place, nor are Balinese a natural entity or species. To the extent that they and their commentators have come to think of themselves as such involves what Althusser called interpellation: they have been assiduously addressed and trained to recognize themselves and respond accordingly, especially recently through radio, television and social media. As a corrective, it may be helpful to think of Bali not as a place or a culture, but as a brand with the unique selling point of a peculiarly harmonious synthesis of culture, art and religion (Hobart 2011).

Bali as a battlefield

It requires hard work to ignore the blindingly obvious. What we know of Balinese history suggests that it has been distinguished by widespread oppression, strife, war and violence, when ordinary people were the victims of corruption, gangsterism, greed and savagery with little redress whether in pre-colonial (e.g. Hanna 2004; Worsley 1972; Vickers 2005), colonial or post-colonial periods (Robinson 1995; Schulte-Nordholt, 2007).¹¹ The received history of

diverging practices are dressed up as the unfolding of an authentic, unadulterated, unchanging essence.

9 They have also had a global presence as an imaginary since Hollywood film. Both *The Big Sleep* and *Some Like It Hot* include gratuitous references to Balinese dancers.

10 Amusingly, such widely acknowledged exemplars of Balinese cultural creativity as the late I Wayan Beratha were disarmingly honest about the sources of their inspiration. He explained that, when he or his friends ran out of ideas, they simply went over to Java, took what they liked and adapted it (personal communication).

11 Nor was the colonial period the idyll it is often made out to be (e.g. Covarrubias 1937). Consider just one of Vickers’s summations of the lot of non-élite Balinese.

In 1917 there was a massive earthquake, which flattened whole villages, destroyed some of Bali’s foremost temples, and damaged some of the most beautiful palaces; in all 1350 lives were lost. After that came mouse plagues and other forms of devastation of rice-crops, closely followed by a world-

Bali is arguably a history of silences, evasions and counter-factual colouration. For example, consider the striking contrast between the widespread brutality and violence of pre-colonial Bali and its rose-tinted representations in contemporary dance and theatre. It seems historically that the more social life became anarchic and anomic, the more literary accounts stressed visions of a wondrous, luminous, stable world order (Hobart 2007: 122-24). It is not hard to work out in whose interests such representations were—and are. More generally, to avoid seeing the scale of institutionalized conflict and violence in Bali over the last seventy years requires the dedicated myopia of a single-minded ostrich.¹²

So, the kindest reading of the Pythagorean vision of historical or present day Bali is reminiscent of Samuel Johnson's dictum about second marriages: 'The triumph of hope over experience'. The conventional translation of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* needs to be set against other *kakawin*. For instance, writing about the background to the *Śiwarātrikalpa*, the authors note that

another compulsory feature of almost all *kakawin* (poems) is the elaborate, and to our taste exaggerated, descriptions of wars and battles between armies of heroes and demons... The fantastic weapons and gruesome methods of warfare which the poet's imagination conjures up are almost equal to what our modern society has actually achieved' (Teeuw *et al.* 1969: 31-32).

Studies of the *kidung* literature (e.g. Vickers 2005) or Balinese *babad* (Worsley 1972) show the pervasiveness of discord, disruption,

wide epidemic of Spanish influenza, which claimed tens of thousands of lives. Soon after came the Depression, which hit Bali's exports. By 1934 pigs and copra, the two major exports, had fallen to a quarter of their former price, and Balinese coins, *képéng*, had been virtually halved in value. Hard on the heels of this came further mouse plagues and devastation of rice-crops. Many at that time lost their land holdings and were on the verge of starvation. The charmed circle of expatriates, however, were oblivious to all of this.

The Dutch colonial ideal of law and order meant control and an appearance of peace for the Dutch and suffering for the Balinese. Balinese at the time saw this as an age of wage labor, when lower-ranking aristocrats appointed to official posts could terrorize and control the population through spies and violence, and could serve their own interests through corruption and sexual claims over pretty local women, but who nevertheless could not control the gangs of thieves and bandits created by the social dislocation (2012: 148-9).

