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978-0-521-29226-9 - The Anthropological Romance of Bali 1597-1972: Dynamic Perspectives in Marriage and Caste, Politics and Religion

James A. Boon

Excerpt

[More information](#)

# Introduction

## Beyond epic

On maps with a transverse mercator projection, Bali – in the very center of the Indonesian archipelago, which comprises the largest and most populous nation of Southeast Asia – lies about half as far from India as Hawaii. The same might be said of its Indo-Pacific culture.

This study combines fieldwork analysis, archival research, and the application of comparativist schemes of social institutions. It introduces Balinese studies to the nonspecialist by reviewing the history and direction of anthropological views of the island, and it interprets the interrelation of ideas and actions involving subsistence, marriage, caste, and the religious and political qualities of space. We are in search of more adequate holistic images of Balinese culture than those conveyed in the labels ordinarily applied: ‘Third World’ by planners, ‘Hindu’ by the Indonesian religious establishments, ‘paradise’ by sixteenth-century sailors as well as their twentieth-century bohemian successors, ‘pork-eating, noncircumcising heterodoxy’ by surrounding ardent Muslims, ‘marriers of father’s brother’s daughter’ by standard anthropological kinship theory, and many more.

Simple factual specifications on Bali are intriguing but ultimately unenlightening. In the Southeast Asian scheme of things, the island harbors one of those ‘miniature outposts of plains civilization’ (Burling 1964: 8) which benefits from monsoonal rains and whose dramatic irrigated terraces have yielded rich harvests of rice since at least the ninth century A.D. It is possibly the courts of Bali that are described by emissaries in the sixth-century Chinese *History of the Liang Dynasty*. Bali next appears in inscriptions as the seat of the tenth-century, South-Asian-style Varmadeva dynasty whose Sanskrit titles ‘indicate that the rulers considered themselves to be scions of the Satria family’ (Sarkar 1970: 46). It seems that subsequently Indo-Javanese culture was introduced by Udayana, whose sons (including Erlangga) continued until 1077. Little else can be guessed until 1343:

In the first part of the 13th century, Bali passed under Javanese hegemony again, because, according to the testimony of Chau Ju-kua, Bali was among the fifteen vassal States of Java. After the fall of Kadiri in 1222 A.D., she seems to have snapped the bond of yoke, because Paramesvara Sri Hyang ning hyang Adilancana bore a title signifying political independence. But this spell of independence was of short duration, as king Krtanagara of Java sent a military expedition to Bali in 1284 A.D. and imprisoned the king. The death of Krtanagara in 1292, however, signaled

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 Introduction

the reassertion of Balinese independence, but this was again quenched in blood in the Javanese military expedition of 1343 A.D., in which Gajah Mada distinguished himself. According to tradition preserved in the *Pamancangah*, the first capital was set up at Samprangan (about modern Gianyar) but *Usana Java* described the place to be Gelgel. These were the greatest days of Majapahitan imperialism; it ensured rapid transformation of Bali under the impact of Indo-Javanese influences which had started infiltrating into Bali since the 11th century. Indeed, it is clear from the decrees of 1394 and 1398 that Bali was still a dependency at the close of the 14th century A.D. If we now look back upon the History of Bali during the fourteenth century, we can say that the year 1343 was a turning point in the History of Bali, as it ensured a period of full Indo-Javanese-Balinese cultural synthesis and thereby provided a matrix for a refugee civilization from Java after the Muslim conquest (Sarkar 1970: 47–8).

As we shall see later, the ultimate significance of this turning point and the nature of this 'refugee civilization' are still being determined.

