

Bali, last paradise or paradise lost

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Offering to the temple

A few weeks on Bali, at the end of the monsoon season, is a hot and humid experience, but also allows, next to the sun, surf and disco opportunities, a dive in a cultural and spiritual society with many lessons and warnings for our 21-century complacency. In this essay I will try to convey my insights about what Bali means to me, a Dutch westerner and would-be philosopher/anthropologist, journalist and writer, especially concerned with the field of psycho-social development. I will be touching upon things like the impact of religious and ritual life, the root cause of corruption, the impact of mobility oriented borrowing, the hidden natural disasters of the pre-Hindu era, the energetic lay-out of temples, the focus on beauty and newness in Bali, the ill-represented relevance of the puputans, but all these are no more than personal observations, at best hypothetical.

Bali is a great place, no doubt, it offers a combination of natural and human treasures that is quite unique and allows us westerners a comfortable taste of the tropical. Many fall in love with the island and come back again and again. The eerie beauty of the rice fields along the hillsides, especially when the thick monsoon clouds colour the sky and the volcano's are just barely showing themselves is a sight that stays with you.

But two days after we left, close to our Sanur hotel, five terrorist were killed, one wonders about the underlying realities and deeper dichotomies in Bali.

Bali has retained, despite annually some 2,5 million foreign tourists, it's own culture with a strong religious Hindu-dharma focus and probably more shrines, sanctuaries, protective offering altars and temples than inha-

bitants. It has great beaches, mountains, volcano's and rice-paddy vista's. Economically it relies on handicraft and tourism, but is outside the cities and beaches still very much a traditional agricultural society. The 4 million or so Balinese are friendly, cooperative, clean and focused on aesthetics, more crafty than artistic, concerned with living now, not in the future, tightly knit into family and village structure and very concerned with the "otherworld" they see as balanced and mirrored in the tangible.

There is an image of Bali as a paradise, as a peaceful land of beautiful people mainly concerned with keeping the forces of nature and the spirits in other dimensions happy. In a way this image, stemming from the early visitors in the 1930's, reminds me of how Cambodia was seen, before the Lon Nol and Pol Pot atrocities came to light. The Bali image is too rosy, too idealistic, repressing the reality of 80.000 deaths in the KPI-purge in the sixties, the volcanic threats forever present, the 40.000 orphans hidden from sight, the Hindu-Islam feud (and the bombings to make that real) and doesn't look much further at what defines the Bali mindset. It's of



Ceremonies and rituals are part of village (desa) life

course a good promotional image, Bali as a holy and blessed paradise, but the fundamental juxtapositions that have led to what happened in Cambodia are also present in Bali. The terrorist attacks and bombings are a warning sign.

The scooter burden

Let me elaborate on one example, that anyone in Bali will recognise, being the disproportional amount of income spent on mobility and how those 1,5 million scooters are financed. With salaries in the tourist trade around or even below the 100 dollar mark, 40 to 50% of income goes to financing mobility. (A normal scooter costs around 1500 \$, with 48 month payback plus 1,5 to 2% interest per month). The mobile phone and gas eats up another 10 to 20 \$, not much left to save! And if there are savings, they might go the very expensive marriage festivities, funerals etc. The influence of

moneylenders, in Cambodia one of the root causes of peasant upheaval, communist success and eventually the rise of Kmer Rouge is hardly recognised as a risk-factor in present-day Bali, as these are now euphemistically called banks. The big, national ones charge less, but many of the poorer Balinese have to go to local banks or loan-sharks, and never get out of debt. This even more, because nobody wants an older model, new cars and scooters define the streets of Bali, older models are shipped to the poorer islands. New, beautiful, status comes with aesthetics and fashion, even the Balinese policemen look impeccable, shabbiness is a sin, at least for the higher castes or those pretending to be. So the young girls and boys basically work to pay for their image of mobility (on the road and via their mobile), at low wages in the tourist industry, and still relying on their free housing (the family compound or village doesn't charge for living there) and low price of food. They are in fact slaves to the banks and outside impulses like the economic crisis (less tourism) or rising gas pri-



Characteristic temple portal;cleansing gate

industrial ventures if they have no expandable income. With now most investment coming from foreign or rich Djakarta sources, the money power beyond their control, and inter-island and inter-religious animosity an issue, this will limit true sharing of Bali's resources by all. A simple rise of the

gas-price with 30 percent could spark unrest that might translate in capital-flight.