12 That Indonesians have kept quiet about the Orde Baru government's neat airbrushing out of the execution of some 100,000 Balinese in 1965-66 is perhaps understandable. That foreigners have found it convenient to collude is less so.

fighting and the virtual omnipresence, even celebration, of murder, mutilation and mayhem.¹³ Analyses of painting (e.g. Geertz 1994) and theatre (e.g. Fox 2011: 218–300) reveal similar preoccupations. What is notably absent from such representations is the response to such threats and dangers, namely fear, which loomed large in older villagers' memories of their lives under the rajas and later.

By many accounts Bali often resembled less a paradise than a battlefield. And, if you look past the glitz and glamour of the façade at the competition for the rich spoils of tourism and the endless political infighting, to conflicts in *banjar* and the activities of *préman*, a rather different Bali carries on seemingly unabated. However, my aim is not to replace one hegemonic articulation with another. It is to draw attention to how entrenched these Arcadian fantasies of Balinese culture are and what they are doing. There are several reasons for invoking the image of Bali as a battlefield. First, introducing an alternative image or paradigm to the dominant one calls into question the self-evident verisimilitude of the dominant image, a ploy Foucault used to effect with his deliberately jarring use of metaphor. Second, it raises questions about who is doing the enunciating and the circumstances under which they do so. Third, it draws attention to the differing registers that Balinese and commentators use to describe, interpret or explain what is going on. Fourth, it sets historical and contemporary accounts by different groups of Balinese against the dominant government, corporate and mass media representations.¹⁴ Finally it opens the way to inquiry into the conflicts and antagonisms that are suppressed, ignored or denied in most approaches to culture.

The discipline that most suggestively explores culture not as

13 Cycles such as *Malat* are at least as much Javanese as Balinese. We should not however fall into the trap of hypostatizing social practices into essentially different substances, *aka* cultures. For symmetry, it would be fun to complete Johnson's quotation by stating that such a literary account, like first marriage 'is the triumph of imagination over intelligence'. However presumably intelligence would have advised Javanese and Balinese authors to err on the side of caution if they wished to continue writing or even living.

14 That is not to suggest that these elite accounts are univocal or that many Balinese do not reiterate or even enthusiastically embrace—or appear to—such public representations on many occasions. That, after all, is what hegemony is about. However what people say tends to depend on whom they are speaking to and in what context.

the creation of unity out of diversity, but as a site of—or, as I would prefer, moments of—struggle is Cultural Studies.¹⁵ Cultural Studies brings to the discussion recognition of the multiple antagonisms that permeate Balinese society, but which are hidden or finessed by the Pythagorean vision. That, of course, is one of the latter's main functions. What is less obvious is how great mass spectacles such as the Bali International Arts Festival on the one hand and the modern mass media on the other underpin a manufactured semblance of integration and harmony. The point about spectacles is that, like most representations which prioritize the visual, they minimize the role of dialogue, discussion and argument by presenting *tableaux vivants*, which are then articulated by members of the élite through speeches, television commentary or, for *Sendratari*, by a single *dalang*.¹⁶ The importance of dance as the brand image of Bali is not accidental. Here dialogue and the possibility of articulating anything untoward have been nicely excised. Television famously positions viewers in tightly controlled viewing positions, having surrendered much agency to privileged enunciators and commentators.¹⁷ Even the Cultural Studies' formulation of culture

15 The phrase culture as a 'site of struggle' is widely attributed to Stuart Hall (e.g. Grossberg 1996: 158). What Hall actually wrote was: 'Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged' (1994: 466). Note how this echoes Vološinov: 'Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e., with the community which is the totality of users of the same set of signs for ideological communication. Thus various different classes will use one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena of the class struggle' (1973: 23). Class difference and concomitant inequalities are, of course, antagonisms neatly sutured by an imagined culture-for-all.

16 Conflict is necessary to theatre plots but, in Barthes's terms, it is neatly inoculated either by being projected onto the distant past and safe mythical figures like the Pandawa and Korawa or resolved narratively (1973: 150). If the point about the visual tending to minimize argument is unclear, consider coverage of such wonderful misnomers as 'the Arab Spring'. Television footage of Egypt's Tahrir Square showed a multitude of people subject to the voiceover of a single commentator who provides a unified summation of the presumed thoughts of tens of thousands of people. Were you to have attached a microphone to each person, the resulting diversity would probably be inexpressible and incomprehensible. It is therefore to be avoided.