Bali's estimated current population is around 2.2 million, with an additional 0.2 million Bali-Hindus in the western part of neighboring Lombok, possibly subjected by Bali's eastern kingdom Karangasem as early as the eighteenth century (cf. Crawford 1820: 136). These millions are compressed on Bali into less than 6,000 square kilometers (including nearby Nusa Penida), less than 20 percent of it suitable for double-irrigated rice harvests and over 30 percent comprised of unproductive wasteland and critical forest reserves (cf. Raka 1955). Population has soared throughout this century. In 1921 Lekkerkerker records it as 859,400; the total for the colonial census of 1930 was 1,101,393. The Indonesian national census of 1961 was 1,782,529, and the election registration figure of 1971 was 2,106,264 (Hanna 1972a: 2). None of these figures is reliable but the broad trend is obvious. Since the 1960s the old favored varieties of rice have been replaced by the less delectable high-yield strains (now mechanically hulled) associated with Asia's 'Green Revolution', but production still falls short of the island's needs (Ravenholt 1973, Hanna 1972c). Moreover, in Bali as in Java a priority government program is the transmigration of village groups to the Outer Islands where they can establish outposts of wet-rice technology. In Bali, however, the indisputably top-priority program is tourism, the impact of which is concentrated in a small triangle of south-southeast Bali stretching between the airport on the island's sandspit, the capital Den Pasar, and several artisan and beachside communities eastward (McKean and Bagus 1971, Hanna 1972b).

Everyone has heard of Bali, if not in touristic lore saluting this supposed tropical Shangri-la, then in news dispatches concerning either the devastating volcano eruption in 1963 that obliterated lives, villages, temples, and precious paddy, or the massacres during 1965–6 that eliminated tens of thousands of suspected Communist party sympathizers. In Bali as elsewhere in Indonesia this aftermath (as much over land as politics) to the attempted coup in Jakarta appears to have marked the end of a luxuriant proliferation of partisan organizations since independence in 1948.

These topical specifications suggest many epithets for Bali other than 'land of a

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

### 3 *Beyond epic*

thousand temples:’ overpopulated, underfed, intensely politicized, ecologically perilous, violent. Taken together and in the island’s superficially serene context, what do they mean? In this study such isolated facts of history, subsistence, population pressure, and political tragedy will be related to complex patterns of values and actions in Balinese culture. Certain areas neglected in earlier research receive special attention: the connections among distant localities, apart from the defunct political and military organization of precolonial states; the process of title and status mobility in a changing society; and the complementarity in Bali between principles of caste and principles of marriage. We move across the history of ideas of Bali to analyze flexibilities in basic social, political, and economic institutions and profound religious, ritual, and literary concerns. To lend the whole a thematic coherence, we develop along the way an extended analogy between Bali’s dynamic, lustrous culture and Indo-European principles of ‘romance.’

Whatever Epic may mean, it implies some weight and solidity; Romance means nothing, if it does not convey some notion of mystery and fantasy (Ker 1957:4).

‘Romance’ – no frivolous epithet this, but a highly charged concept from comparative world literature and the history of ideas concerning the relation between social rules, literary images of historical change, and the beliefs and practices of different components of a political and religious hierarchy. In its abstract sense as a view of society and history, romance emerges out of epic. Epic posits constant, consistently principled, heroic familial aristocracies whose leaders establish the lawful and the just at the expense of the enemies of right. Romance portrays vulnerable, disguised protagonists, partial social misfits who sense surpassing ideals and must prove the ultimate feasibility of actualizing those ideals often against magical odds. In principle, epic legitimates a ruling elite, explains the sacred underpinnings of its authority, and portrays the expansion of its system of culture and law. Romance qualifies such solid, stolid, architectonic achievements in the blood line; it envisions sacred forces less limited to, controlled by, and correlated with temporal authority. Romance detects tears in the hierarchical fabric, and its task is to stitch them in time. While the distinction between epic and romance is usually applied to literature, it can reflect on cultures as well.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the labels themselves are only relative. Every epic – whether expressed in cultural forms or literary texts or, as usual, both – contains seeds of romance; and every romance harbors souvenirs of epic. In general, epic forms project the more grave image of aristocratic heroics. Romance properly concerns champions rather than heroes; they are, sociologically speaking, unsuitable candidates for sacred elevation, but they are surrounded by signs and tokens of semimiraculous birth, prone to mystical insights, and acquainted with the natural and rustic orders more intimately than their privileged aristocratic counterparts.