Corruption

This leads to looking at what corruption really means. Newspapers everyday report about officials involved in corruption and fraud, and usually blame the higher-ups. Not a single Balinese I spoke has not heard about how Suharto and his family enriched themselves, but these are the same people routinely paying off the policeman, guard or official. As a tourist you are not supposed to see how the driver with some slight of hand donates a little here and there, and how the police at road-traps desperately tries to find some real or on-the-spot made-up cause to get some money. How the workers in the hotels have to share extra income with the higher-ups, how the corruption pyramids pervade everything. How the rich Javanese and the smart westerners use the corruption to get what they want, to whatever cost to the ecology, the culture or the poor.



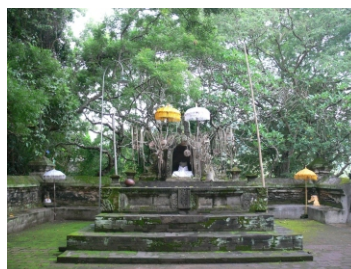
Scooters, mobility at a price for the working class

zes will threaten their whole existence and lifestyle. No scooter, no mobility, no work, as living in the tourist places is unthinkable, in cultural and financial terms. Balinese are proud people and not afraid, as the puputans illustrate. Those were not senseless repressions by the Dutch, killing whole royal courts, but the result of deep integrity issues. The royals were caught between old adat (customary rights) and the treaties they signed with the Dutch concerning Tawan Karang (kliprechten-beachcomber rights) and saw no way out. Interesting enough, this underlying issue of checks and balances in law is of relevance in the cyberspace law/rights discussion see: www.lucsala.nl/klikrecht.htm

Risks

The high proportion of income spent on mobility, the correlation between mobility and tourism, the interest of up to 25% per year (per se not so exorbitant with 10% or more inflation) strike me as economic risk factors. The Balinese can hardly become involved as investment partners in real estate, touristy or

Now I am not so naive not to acknowledge that this is also happening where I come from, the rich West, but Bali makes you think about the root of this. Now the recent Occupy movement, blaming the top 1% for whatever went wrong for the 99% (in the financial crisis), made me think about this too. I came to the conclusion, that it is us, the 99%, that were to blame. Our greed and need to possess ever more was inviting the entrepreneurial lot among us, always there and necessary for progress and change anyway. We cannot



Older (rebuilt) temple site (Chandidasa) with very old stone

progress without the wild and unruly, a thing that one can truly feel in Bali, where the culture in a way is very strict, repressive and stagnant. Remember the tame and the wild horse of Plato's Phaedrus as a model for the psyche. Now I wonder whether corruption is not a kind of invisible protest, in the sense that it is the small man's need to bribe and



Michi Retreat riverside villa's

therefore corrupt the system. Unconsciously maybe, but is this not the only way to preserve some sense of pride, of power over the system? Especially in Bali, where on the one hand the caste system and the family dwelling and desa rule are prevalent, on

the other hand the worldly power lies with bosses, investors and officials seen as foreign, the second economy of bribes and corruption seems to me a natural complement to an overpowering first economy. Corruption is the people, maybe a good title for a protest-song at Kuta-Beach by my good friend Fantuzzi, we are the corruption as we need at least the illusion of another way out of the corner we find ourselves.

Bribing and offering are, and I make a strange bridge here, maybe both psycho-social mechanism to obtain and ensure magical power, so much the underlying sentiment in Bali. The one to the worldly, the other to the intangible, both part of life on an island, forever threatened. And maybe it's good to remember that Adam and Eve had to leave paradise after the first act of bribery, the apple of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, so corruption is the essential sin, of revolting against the overpowering force.

Defensive

The anthropologists of the 1930's looked, with Western eyes and a soft spot for the primitive, at Bali, at the temples, rituals, gamelan music and aesthetics, admired the traditional art, but failed to see the fundamental defensive nature of the culture, the carelessness for whoever or whatever is outside of family or village, the escapist tendencies and the tight harness of the agricultural seasonality. They see the ritualizing states of self-control, resulting in graceful and tactful behaviour as a part of the religious expression among the people, not as escapism, a hiding behind a mask. As one of my main focal points in writing is the innerchild-mask dichotomy, I tend to look at it differently and try to understand causes, not symptoms.

