

Commodifying Bali

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Abstract Bali is not the first tropical region that has been transformed for and by a growing tourism industry. The process of commodification is speeding up exponentially, its roots arguably dating back all the way to colonial times, resulting in complications exceeding the obvious environmental issues. To grasp the situation, this article categorizes the process into three main areas. Balinese culture, including religious sites and ceremonies, art forms and symbols, as well as society and people's psychology, Balinese natural environment, and the built environment. The realization of profit-oriented projects often disregards the immediate effects on the environment, local culture, and urban design, which is contributing to a shifting self-perception in Balinese society. Suartika and Cuthbert (2020) and Picard (1990), although thirty years apart, describe the appropriation of Balinese culture by capitalist ideas of tourism through Balinese society itself, while Suartika and Cuthbert (2018, 2020) report of a returning awareness and emerging resistance movements. Nevertheless, Balinese culture is being transformed to appeal to an international audience for economic growth. The same relates to nature along with the built environment. Conservation efforts and environmental laws are unable to decrease the environmental decay, resulting in mayor problems like pollution and water scarcity. The ongoing commodification of Bali might relate to economic growth, however, it only benefits individuals and powerful interest groups, not Balinese society. Raising awareness to the mindset that has established itself in many tourists and locals alike, through educating and speaking up, as attempted in this paper, could help change the way Bali is perceived globally. The financial means for appropriate and sustainable growth, if utilized reflectively, are given, which would ultimately help the capitalist tourism industry become the solution, rather than the problem. Excessive tourism without reflection, as observed in major touristic hotspots and in cultural heritage sites alike, is unsustainable and can ultimately lead to the collapse of the Balinese economy and environment. Tourism, that appreciates and respects the actual culture and beauty of the island is way more beneficial to all parties involved.

Index Terms— balinese society, commodification, economy, environment, perception, tourism

I. INTRODUCTION

Bali, the island of gods, affordable luxury and a tropical paradise, narratives which the tourism industry has pushed on travelers and vacationers all over the globe. For several decades, still recovering from many years of colonialism, but rich in its cultural identity and heritage, Bali has been shaped and commodified for economic growth. Sacred temples have turned into mere Instagram hotspots, shorelines are being covered in concrete in rivalry for the best sunset spot and rice terraces are being flattened to accommodate yet another breakfast spot. All the while developers disregard ecological problems that naturally arise from sealing permeable soil and cutting down acres of jungle. Laws are in place, yet it seems easy to navigate and avoid them. Art forms, heritage sites and customs, that to Balinese society felt like natural features of their culture are being put on display for commercial purposes. Not only by

foreign investors, but just as much by Balinese locals. This begs the question whether a new self-perception has already established itself. Cultures can change, just like vernacular architecture can change and adapt over long periods of time. Both culture and nature are seen as commodities, merely more ways to make profit. May it be for self-enrichment or a sheer necessity to make pay. On the other hand, religious customs and symbols like offerings, festive decorations and ceremonies do not appear to be ingenuine. In this combination of authenticity and public display, be it purposely or not, probably lies the successful marketing of Bali and its cultural heritage. Going even one step further, the commodification does not stop at the cultural sites and ceremonies but has arguably reached a point of commodification of people's psychology. This might sound a bit extreme, yet poverty in Bali is more present than one might think. Although reaching a high-level education is possible, easy access to basic education, especially in rural areas, is often not guaranteed. A large percentage of the population is forced to financially rely on tourists and is therefore willing to commit to the capitalist mindset of

servicing foreigners for low wages, as well as commodifying their culture. This relationship has resulted in a social segregation and a society of multiple classes, which unfortunately sometimes even reflects in the way tourists or expats treat locals.

This inflated description of the situation is merely meant to highlight and clarify the topics discussed in this paper. The following paragraphs shall shed some light on the actual grievances and how they have been enabled and pushed onto a society.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Papers on the topic of commodifying culture, specifically the development of Bali as a major tourist destination, have been being published for over half a century. While in the beginning rather uncritical or optimistic (Francillon 1975; McKean 1987), more light has been shed on the dangers that come with increasing cultural as well as environmental appropriation. As mentioned, Bali is not the first tropical island that has fallen victim to over tourism, take Boracay in the Philippines as an example to illustrate the dangers of exploiting a culture for financial growth (Mueller 2020). The island had to be shut down entirely for two years in an attempt to regulate the real estate and property market as well as recover from significant environmental damage. The reopening of the island was supposed to implement a more controlled tourism industry that preserves the vernacular culture and environment, by establishing a tourism tax and raising awareness by marking protected cultural and natural sites. Unfortunately, those good intentions did not prove to be sufficient and the island is again finding itself in a downward spiral.