Epic is a monumentalization of the ruling authority, the highborn singing their own achievements to themselves. Romance is a popularization that embraces ver-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

#### 4 Introduction

naular concerns, a compromise between courtly standards and the surrounding sub-literate world. Romance studiously incorporates local native lore into the imagery of the political and religious elite. Thus, for example, the great Arthurian romances of twelfth-century Europe hearken wistfully back to the epic days of King Arthur but themselves deal with post-heroic episodes of fallible adventurers who encounter the Druidic magic of forests, the sacralia of Christ, and the new-found wonders of romantic epiphanies of love.

The two strains of Western literature often isolated as 'first epic' (for example, *Song of Roland*), 'then romance' (for example, *Yvain*) are consolidated in Hindu literary genres. Yet throughout Indo-European traditions the epic attitude stresses birthright, propitiation of the gods, clashes of good and evil, and the eventual victory of legitimate political and religious authority; it is weighty. Romance reveals more personalized individuals, earthy champions in mystic contact with divine protectors as they engage the complex world; it is fantastic. The romance strain of South Asian literary materials possibly developed after the epic strain. But the two are intimately intertwined in those tales and legends collected and recorded as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, this 'library of opera' dating from 400 B.C. to 400 A.D. in India (Van Buitenen 1973: xxv), and still presented in courtly Javanese arts and performed everywhere in Bali. For us the essential point is that the romance characteristics of these South Asian sources have been highlighted in Bali and indeed augmented in its social life. While the pre-Islamic Javanese social and religious context possibly echoed the epic aspects of Hindu texts, the Balinese social and religious context that perpetuated and elaborated these same sources after Java became Islamized came to reflect their romance aspects in its marriage rules, its concepts of mystical powers, its theories of individual love, and much more.

The same point can be put more boldly. If, for example, the *Mahabharata* is composed according to both a 'baronial tradition' and a 'newer and less baronial imagination' (Van Buitenen 1973: xix), then Java, we can conjecture, accentuated the former and Bali, we are sure, accentuated the latter. The South Asian literary cycles contain many implicit models for sociocosmological systems; consider, for example, 'the tangle of the Adiparan, which begins, one might say, with folktale, moves into myth then romance and dynastic legend intermingled with something like hagiography, and only then, never abandoning these threads, winds them into the fabric of a gradually emerging epic' (Hiltebeitel 1974: 230). Whereas Hindu-Javanese courts styled themselves after the implicit dynastic-epic dimensions, or appear to have done so from the records that remain, Hindu-Bali grew increasingly to reflect the dimensions of romance. Particularly when seen from a comparativist perspective, the workings of Balinese marriage, caste-status, and political authority today conform more to principles of romance than to principles of epic. Such dynamics lend Bali the air of a social, and literary, romance in action.

Balinese literature and ritual often evoke an ideal golden age of harmonious hierarchical order in a well tuned cosmos. This age is identified with Java and with the elite perpetuators of Javanese courts who supposedly conveyed heightened civiliz-