This falling for only the nice picture is the same mistake as in admiring the Ankor Watt temples in Cambodia as the epithet of Kmer culture and not as monstrous ego-monuments of ruthless rulers built at the expense of the people and ultimate signs of disastrous decadence. Ba-



Michi Retreat ricefields Ubud

line culture was seen as enchanted, magical, a paradise. Even today, this is the dominant view, go to Bali to search your inner child, use yoga, massage, art and of course low prices

to escape your Western problems. Spirituality is still the banner of Bali, although most young Australians at the Kuta and Seminyak beaches find that in their Bintang beer bottles. And of course, Balinese women spend sometime 30% of their time preparing offerings, placing them around on all the powerspots they can imagine and participating in prayer and rituals. However,

in the villages one can observe that these beautiful offerings are an industry by themselves, with mostly older people involved, an economic activity like tourism, handicraft and agriculture, but hardly figuring in the statistics. Magic, rituals, offerings, they are part of the whole, and even as the tourists interest has made them commercial, -every hotel has offerings as part of the Bali experience, dances and gamelan are

entertainment- they offer also a way to understand the Balinese soul.

This soul is far more defensive, far more focused on shielding against evil, danger and the magical powers of other humans than we think. By looking at the Balinese temples I noticed how defensive they are, with strong architecture and pointing details, straight edges on the corners, no places to hide, entrances and portals of a specific form, copies of copies everywhere. And why is every statue again protected or shielded by a sarong, usually chequered for demonic statues, and white (with gold band) for more pleasant deities?

These are the temples of a fearful people, bowing to the outside pressure, pleasantly merging with intruders and invaders, hiding their unconscious fears behind smiles, great but not creative craftsmanship, sticking to traditions that served them well before. Not really bowing to the Hindu and Buddhist faith, but merging, adapting, still retaining the old animistic and ancestor beliefs, much like the Tibetans incorporated the Bon in

Buddhism/Lamaism with all kinds of demons, gods and deva's. The Balinese are flexible, they adapt, like these days the temple rituals are no longer strictly planned according to the astrologer's divination, but are in the weekends and after work hours. With all their modern manners they are however still bound by the alliance they owe to family and village (and no-one else, charity and social responsibility ranks much higher with Muslims), by the need to marry and have male children. Premarital sex is not allowed, but many wait to marry until a pregnancy guarantees a family future.

Temple energy

As I went around the Bali temples I measured the energy (by divination this is quite easy) and checked orientations, power spots and what objects had the most energy. One of the findings was that the quite characteristic gate or portal of Balinese temples, two adjacent pillars with complicated forms at the outside but a sharp edge facing the inside, had quite a different function than what the textbooks indicate (keeping the demons out, because often there is a straight wall behind and demons are supposed to move in straight lines only) as there is a distinct energy dip in the portal and it acts as a cleansing device. Pass the portal and you have to go through a zero-energy field, that kind of cleans your aura and soul. No water cleansing as in other cultures (the Balinese have a healthy respect for what water can carry, they use holy water a lot in rituals) but just stepping through the cleansing gate. The underlying magical technology must be pretty strong as we found no gates without that dip. However, when we visited a rather unknown pre-hindu so called Chandi (the old statues are also

indicated as Candi) temple near Ubud, it turned out that there were earlier uses of the zero-field cleansing. At a very ancient riverbed site, cut out from the rocks, the remaining statue in the middle had a similar zero-energy cleansing effect. The villagers, respectful of the old site, went to pray there standing before that image and ignored the two stone altars at the sides. We checked the energy around and noticed that the old statues, from those altars, were thrown into the river, by now unrecognizable except by dowsing. My friend An-Jes felt they were thrown in the river at a time of utter despair, as flooding and maybe other disaster made

the villagers try an ultimate effort to appease the gods. The settlement was probably there, in a hidden bend, because the river contained silver or copper. This disaster happened, I feel, somewhere in the 300-500 AD timeframe and it would be interesting to check this against geological data, as a major Krakatau like event might then have dramatically threatened Bali, but maybe also other places. I have always suspected, that the



Pre-Hindu temple near Ubud

relative dip in European history (the fall of the Roman Empire) had something to do with a natural disaster, and a major eruption could have had worldwide effects.