The following works discuss the different aspects of commodification in Bali and will provide the basis for this paper's discussion. Selectively summarizing and reviewing for this paper relevant research and arguments provides a comprehensive overview of the situation and the key elements, that this paper will further elaborate on.

"Sustaining the unsustainable? Environmental impact assessment and overdevelopment in Bali" was published in November 2018 and sums up the ongoing environmental crises in Bali and their legal background. The overdevelopment of tourism and real estate is speeding up an unsustainable development leading to water shortage, conversion of agricultural land into real estate properties, pollution as well as an economic and cultural displacement. The EIA (Indonesian environmental impact assessment) is Indonesia's most important tool to prevent said impacts and environmental changes. Every project, that might affect the environment, landscape or natural resources in any way, must be assessed and evaluated under EIA criteria. The paper discusses errors and discontinuities of the environmental law and its relation to politics. Warren and Wardana claim that though the EIA portrays a significant improvement, through influences in the legal processes by vested interests, it remains a tool for powerful developers to enforce their unsustainable developments. By presenting

case studies, they underline and confirm this assessment.

Michel Picard is a respected scholar when it comes to analyzing the interrelationship between touristic developments and cultural traditions in Bali. In his work "Cultural Tourism in Bali' Cultural Performances as tourist attractions" he elaborates on the difficulties in preserving true Balinese heritage and distinguishing it from cultural performances that are merely aimed at monetary enrichment. In doing so, the paper refers to the American anthropologist Philip McKean, who in the 1970s argued, that financial means and international attention are resulting in a 'cultural renaissance' of Balinese culture and a reinforcement of pride and interest within the Balinese society. Picard, though, comes to the conclusion, that the cultural pollution and the official attempts on categorizing performances by creating barriers between the sacred, meant for the people of Bali and the 'Gods', and the profane, meant for tourists, only led to confusion within the Balinese society. Touristic performances *become* Balinese tradition, while the touristification of Balinese culture is understood as the promised 'cultural renaissance' by both tourists and Balinese locals alike.

Also talking about the abstraction and appropriation of culture by capital and their ties to Indonesia's colonial history all the way to the post dictatorship development of globalization and capitalism, the paper "Sleight of Hand: The Expropriation of Balinese Culture" (2020) focuses on the concepts and methods of expropriation, exploitation and appropriation, and their resulting effects on Balinese environment, economy and culture. For the past few decades, Bali's development has been shaped and strongly influenced by powerful interest groups, their personal relationships and their capital, resulting in a conflict between local and global interests. Official building laws and consensus rooted in Balinese society are being bent and freely interpreted to exceed building regulations and devalue cultural sites. This process is, according to Cuthbert and Suartika, credited to a larger process of expropriation of Balinese tradition. Cultural values like landscapes, architecture, art forms as well as religious ceremonies and even symbols are being turned into commodities and implemented in commercial development, real estate, advertisement campaigns to elevate Bali's status as a paradise for tourists, tours, exhibitions and more, with the sole aim of gaining capital. Although referring to Picard's thesis of a shifting self-perception in Balinese society, a recent rise in awareness among the people of Bali can be reported. Several projects, that would have severely impacted the Balinese "Way of Life" were suspended due to actual resistance movements, like the *Tolak Reklamasi* movement (Smith 2018). To date, this environmental movement has successfully fought off the plans to develop southern Bali's mangrove conservation zone into a huge artificial island resort. The paper's authors place their hope on an increasing awareness among Balinese people caused by conflicts of interests between local and global ambitions, leading to the establishment of a new *class for itself*, meaning pursuing their *own* interests, identity.