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James A. Boon

Excerpt

[More information](#)5 *Beyond epic*

ation to Bali. While we do not know whether the civilization of Majapahit Java was in actuality epical, the important point is that many Balinese think it was. The ritual manuals of Brahmana priests in Bali try to emulate such a Brahmanical age where 'the baronage is in league with brahminism, and brahminism is allied with the baronage' in directing the ultimate rites of religious and political life. On this epic image as well, the Netherlands modeled its colonial administration. But other portions of Balinese literature, ritual, and social rules place value on the recurring interruptions in this hierarchical order and on the incursion of mystic revelation at certain times and places for certain individuals. These elements of Balinese culture highlight social change, romantic adventure, and shifts and tensions in the religious and political hierarchy. Moreover, in both Java and Bali the Hindu literary and dramatic view of life ebbs and flows above a satirical, sometimes farcical, undercurrent. The fool-like Indonesian clowns – beloved of the people and the god-kings alike – who persistently reflect and reject courtly comportment, attitudes, and obsessions, without ever overthrowing them, are like a persistent promise of romance even where the epic vision seems to have won out. Even in the more stately dramatic and literary images of royal Java, the clowns execute pratfalls amidst the perfected hierarchies between gods and men and between rulers and subjects. The clowns suggest the ever present impending necessity to dismantle, to adapt, to humanize, even to vulgarize courtly schemes, at least temporarily, in order to survive. Bali, then, is the macrohistorical realization of this promise of the clowns. It is the latest – or last? – adaptation, vernacularization, and reorientation of the hierarchies of Hindu-Buddhist Indonesia.

The traditional pliability of the Balinese social order was long neglected by outside observers for historical and sometimes for political reasons. Early philologists discerned in large part the rigid epic side of Balinese life and history, presumably in continuity with Java, because they relied on the literary texts of Brahmana priests and ruling courts which are the mainstay of a static view of religion and society. But at other levels of the social order, exceptions to the hierarchy have always been crucial. And many developments in modern Bali concerning caste, marriage, religion, and politics can be explained only in reference to the traditional means of understanding adjustments in the status quo.

This then is part of the romance of Bali: an alternate outlook on society and history implicit in social rules, ritual, and literature. This dynamic view typically characterizes not the epical, and apical, ranks of the hierarchy, nor the bottom ranks whose members often revere the apex as mortals revere gods, but the active middling families and locales as they seek to gain advantage from new contexts – for example, in the context of modern Bali. Yet even modern Bali is not precisely a 'new' context since it conforms to articulate patterns in old Balinese ideas of historical and cultural flux.

A holistic concept of Bali as romance might appear a throwback to anyone familiar with earlier Dutch views on the island. Bali was first perceived and repeatedly described as 'feudal.' The label evoked certain prerogatives of its overlords and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 Introduction

priestly castes, in particular their enhanced religious worth and favored treatment under law for criminal offenses. The Dutch could thus justify liberating Balinese peasants from a vestigial Dark Age. But proclaiming Bali feudal obscured crucial aspects of landownership, subsistence production, and the nature of the bonds joining one Balinese to another, whether his equal, superior, or subordinate.<sup>2</sup>

The question thus becomes: if not feudal, what? And the preliminary answers are best shrouded in syllogisms. One such syllogism, perhaps useful in providing bearings for the non-Asianist, is this: If pre-Islamic Java were Renaissancelike in its elaborate schemes, certainly rivaling Plotinus or Plato, of the interrelation of cosmos, art, and society, then Bali was and is more loosely mannerist. The supposedly powerful and centralized courts of Hindu-Buddhist Java recorded their control of vast stretches of fertile plains. History tells us that Bali then served as a repository for the grandiose schemes of divine monarchy, caste divisions, religious purity, and stratified political authority, many of whose proponents apparently abandoned Java upon the advent of Islam. But ethnography reveals that this stately apparatus was somewhat top-heavy for such an islet. Bits and pieces of Majapahit Java's majestic florescence were squeezed into the few small plains and many ravines of a probably underpopulated mountainous acreage the size of Delaware. If this process had involved merely a few formal migrations, it would have been rather like condensing the whole of Versailles – values, ideas, pageants, authority, literature, and architecture – onto the Isle St. Louis or packing the belief system of the Vatican and its supporting Italian states off to a shrunken Sardinia. As we shall see, it is more likely that Balinese hierarchy emerged less abruptly during a centuries-long give and take with East Java and other sources of Hindu-Buddhist traditions. While Bali's court centers continued to manifest intransigence and distance, the hierarchical patterns they embodied doubtless filtered downward. Although actual rajas were few, most commoners could be sufficiently acquainted with high-caste practices to assume rajalike airs vis-à-vis their younger brothers, sons or nephews, and they could demand honorifics and general forms of respect to express this relationship. The courts, of course, remained exclusive and they kept tight control on access to certain privileges and kinds of expertise. Yet, we can surmise that, as many expressions of status were in a relative sense popularized, policies of irrigation control, principles of marriage, and other social and political correlates of the symbolic schemes, along with the schemes themselves, were adjusted and refined to engage the more properly Balinese conditions, with the elaborate scope and scale of the earlier Javanese infrastructure now gone.