As we checked the newer temple in the village, not more than a few hundred years old, we found, like in

many other temples, a few old stones in the northeast corner. barely recognizable as statues, so old and worn were they. Neatly on their own pedestal/temple, sometimes with sarongs but hardly part of the normal rituals. Now the energy of these old stones was so high, outranking the normal objects of devotion, that it was stunning.

These were objects of worship and reverence of formidable age, likely stemming from even before the Hindu waves from Java in the twelfth century and later. A thousand or more years of human worship (and the belief in the magical power of stone objects, so abhorred by the decidedly anti-magical soenni Islam) had given these statues, now turned into unrecognizable lumps, immense energy.

Some of the Brahman elite must know about this, as the stones are

surely respected and attended to in some way, but the common folks just do not know. Now there is much magic (guna guna) on Bali, and it is still used a lot, and it partly explains why so much attention is given to the five times a day offerings, but it is also very underground.

When we went to another old temple, at Chandi Dasa above the newer village temple and again not even mentioned as an important site, we found a temple built or rebuilt in 1961, but with an altar containing one of those old stones of very high energy, no demon statues, only white and gold sarongs and a magnificent, quiet mood around, much "holier" than the major temples mentioned as tourist attractions.

Ecology

The care for the nature and the land is part of what in Hindu lore is called the philosophy of



Sanur Beach fish statue



Ratu Bagus

“Tri Hita Karana”; dealing with the divine, the fellow man and the world are the three pillars. Sounds great, has become official ecospeak, but the reality of stinking rivers, inadequate sewers and dirty beaches weighs heavier than the cheap labour sweeping and cleaning the fallen leaves in the hotel gardens. The rivers, when then enter the sea, where filled with debris and junk, the ecologically important mangrove swamps outside the tourist eyes resembling junkyards and smelling really foul, as we noticed when we cycled a bit off the tracks.



Ogoh Ogoh, a new tradition for new year demon chasing

The tourists on the one hand come to enjoy nature, but on the other hand the hotels, roads and infrastructure are threatening nature and even existence, as for instance water-scarcity is now a real threat. Too many villa's and resorts, many empty as the crisis also hits tourism and too many overambitious projects, have taken too much land and damage the rural balance, notably of Subak or traditional water-irrigation law and practice. However, there is hardly a win-win scenario here, more tourism will hurt the ecology and the attractiveness of the place.

The visa issue

Too many foreigners, who have a tendency to set up shop and milk their fellow visitors even worse than the locals, using bribes and corruption even smarter than they, have created a class of toans, bosses like the plantation colonialist of before. Ownership-limitations for foreigners have been circumvented in many smart ways, against the original aim of such restrictions. Many expats married to Balinese women, female beauty an export product like any, and were much better than locals to efficiently set up hotels, resort, taxi-services, rental operations and all kinds of tourist traps. Even the spiritual is effectively exploited, yoga schools, healing classes, spiritual retreats, it's big business that has little to do with Balinese spirituality, but sells well. The book and then the film version of [Eat, Pray, Love](#) (EPL), was a boon to this business, attracting many tourist seeking an escape from the stress West. Some of the original Balinese healing and spiritual practice does reach the West, we visited the ashram of Ratu Bagus, who teaches a kind of shaking meditation.



Characteristic temple entrance (Chandidasa)

Day-to-day running these enterprises the 30.000 or so new foreign colonialists and untold Javanese investors leave to the locals, underpaying them, but Balinese are good at following orders, they learn fast and don't have the western notion of initiative. Balinese cut wood, make Ikat or Batik textiles and serve in a pleasant way, but are no entrepreneurs, they are too busy dealing with the magical threats, the demands of the other-world and the family and village structures. It's quite interesting, that the newly sprung up tradition of making

Ogoh-Ogoh images for the new year, grotesque statues that are burned or thrown in the sea to fend off demons, has spread in the same time frame as the new mobility. The western notion of competition has spread amongst the youngsters, trying to best the other groups in the village with an even crazier statue.



Temple

The Indonesian state however, is kind of ambiguous about the foreign entrepreneurs and expatriates. Apart from trying to squeeze more money, above or below the table, out of them, they are definitely making it harder to exist here as a neo-colonialist. I have no more than a hunch here, but suspect the Javanese see this visa-meddling as an opportunity to get the businesses from the foreigners too (at a low price), and they are of course closer to the politicians in Jakarta. With more stringent visa-measures Indonesia forces expatriates to shorten their stays on Bali, forces more trips away, using the concept of reciprocity as a handy argument. But this is a dangerous and risky path. This could lead to a collapse of the real-estate market, already dangerously at risk. The Balinese could probably run the existing infrastructure, but not creatively develop it further, and innovation would draw the tourists elsewhere. The Indian government is doing the same, and there foreign investments by individuals are dwindling, the attraction of huge profits attracts big money, but it will leave as soon as it smells danger.