Figure 1. Tolak Reformasi Movement in 2018

III. METHOD

In order to understand the issue of commodifying Bali, we must look at global developments in the tourism industry. Overtourism and everything that comes with it is not unique to Bali, but rather a global phenomenon. As reviewed in the works of Mueller (2020), the aftermath of overtourism can be an enormous threat to cultural identity, as seen in Boracay in the Philippines. The situation in Bali is not unlike this case and resulting changes in society are already visible.

This paper focusses on the problem of commodification of Bali, dividing it into three main aspects. As discussed in the works of M. Picard as well as G.A.M. Suartika and A. Cuthbert, there has been a shift of psychology and self-perception in Balinese society that affects almost every aspect of their cultural and religious heritage. It is not only the foreign investors coming onto the island to transform it into a hotspot destination for all kinds of tourism, but also the Balinese locals, that are working on pushing the mentioned narrative of living in a tropical paradise. Since this topic is composed of several aspects, ranging from cultural products to religious sites, as well as nature itself, it will make up a large portion of the discussion.

Appropriation of the natural environment along with the built environment is closely related to the commodification of Balinese culture. Although certain laws are in place to regulate urban development and therefore to protect the environment through legislature, construction activity on the island has never been bigger. It begs the question, how the attempts on regulating the city density are actually protecting Balinese culture and environment. Looking at a few projects which best represent the grievances arising through uncontrolled growth, the impact of such developments should be obvious to the eye.

Many jobs are closely tied to the tourism industry, which also relates closely to the shift in self-perception. Undeniably, a society of multiple social and financial layers has established itself and it appears as if Balinese culture defines itself by hospitality, service and selling their culture, rather than celebrating its rich heritage. The graphic (2) untangles the network of production and capitalism revolving around the tourism industry. The discussion section will assess the issues of this economic reliance and

whether it is a necessity or a burden and on a more positive note, what kind of potential it might hold..

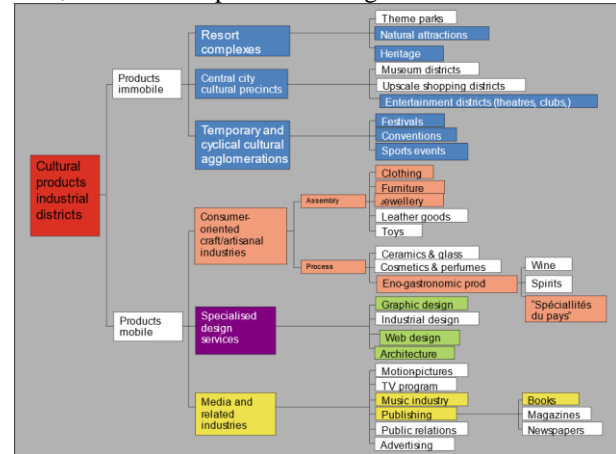


Figure 2. Cultural Products Industry (A. R. Cuthbert)

A summary of the topics as well as an assessment of the opinions discussed can be found in the conclusion section of this article. Furthermore, this section contains a potential forecast of the situation in touristic hotspots as well as in Balinese society, if this development is further sustained. Finally, it shall present possible solutions or adjustments that could raise awareness and ultimately lead to a changing perception.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Culture and Heritage Why is Bali so attractive for tourists and expats? Beaches, jungles and rice terrasses, waterfalls and tropical climate. Sure, but you can find that practically anywhere on the globe around 0 degrees of longitude. Hovering above anything else and really distinguishing Bali from other places, or *destinations*, is the seemingly flourishing, unique culture, that is portraying a “cultural renaissance” (Picard 1990). But there are two sides to the same coin. Cultural heritage and religion are obviously still a very important aspect in the average Balinese daily life. Fragrant offerings pervade the streets on a daily basis and during special celebrations like *galungan* and *kuningan* decorated bamboo poles grow from the ground like street lanterns. The contradicting, yet somehow harmonious intercorrelation of contemporary, western influenced architecture in touristic areas with these portraits of ancient culture create a uniquely charming atmosphere.

Researching the accurate term for the decorated bamboo poles (*penjor*) on the internet, conveniently presents the perfect opportunity to make a transition to “the other side of the coin”. The first hit is a website advertising the religious holidays *galungan* and *kuningan* as a great opportunity to join traditional prayer ceremonies and to visit the beautiful temples. While most tourists have likely experienced that Balinese people are proud to share their rich cultural heritage to some extent, the intense cultural tourism has in the eyes of experts led to cultural pollution (Picard 1990).