At the close of the sixteenth century, a few Dutch sailors stumbled into this complex situation, thus initiating the long adventure of trying to understand the process from outside, even as new events were continually altering it. The often overlooked flexibility of Bali has grown particularly conspicuous during the post-colonial era, especially since 1965. And regardless of how Bali evolved from pre-Islamic Java, it is certain that within Bali today the dynamics of romance recur.

By reiterating the notion of romance, I hope to create a field of associations



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 7 *Beyond epic*

between Balinese social, religious, and literary patterns. After reading this study, it should seem appropriate that, for example: (1) South Asian motifs have been incorporated into Panji tales which, however, articulate a distinctly Balinese marriage system and a perhaps Oceanic value on individual love; and (2) although Balinese rice bins are filled with a regularity that suggests social stability, the continual shifts and realignments in actual residence, status relations, and political forces – often conceptualized as caste bonds and divisions among temple congregations – allow baronial ambitions to rise and fall, ebb and flow, ricocheting through diverse sectors of society, including communist ones, even occasionally to surge out of the lower echelons in the form of mystic quests to sacred founts of divine authority according to ideals that are as much political as religious.

Balinese culture is, then, a romance of ideas and actions which, like any romance, implicitly plays against an alternative self-image. Within Balinese traditions this image of fixed order, which we would call an alter-epic, is called in stratificational terms *warna* or caste, in political terms ‘divine kingship,’ and in historical terms ‘Majapahit Java.’ This implicit epic is the set of social and cultural ideas Bali persistently wanes from and waxes to but has probably never quite embodied and perhaps never conceivably could. Yet more often than not it is this alter-epic that has been proffered by outside observers as the simplified essence of Bali, thus obscuring the far more alluring romance.

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[More information](#)

## Part I

# Temporal perspectives

Every perspective requires a metaphor, implicit or explicit, for its organizational base.

(Burke 1957: 132)

The case could be argued that, by itself, the favored anthropological endeavor called fieldwork rarely if ever provides an original holistic theory of a particular culture. In the broad task of conceptualizing the very nature of a body of ethnographic data – in the properly ethnological task – fieldwork merely confirms past assumptions while adding a few details hitherto overlooked. Of course ethnographic descriptions rely on field data, but they derive from an ethnological tradition as well; and this fact is worth stressing, even celebrating. It points up the side of anthropology that is a cumulative, humanistic discipline at times incorporating, to borrow a recent felicitous phrase from Margaret Mead, ‘echoes and analogies from four centuries and many minds’ (1974: 908). Indeed, anthropology is more a cumulative discipline than the portable, ruggedly individual laboratory it often tries to appear. Accordingly, before broaching any ethnography, one does well to consider how the general frameworks and approaches it relies on ever materialized. The following chapters attempt not to explain the history of Balinese ethnology, but to suggest it as a set of intriguing problems – in intellectual and social history, as well as in anthropology – each worth more elaborate study in its own right.



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## I. Bali-tje: a discursive history of the earlier ethnology (post-1597)

The first images of Balinese culture were happily inscribed on Western consciousness following a stop there in 1597 by Cornelis de Houtman's renowned *eerste schipvaart* to the East Indies. Evidence exists that Magellan's expedition had sighted so-called Java Minor some eighty years earlier, that the Portuguese had contacted Bali in midcentury, and that Sir Francis Drake and Thomas Cavendish predated Houtman's arrival by a few years (Hanna 1971a: 1–2). The island's name was known from a list of the Lesser Sundas obtained in 1521 by Magellan's scribe Pigafetta (Lach 1965: 2). But the initial representations of Balinese customs to enter the Western record were fruits of Houtman's final, perhaps least productive, and definitely most appealing stop.