17 An example is the authority vested in figures like Bali TV's Ida Pedanda Madé Gunung. John Ellis made the point. The whole domestic arrangement of broadcast TV and the aesthetic forms it has evolved to come to terms with this domestic arrangement provides

as sites of struggle involves spatializing and visualizing actions on particular occasions.

The missing link—mechanical solidarity

A paradox about Bali is that the more its unique culture is celebrated, the less there is, whether imagined anthropologically as the variety of local customs or as an evolving self-sustaining contribution to civilization—unless we reduce that to branded shopping malls or *Son et Lumière* such as *Bali Agung* complete with elephants. Driven by the multiple demands of government, the tourist industry and mass media for increasingly standardized, recognizable, marketable products, Balinese have eagerly learned the art of mechanical reproduction needed to partake in the culture industry (Adorno & Horkheimer 1972; Benjamin 1977). Think of the mass production lines of woodcarvings or stone statues, or how many Barong dances are performed every morning and a stock repertoire of *kebyar* dances every evening to charabancs of tourists.¹⁸ Claims about the fabled creativity of Balinese mask, with a few notable exceptions, mask its increasing absence. Balinese have avidly and largely unreflectively McDonaldized themselves.¹⁹

Considering its relevance, it is surprising that the sociologist Émile Durkheim's theory of modes of social solidarity has not been invoked more often to elucidate striking features of Balinese society. Modern societies are distinguished by a complex division of labour, in which differentiation of complementary functions is highly developed, so that people depend upon one another in what

broadcast TV with the capability to do this and no more. The citizenship that it provides as the position for its viewers is a position of impotence: TV viewers are able to see 'life's parade at their fingertips', but at the cost of exempting themselves from that parade for the duration of their TV viewing (1992: 169-70).

- 18 Delightfully, that leading exponent of Balinese culture Margaret Mead, together with Gregory Bateson, played a role in making such anodyne *Barong* dances possible. They wanted to film a Calon Arang, but quite apart from the risks of filming an event at night so potentially imbued with *sakti*, technology then did not permit it. Balinese, discovering that a daytime performance did not bring the sky down, neatly turned it to commercial advantage.
- 19 The term (from Ritzer 1993) indicates the process by which goods and labour become standardized as commodities under consumer capitalism. Deleuze, with Guattari, has given a more thoughtful and philosophically nuanced account in *Thousand plateaus* (1988) and *Societies of control* (1992), to which I refer below.

Durkheim called organic solidarity. The opposite is mechanical solidarity. Here groups (in Bali *banjar*, *désa*, *subak*, *sekaha* etc.) are central to social life and organize much of their members' activities, often backed by formidable sanctions. Social integration emerges through emphasis on similarity and conformity to shared values, reinforced through religion and the arts. Balinese society instantiates mechanical solidarity to a remarkable degree. The result is its famous social cohesion and organization, but at the price of treating originality or deviation from the norm as potential threats. Instead creativity is confined to endlessly elaborating existing ways of doing things rather than exploring new ones. Goldenweiser called this 'involution' (1936; cf. Clifford Geertz's extension to agriculture, 1968). Simulated novelty disguises the absence of change in any serious sense. Think of the endlessly similar *tari kebyar* at successive Arts Festivals. Bali's real motto is: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.²⁰ That is not enough. To prevent the palpable limitations of mechanical solidarity becoming evident also requires a model of representation that fits and confirms this world narrative. What is it?

After representation

Such a model must treat representation as about using signs, images, laws and classifications faithfully to reflect a pre-existing reality that adequately encapsulates knowledge, yet remains unaffected by the act of representing.