During colonial times, Bali was already recognized as something special, something that is worth preserving. Though tourism had not yet developed, Bali was kept as a

living museum. However, the Dutch authority deemed it fit to remove cultural object and portraits of Balinese heritage to present them at exhibitions in Europe. It was not until the early 20th century, that learned scholars would recognize the flaw in that and bring portions of the stolen relics back to Bali to establish the Bali Museum in Denpasar. This short digression is intended to clarify the background of appropriation and even expropriation that has in some ways continued to this day and has therefore become a firm component of Balinese identity. The fact that for centuries outside voices, beginning with the Dutch and continued by today's tourism industry, have identified Bali as a cultural and natural paradise has likewise found its way into the mindset of Balinese society.



Figure 3. "Gate of Heaven" at Pura Lempuyang

Balinese people, without realizing it, are themselves working on commodifying their culture for economic gain. To avoid tourists' fatigue, ceremonies are being shorted and abstracted. Picard (1990) elaborates greatly on the abstraction of dance performances and how touristic events are being confused as actual heritage, not only by tourists but in Balinese societies perception as well. Balinese temples are opened to the public, making them overrun by tourists. These former strictly religious sites are now operationalized and therefore commodified into yet another way to increase capital. Hence, the commodification of heritage sites creates a commercial barrier between the sites and the spiritual locals, complicating and disturbing religious practices like ceremonies and prayers and making

them seem almost unwanted by the operator. The construction of these temples occasionally dates back hundreds of years, combining forgotten archaic construction methods with local materials. Modifications and renovations on these buildings are synonymous with the degradation of the value of the site. Conservation efforts need to be minimal and carefully executed and, in some cases, better left undone. It is doubtful that touristic temples have been preserved in their original form, but rather transformed according to the visitors' expectations, making heritage sites appeal to the masses for economic gain (Mueller 2021). The popular Pura Lempuyang in eastern Bali offers only a small, designated area for worshippers, while the lower part of the temple is being expropriated for its scenic picture spot, titled "Gate of Heaven" (3). It was restored in 2001 by local communities and the Indonesian government, turning it into the stunning temple that tourists are standing in line for to visit. To be fair, during special holidays, the temple will be closed to the public to enable undisturbed ceremonies. Another temple, Pura Ulun Danu Bratan, was described to me as some sort of amusement park, where the main focus was not on the architecture or the temples symbolic meaning, but rather on selling souvenirs and other "cultural" objects (2) to squeeze as much money out of the heritage site as possible.

Another prime example stands for the subversion of Balinese culture more than anything else and also relates to the idea of utilizing and commercializing religious symbols (Suartika et al 2018). The Garuda Wisnu Kencana Cultural Park, often abbreviated as GWK, accommodates a shopping plaza, restaurants, art exhibitions, daily dance and theatre performances, and regularly hosts large musical festivals. In short: it pretty much encapsulates the previously described commercialization of Balinese culture. All of it is centered around the 121m tall statue of the Hindu deity *Wisnu* riding his vehicle, the mystical, eagle-like *Garuda*. Supporters and promoters of the GWK describe the statue as a symbol of Indonesia's cultural heritage, while the opposition, led by Hindu religious leaders, reduce it to an attempt to attract more tourists in the region and commodify the religious symbol (Coconuts Bali 2017). Despite widespread critique the project was eventually completed in 2018 and developed into the aspired tourist attraction selling "authentic" cultural experiences, with the entrance fee for daily admission varying between 300.000 and 400.000 IDR (currently translates to about 18-24€).



Figure 4. GWK Statue & Kecak Dance Performance at GWK cultural park

Products Traditional art forms and fashion are losing

their authenticity through the implementation of western production techniques and mass production. The graphic by Cuthbert (1) presents the complexity and variety of these artificial cultural products, that in most cases are not even being produced where they are being consumed, so in that way are not even contributing to, but rather harming local economy. These products are then not only charged with artificial meaning and sold to tourists, but due to affordable prices through mass production, they are also used and accepted in the local communities, representing cultural pollution.