### Hindu spectacles

Most twentieth-century commentators on the history of Dutch-Balinese relations draw pleasure from the fact that they began not with a shot, but a seduction:

The island had nothing to offer in the form of trade, but there were other attractions – a carefree way of life and comely women . . . Two young men found these charms irresistible, and the fleet sailed without them (Masselman 1963: 96).

Covarrubias exaggerates this point in relating that Houtman and his men 'fell in love with the island' and 'after a long sojourn . . . [they actually stayed less than a month] returned to Holland to report the discovery of the new "paradise"; others refused to leave Bali' (1937: 29).

We have no clear idea why these sailors abandoned their shipmates. The official report on Bali was not quite ecstatic, merely relatively positive in light of difficulties experienced by the beleaguered expedition in establishing trade agreements in Java. To the weary explorers, Bali became a pause for recuperation before returning home. Their favorable accounts of their experience produced the original image of what we might appropriately deem 'dear little Bali' (Bali-tje).

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James A. Boon

Excerpt

[More information](#)11 *Bali-tje: a discursive history*

## From the anecdotal to the sensational

Maps and reports of Bali were completed and published by 1598. Its size and mountainous profile lent themselves well to sixteenth-century guides to navigation; Bali's different volcanoes are identifiable from the first drawings. In 1598 a map appeared which illustrated the rajas and battling armies mentioned in a verbal account.<sup>1</sup> This chart is called 'crude and sloppy' in a modern commentary, but it is better appreciated as a different sort of illustration, a visual caption to communicate that the name 'Baly' stood for a mountainous, many rivered, war-waging island. Moreover, this conceptual portrait accurately situates the sacred mountain Gunung Agung and reveals the complex river drainage through the southern plains.

In 1625, the first thorough-going English summary of Dutch impressions of Bali (which does not forget to mention British claims of prior contact) is included by the Jacobean Samuel Purchas in his edited collection of the discovery literature left unpublished at the death of Richard Hakluyt:

. . . Baly they called Hollandiola, for the fertilitie; there they watered.

They sent to the King, who accompanied the Messenger to the shoare in a Chariot drawne with Buffals, holding the Whip in his owne hands, having three hundred followers, some with flame-formed Crises and long Speares, Bowes of Canes with poysoned Arrowes. Hee was feasted in Dishes of solid Gold. The Land is an equall and fertile plaine to the West, watered with many little Rivers (some made by hand) and so peopled that the King is able to bring into the field three hundred thousand foot, and one hundred thousand horsemen. Their horse are little like Islanders, their men blacke and using little Merchandize, but with Cotton Cloth in Prawes. The Iland is in compasse about twelve Germane miles. Their Religion is Ethnike, ordered by the Brachmanes or Bramenes, in whose Disciplines the King is trayned up. They have also Banianes which weare about their neckes a stone as bigge as an Egge with a hole in it, whence hang forth three threds; they call it Tambarene, and thinke the Deitie thereby represented: they abstaine from flesh and fish, but not (as the Java Pythagoreans) from Marriage. Once they may marry, and when they dye their Wives are buried quicke with them. Every seventh day they keepe holy, and many other Holidayes in the yeare besides with solemne Ceremonies. Their Wives burne with their dead Husbands. Here they heard of Captaine Drakes being there eightene yeares before, and called one Strait by his name. The King observeth state, is spoken to with hands folded, by the best. The Quillon hath power there as the Chancellor in Poland. Two of their companie forsooke them and stayed on the Iland. And of the two hundred fortie nine there were now left but ninetie. In February they began their returne (Purchas 1625).

Purchas distilled his overview from the more lengthy Dutch logs and journals, taking several accompanying plates as guides to the primary features of Balinese life. These early descriptions include William Lodewyckszoon's log of the expedition, which ap-