Knowledge can be known, our dominant tradition seems to feel, only through *re*-presentation and *re*-production, through sign-systems, models, law-relations, or at least taxonomies whose common mission is to create order... Culture gained its currency as a cover-all concept and its historical function as a *point de repère*...by serving as a short term for a theory of knowledge and not...for a theory of conduct (Fabian 1991: 191)

More important still, the purposes of who does the representing and under what circumstances must be expunged by appeal to what is being carefully placed beyond question: the authority of the past, culture, religion or, failing that, the authority of the speaker.²¹

²⁰ 'The more it changes, the more it is the same thing'.

²¹ Such appeal to authority is an informal logical fallacy: *argumentum ad vere-*

By contrast, any approach that recognizes contradictions or incompatibilities between divergent accounts has to question and — what is anathema to authority-lovers — to question unquestionables. An interesting way of exploring what is at issue is to reflect on the term ‘represent’. It presupposes a prior state of presence to which what follows is subordinate. Truth, goodness and what is authoritative is what most closely resembles this original state or presence and what deviates is inferior, compromised, adulterated. To challenge this Platonist vision, we require one that allows for multiple, divergent and contrary accounts which turns out to be the case everywhere except perhaps North Korea. Put simply: representing does something. It is a social practice that intervenes in and changes the world it describes. So there can be no single, all-encompassing, true framework for Bali. Different people or interest groups represent Bali *as* something (paradise, hell, the ideal place to make money, get drunk or laid, or whatever) to someone on some occasion for some purpose under particular circumstances. You cannot represent something as it is in its fullness in all the possible contexts as understood by every one of the participants. Representing is necessarily rather like a cartoon: it picks out and emphasizes certain features and naturalizes them at the expense of others. So we learn to see the representation as authentic insofar as it reiterates previous representations.²² Representing then, by definition, is an elegant but deceptive act of betrayal, which transforms what it purports to depict faithfully, then naturalizes it. The enunciations of politicians and officeholders, like the twittering of Bali’s many commentators, cannot be judged by how accurately they reflect some prior reality because in no small part they constitute and change it through their practices. Representing is a way of acting on the world, not reflecting it, because ‘representation is already mediation’ (Deleuze 1994: 8).

cundiam. Notionally this may be restricted to ‘false authority’, which begs the question of what authority determines what is true or false? And what happens when authorities differ? Claims to authority are just that — claims to be interrogated.

22 Yet again power inserts itself. The etymology of authentic is linked to authority. The Greek root ἀθεντικός (*authentikos*) ‘of first-hand authority, original,’ derives from ἀθεντία (*afthentia*) ‘original authority,’ and ἀθέντης (*afthéntis*) ‘one who does a thing himself, a principal, a master, an autocrat’ (The English Oxford Dictionary).

Conventional accounts of representation presuppose a static world where copies are measured against the authenticity and primacy of the original. So doing underplays how far we rework things through our practices of talking, depicting and so on.

The theatre of repetition is opposed to the theatre of representation, just as movement is opposed to the concept and to representation which refers it back to the concept. In the theatre of repetition, we experience pure forces, dynamic lines in space which act without intermediary upon the spirit, and link it directly with nature and history, with a language which speaks before words, with gestures which develop before organised bodies, with masks before faces, with spectres and phantoms before characters—the whole apparatus of repetition as a ‘terrible power’ (Deleuze 1994: 10).²³

Apart from suggesting another way of appreciating that proclivity of Balinese, puzzling to foreigners, for watching well known stories over and over again, it also enables us to reflect on why those in office are so wedded to the impoverishment that, conveniently, the mass media enable. There is a ‘necessary destruction’ by

the politician, who is above all concerned to deny that which ‘differs’, so as to conserve or prolong an established historical order, or to establish a historical order which already calls forth in the world the forms of its representation (Deleuze 1994: 53).

However innocent they may imagine themselves, proponents of Balinese culture as unique are caught up in a field of knowledge and power that I doubt they fully understand.

Where to now?

For decades, Bali has been subjected to breakneck social change, driven in no small part by corporate capitalism. Unfortunately, how Balinese and others discuss what is happening to Balinese culture all too often relies on concepts, assumptions and metaphors drawn from precisely the model they seek to comment on, so involving themselves in a vicious circle.²⁴ They might heed the late Denis Healey’s advice: ‘When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging’.

²³ Deleuze managed here neatly to link representation to Artaud’s writing on Balinese theatre (1978).