Contrasts

Going from Sanur to Ubud, driving around to the North, East and West Coast, the vulcano's and old Aga village, the contrasts are enormous. Seminyak in the South -West, the most rich beach area, is full with drunken Australian kids,



Sanur Beach

expensive shops and evermore villa's and hotels. It's a holiday place like everywhere, beach (dangerous but exciting surf), shops, restaurants, disco, but not very interesting for An-Jès and me. We liked the Ubud area (not

the very touristy main streets) and the somewhat hidden Michi Retreat (<http://www.michiretreat.com>) better, and went to Sanur beach for the last few days, it's a somewhat older and more culture oriented crowd there. Bali is great, but hot and in this season very humid, but with a airco car it can be done, the drivers are most friendly. By talking with many people, visiting private homes and just observing we got some insight in what makes Bali tick. We visited private homes, hidden very old temples and filmed a lot, temple rituals, cremation/funeral, Ogoh-Ogoh puppet making, Kecak dance, and even illegal cockfight from behind a wall.

Inner child

The culture of Bali is clearly more interdimensional, more in contact with the otherworld, the unseen, the spiritual. For me this means, (in the context of a rather complicated theoretical model of the psyche) that the Balinese are more in contact with their inner child, with as result less need to act, to create, to deal with the future. Their sense of time is different, with as a result different ways of evaluating profits, they think short term, sell now at a high price, if the customer never comes back is not a worry. It is also charming, there is less need for durable masks, they are friendly now, but don't need to stick to that. On the other hand, their friendly stance, also borrowing from their Hindu-Dharma spiritual practice, is a mask itself, an escape from a sometimes grim reality. Escape from family, fate, caste, poverty is very hard, tourism (or crime) or marriage outside is the only way. But what if you finally manage to get a job on an international cruise-ship, earn 600 dollar a month to save, but have to spend the proceeds of a year on your marriage when you return?

As I mentioned before, modern mobility (maybe 1,5 million scooters on 4 million Balinese) could destroy this mindset, but the twenty years of mass tourism seems not to have had enough impact to destroy the focus on the otherworld, the demons and gods, the ancestors and the nature forces. Offerings everywhere, every energy point has a shrine or small temple, every house, car or building receives offerings. Beautiful, touching, and psychologically this means the Balinese are much more in touch with the inner child (soul) than we (wo-

men up to 35%, men 10% or less in Bali). In psycho-anthropological terms, this is what sets Bali apart from our modern mindset, where we are less than 4% in that mode (mostly in dreams and sex). This has an effect on the perception of time, on the economic stance towards the future, and of course is related to accepting what is as a karmic condition. In my view of anthropology the relation with the "otherworld" is crucial, and this is mostly in the subconscious layers I call inner child (higher self/soul). Recognising the mask(s) and child modes in individuals as well as in larger society entities is essential to understanding them. As in individuals, societies tend to ignore or deny their unconscious drives, the trauma's that have led to (sub)-personalities, but history again and again shows these hidden energies as suddenly erupting and often decisive forces and root causes of the big drama.

Now looking at the Balinese they have an interesting mix of energies, quite different from the other Indonesian people. One way to look at that is the chakra focus of their religion and culture.



(Chandidasa) very old holy stone

The Hindu faith energetically relates most to the third chakra (truth-power), while the Muslim (and Jewish) are focussed on the fifth (voice, ruling the reality) and the Christian faith has the fourth chakra (love, blood) as main point. So the Balinese combination of animistic (first chakra), ancestor worship (second chakra) and Hindu(third) indicates a fairly practical and survival stance on life, and yet the Buddhist (sixth chakra) adds that visionary accent. All together an interesting mix, quite different from the Java energetic spectrum, and the question remains whether it will survive the onslaught of modern life, modern technology

and global tourism.

We can learn from all this, I certainly did, a trip to Bali can be an anthropological déjà-vue and help to understand our own lives better, but this requires more than just sitting on the beach, drink and enjoy the great food the island has to offer.

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