²⁴ For a detailed discussion of the tautologies committed, see Hobart 2000.

Fortunately there are alternative ways of thinking about Balinese society—one of which draws, coincidentally, on Bali’s singular contribution to the broader understanding of society and the human subject. These include Artaud on the epistemological and ontological implications of Balinese theatre, to Bateson’s rethinking of society as cybernetic and as patterns of relations not structures. By an extraordinary curvature, two key themes originating in the study of Bali came together in the work of Deleuze with Guattari: Artaud on the Body without Organs and Bateson on plateaus.²⁵ Deleuze, in particular, proposed different ways of imagining representation, society and structure, the human subject and that most thorny of concepts: capitalism. Whatever is happening to Bali, it is now in some sense ineluctably implicated in national and global capitalism. But how are we to understand the changes to Bali? And what we mean by capitalism?

Drawing, perhaps idiosyncratically, upon Deleuze, for present purposes might I broadly characterize Balinese society prior to colonialism and in gradually decreasing degree afterwards as organized around two primary principles—or modes of encoding value—which sometimes converged, sometimes diverged: ties to land and ties to persons, including notably political patrons?²⁶

25 As Deleuze and Guattari put it:

Gregory Bateson uses the term *plateau* for continuous regions of intensity constituted in such a way that they do not allow themselves to be interrupted by any external termination, any more than they allow themselves to build toward a climax; examples are certain sexual, or aggressive, processes in Balinese culture. A plateau is a piece of immanence. Every BwO [Body without Organs] is made up of plateaus. Every BwO is itself a plateau in communication with other plateaus on the plane of consistency. The BwO is a component of passage (1988: 158; my parentheses)

I am still tracing the steps, sometimes intricate, between Artaud’s work on Balinese theatre and the Body without Organs and Bateson’s on the Steady State and cybernetics. So what follow are my initial thoughts.

For present purposes, one sense of the Body without Organs is those assemblages of practices upon which social organizations depend, but which they effectively deny. Whereas structures and organizations are what Lévi-Strauss designated as *en clé de mort* (in the [musical] key of death) because they tend towards fixity and rigidity, the Body without Organs is *en clé de vie* (in the key of life), because practices are ceaselessly changing. The more Balinese are bent on standardizing, institutionalizing, prescribing and fixing—be it religion, music, dance or whatever—the more they move away from the Body without Organs towards hypostatized, dead substances, which is why the increasingly desperate appeals to art, religion and culture are flogging a very dead horse.

26 In a sense the emergence of *pecaling* and political *préman* (Schulte Nordholt 2007) may be considered as new encodings by these two plateaus.

On Deleuze and Guattari's various accounts, treating capitalism as simply a new mode of political economy is inadequate. What makes capitalism different from previous forms of organization is that it is based on the dissolution of all previously existing boundaries, such that in principle anything becomes exchangeable with anything else. Its genius lies in decoding what has previously been kept separate—whether culture, religion, *nişkala*, art, land, relationships, meanings—and making them transactable.²⁷ When Balinese run money-making courses in spirituality or *taksu*, tourist guides organize tours to see *odalan*, tooth-filings, cremations or trance dances, or the Bali Safari & Marine Park organizes spectacles, they are dissolving the differences between—or decoding—what was previously kept distinct. Indeed Balinese enthusiasm for decoding that which is notionally separate—cash for competitive employment or educational opportunities, legal judgements or official documents²⁸—suggests that some have embraced capitalism with an imaginative vengeance. The consequence of such exchangeability is that no belief, meaning, message, code or morality can withstand such capitalism because its principle is that all codes dissolve into and flow as capital.²⁹

27 The strip development at the side of roads, which destroys *subak* irrigation and the sale of rice land for villas, are two obvious examples of decoding land from its previous reasonably stable plateau. 'Even art has left the spaces of enclosure in order to enter into the open circuits of the bank' (Deleuze 1992: 6).

28 My favourite is perhaps the wonderful reversal by which instead of local television companies paying artists to perform, the artists pay the television companies.

29 Colebrook put it clearly:

Capitalism is also the conclusion of the logic of the signifier. Prior to capitalism we can imagine social regimes of interacting and competing codes and flows—flows of goods, bodies, women and the codes of life in general. But with the idea of the signifier comes the idea of the subject and capitalism. There is one system—language, signification, the signifier—which stands in for and represents an otherwise uniform, undifferentiated and meaningless life. The very idea of the signifier is tied to decoding; all life can be referred to the system of signification. The signifier creates a separation between one regime of signs (language/code) and the world that exists there to be coded. All other codes—genetics, marked bodies, gestures—can be reduced or translated to the system of signification.

But the despotism of the signifier lies also in its emptiness; it does not represent some quantity or quality but is that which allows for the translation and relation of all other quantities (2002: 131).

Deleuze and Guattari's analysis may help to explain a rather puzzling phenomenon, namely the rise of strikingly dogmatic forms of religion, be they labelled Christian, Hindu or Islamic. Are these a refusal to engage in the

Without becoming lost in abstruse theory, this account may have implications for understanding how capitalism is working in Bali. Insofar as Balinese remain determined to turn whatever aspect of their society they can manage into capital, there is little point in being nostalgic or bemoaning the loss. It follows inexorably from the determined decoding that is continuing apace. Appeal to religion, tradition and culture is in vain because these are part of a representational régime which produces hypostatized entities out of living practices. The next step has been to market these. So, however noble their intentions, both Balinese and foreigners who participate directly or indirectly in this commodification, dissemination and transaction of Balinese culture are collusive with a capitalism, the effects of which are increasingly obvious. The alternatives would take us into the world of the Body without Organs, plateaus and other ideas. That discussion is for another occasion.

Afterthoughts

If I may, I shall try to pull some of these threads together. The weight of contrary evidence makes it clear that imagining Balinese culture as some kind of harmonious Arcadian whole is an ideal. Otherwise put: it is ideological. Now Althusser treated such totalizing representations as products of what he called ‘ideological state apparatuses’ (ISAs). Although ISAs are notionally partly independent, the state plays a greater or lesser part in directing and controlling them. Among the most significant are: religious, educational, familial, legal, political (including political parties), media and cultural institutions (1984: 151–2). A moment’s consideration shows the *prima facie* pertinence to Bali, where the determined attempts to fuse religion, *adat* and family into a single cultural whole are underwritten by education and politics, and celebrated endlessly in media from theatre to television.

What, on this account, does ideology do? It provides a coherent, inherently convincing and total, if imaginary, world view to members of a society, but one that appears to outsiders not as truth, but as myth does to ethnographers. Such myths, however, ‘do make allusion to reality, and that they need only be “interpreted” to discover the reality of the world behind their

limitless decoding permitted, or encouraged, by contemporary capitalism?

imaginary representation of that world (ideology = *illusion/allusion*)' (Althusser 1984: 154). Given that actuality differs significantly from the ideal as variously portrayed in Balinese culture, quite how are we to understand such social imaginaries? As something that is by definition imagined rather than tangible, its status varies according to its allotted function in different models of society.³⁰ Broadly though it connotes a conscious, more or less institutionalized, framework which enables people to make sense of their world and social life as a coherent totality.³¹ As Charles Taylor put it: 'the social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society' (2004: 2). Drawing on Anderson (1983) and Habermas (1989), for Taylor it implies a distinct, prescriptive or interpretive moral order, which encompasses a vision of social,

30 The ineffable characteristics of imaginaries entails that the term can often be used sloppily. My usage is taken from Laclau's rigorous, if somewhat theoretically sophisticated, delineation.

The incomplete character of the mythical surfaces of inscription is the condition of possibility for the constitution of social imaginaries. The relation between the surface of inscription and what is inscribed on it is therefore essentially unstable. There are two extreme possibilities here. The first is the complete hegemonization of the surfaces of inscription by what is inscribed on them. As we mentioned earlier: the moment of inscription is eliminated in favour of the literality of what is inscribed. The other possibility is symmetrically opposite: the moment of representation of the very form of fullness dominates to such an extent that it becomes the unlimited horizon of inscription of *any* social demand and *any* possible dislocation. In such an event, myth is transformed into an imaginary. The imaginary is a horizon: it is not one among other objects but an absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility and is thus the condition of possibility for the emergence of any object. In this sense, the Christian millennium, the Enlightenment and positivism's conception of progress, communist society are all imaginaries: as modes of representation of the very form of fullness, they are located beyond the precariousness and dislocations typical of the world of objects. Put another way, it is only because there are 'failed' objects, quasi-objects, that the very form of objectivity must free itself from any concrete entity and assume the character of a horizon (1990a: 63-64).

31 Taylor's definition ran:

By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society (2004: 23).

Taylor's account is more thoughtful than Anderson's which, remarkably, lacks a critical discussion of what he meant by two particularly contentious terms: imagination or community.

economic and political relationships. A major drawback of these accounts is that they deal with an ideal. Problems arise when these imaginaries not only stand in stark, even cruel, contrast to what is manifestly going on, but impede people from articulating this and deter them from taking steps to improve the conditions under which they live.

Against such ideal, sometimes nigh-utopian, visions, Althusser famously argued that ‘Ideology is a “Representation” of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence’ (1984: 153). Grand as it may sound, this leaves open on the one hand how and why people subscribe to ideological imaginaries, and on the other what ‘imaginary’ and ‘real’ connote here. On the first point, Althusser is clear:

Ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing (1984:160).³²

Examples immediately suggest themselves from theatre when the *pelawak* (servants) address spectators as fellow Balinese who are assumed to share the same values. And BaliTV largely devotes itself to hailing its audience as Balinese, who are then invited, indeed required, to imagine themselves as particular kinds of subject—authentic Balinese—in order to participate in the imagined community so formed.

Althusser’s formulation, however, needs qualification. *Inter alia* it assumes that human subjects stupidly, but blithely and unreflectively, live falsehoods; and that they have a unitary consciousness that systematically misrecognizes their real position in society. In Paul Hirst’s rephrasing,

32 Note the similarity to Castoriadis’s analysis in *The imaginary institution of society*.

The subject does not express himself or herself but is expressed by someone, and therefore exists as a part of another’s world (certainly misrepresented in its turn). The subject is ruled by an imaginary, lived as even more real than the real, yet not known as such, precisely *because* it is not known as such. What is essential to heteronomy—or to alienation in the general sense of the term—on the level of the individual, is the domination of an autonomized imaginary which has assumed the function of defining for the subject both reality and desire (1997: 66-67, emphases in the original).

Different societies not only have different imaginaries, but these need not be conservative and static. Radical imaginaries make change possible.

the imaginary essentially consists in the idea that the subject lives its relation to its conditions of existence as if it were a subject. It is a subject because it exists in the realm of the 'as if', but it lives these relations as if they were true (1979: 34).

Two other aspects of ideology and its imaginaries need mention. Although, as with Balinese representations of culture, which appear coherent, consistent, integrated and total, on closer examination there are invariably contradictions. Totality is, at best, an ideal to be striven for. The social always tends to overflow the bounds of society.³³ In other words, practices often have the bad habit of not conforming to prescriptions or proscriptions. Furthermore, the notion of a unitary subject defined by a non-contradictory consciousness is pre-Freudian, effectively counter-factual and assumes a naïve account of humans as the origins of their own experience.³⁴ This, of course, is one reason that it is so attractive to Balinese and foreigners who are nostalgic for a more wholesome,

33 Criticizing accounts of society as a founding totality, in a seminal article Ernesto Laclau argued that

against this essentialist vision, we tend nowadays to accept the *infinitude of the social*, that is, the fact that any structural system is limited, that it is always surrounded by an 'excess of meaning' which it is unable to master and that, consequently, 'society' as a unitary and intelligible object which grounds its own partial processes is an impossibility (1990: 90).

34 Hirst expanded:

The imaginary modality of living is necessary because men's conditions of existence can never be given to them in experience. Hence the importance of the attack on the theory of ideology as experience. There cannot be any true or false consciousness because there is no basis for a correspondence between the experience of the subject and his social relations. This requires us to introduce the Althusserian concept of the social totality somewhat more rigorously than we have done heretofore. The social totality is conceived as a 'process without a subject'. What does this mean? It means essentially that the social totality is not a process constituted by a subject, and that subjects occupy a place in it other than origin or author (1979: 32-33).

Finally, Laclau elegantly dispensed with the conundrums of the unitary subject and false consciousness but, as noted above, he retained the notion of the imaginary.

The very identity of the social agents was increasingly questioned when the flux of differences in advanced capitalist societies indicated that the identity and homogeneity of social agents was an illusion, that any social subject is essentially decentred, that his/her identity is nothing but the unstable articulation of constantly changing positionalities. The same excess of meaning, the same precarious character of any structuration that we find in the domain of the social order, is also to be found in the domain of subjectivity. But if any social agent is a decentred subject, if when attempting to determine his/her identity we find nothing else but the kaleidoscopic movement of differences, in what sense can we say that subjects misrecognize themselves? The theoretical ground that made sense of the concept of 'false consciousness' has evidently dissolved (1990: 92).

less fragmented, less complicated, less anomic world, that invites uncritical appreciation. Accepting Balinese culture at face value is like the White Queen in *Alice through the Looking Glass*, it is being able to believe seven impossible things before breakfast.

As my aim is to question what is often taken for granted and to encourage discussion, a conclusion would be out of place. My understanding of Balinese semantics is that questions or statements only have meaning insofar as they elicit a response, be it to intrigue, engage or just infuriate interlocutors (Hobart 2015). If I have stimulated discussion or disagreement, then I have succeeded; if not, not. But where does this discussion leave us? Let me return to two antithetical definitions of culture: culture as system or structure as against simply 'how we do things around here'. While the former essentializes practices into a coherent totality by marginalizing or silencing whatever does not fit, the latter contextualizes and recognizes that different people articulate different accounts under different circumstances, so that 'here' is always situational. These two senses are antithetical and lead in quite different directions.

To clarify what I think is at issue, what is the relationship of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of codes to post-Althusserian notions of the imaginary? The two belong to quite different theoretical trajectories. Take the ethnographic example of a common occurrence, a village *odalan* (temple festival). During my first field research in 1970-72, villagers talked to one another and explained to me that participation was above all about showing you were a member of the group or community. At once it obliged everyone to take part on pain of fines or even permanent exclusion, but also showed graphically both members and the wider society how active, cohesive and effective the group was. It was, as it were, a neat way of articulating and instantiating local social values. Twenty years later the same festivals took much the same form, albeit often with offerings on a grander scale. However, such events were usually punctuated by speeches from officials from the Council for Balinese Religion or local headmen delivering homilies on its behalf about how such festivals fitted into a seamless vision of Balinese religion-and-culture. The former I take to involve rules and understandings for living, in this case how to be a member of well-functioning groups. The latter added little, if anything, to how to get on with the business of living, but instead synthesized elements that

were previously germane in different contexts—or, often, were invented lock, stock and barrel, but endowed with retrospective authenticity—to claim hegemonic status. The first seems to be a useful guide to get through the day, to explain what you are trying to do, to understand what others are up to and to reflect on what might be worth changing. The second, insofar as people subscribe to, act upon or even in some sense believe it, carries the risk of mistaking (at best) part for the whole, so encouraging acquiescence to circumstances that may well be deleterious to people's overall interests. What happens when so much is now owned by a tiny minority of rich individuals and corporations; and Balinese are increasingly reduced to wage labourers on their own island?³⁵ Then those flogging culture as the answer are not so much salesmen of snake oil as of opiates. If there is any truth in the stereotype that much of the Russian population copes with life by being lulled into semi-oblivion by alcohol, then overdosing on culture may be an enticing alternative—at the price of failing to recognize Bali as a battlefield.

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³⁵ Balinese whom I know often say they feel ignored and not treated as feeling subjects, which is curiously reminiscent of Ritzer's depiction of the impact of McDonaldization, where corporations 'deny the basic humanity, the human reason, of the people who work within or are served by them (1993: 154). But I wonder whether people were actually treated much better in the pre-colonial or colonial periods.

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