Architecture Briefly, I would like to address the topic of architecture and the utilization of traditional, vernacular elements. These elements can range from local materials to distinctive features and adaptations to the climate and other environmental factors, as well as the appropriation of cultural symbols and ornaments to feign authenticity. Different styles are implemented and merged in a postmodern manner as a means to respect local architecture while simultaneously meeting western standards. Considerately and respectfully juggling vernacular elements and western standards to properly integrate into the natural or built environment can produce exemplary architecture that paves the way to a more sustainable and future-oriented urban landscape. This “east meets west” principle is trying to be conveyed at Udayana University in Bali, as an attempt to transform the ongoing development and raise awareness in the industry. Recapitulating, Architects may incorporate traditional symbols and design elements as an homage to the rich Balinese heritage, rather than attempting to forge or copy them for capital growth. Villa Rosha in Puncak (Java) by Bentley Design Studios is an acclaimed example for dealing with Balinese architecture outside of Bali and can be examined next to numerous additional projects, that are delicately adapting meaningful symbolics, in the design studios compilation of works titled “paradise by design” published in 2008. Simply copying religiously charged elements like the pagoda and taking it out of a religious context would mean appropriation. To avoid mimicry and to demonstrate a clear, respectful dissociation to a cultural site, the architects used an even number of pagodas, instead of the symbolic uneven number used in Hindu temples (5). Little adaptations like that show a deep understanding of Balinese symbolism and can be observed all over Villa Rosha by the trained eye. Profit oriented developers show less attention to detail and oftentimes include symbols and elements in their designs in an attempt to portray authenticity to the tourists. These symbols and ornaments are taken out of context and only utilized for their aesthetics or are given different meanings.

Psychology In this paragraph, the delicate topic of people as a commodity, or rather the commodification of people’s psychologies, will be addressed. Hospitality seems to have been ingrained into Balinese psychology, contributing to the tourism industries paradisaic narrative. Many jobs are tied to and rely on tourism, which has established a serving culture. The gap between currencies

and incomes, most service personal works for the minimum wage of the equivalent of around 240€ a month, is creating a society of classes, with a majority of Balinese locals not being able to afford to live in touristic hotspots or consume the same products as tourists. Delivery and transportation merchants will work for surprisingly low wages and are forced to work long hours to accumulate a decent pay. Cafés and restaurants are usually highly overstaffed, which devalues the individual worker and contributes to an unhealthy self-perception. Foreigners, that are operating with different financial means, are placed in an unnatural position of power over local people, which ultimately resembles a long obsolete societal structure.



Figure 5. Pavilion at Villa Rosha from “paradise by design”

Built Environment Expatriates from all over the world have chosen Bali as their temporary home. Millions of tourists visit the tropical island every year. This gravitational pull has been constructed by the local as well as the international tourism industry and is generating a huge capital that is arguably not going into the right hands. In order to accommodate these ever-growing numbers, major parts of the island have been urbanized uncontrollably. For professionals in the building sector that have become aware of the accompanying issues of this development have identified the lack of a masterplan as the culprit. While this is clearly the case and can be observed in the transformation of Canggu rice fields into real estate properties, the creation of a masterplan, though a necessary step, would not be the answer to all the problems. Building and environmental laws like the EIA have been originally passed about forty years ago, however, they are being abstracted into tools for large and powerful interest groups (Warren 2018). Take the Bali Hilton Resort in Nusa Dua (6), that has managed to build a twelve-story building instead of the allowed maximum of four stories, by simply building the hotel on a cliff (Cuthbert 2020). The shorelines of Kuta to Canggu are roamed with the biggest beach clubs in the world. Without calling out any more names, these

facilities have clearly disregarded the statutes of the EIA. Sealing large surface areas, especially that close to the ocean, prevents rainwater from penetrating the soil and to charge groundwater levels. Instead, the runoff is being transported to the ocean, taking all kinds of pollutants with it. Combined with giant pools that are tapping Balis water reserves, the threat of water scarcity has become more present than ever. Ironically, those companies run campaigns promoting sustainability, conservation and recycling. An echo of their conscience, perhaps, or just an effort at greenwashing.



Figure 6. Bali Hilton Resort, Nusa Dua - Clearly pushing the limits of legal construction.

Natural Environment Closely related to the construction of resorts and beach clubs, the appropriation of views is another great example of the commodification of the island's nature. The prices of properties are always closely related to the location, which in Bali means views. By acquiring land, businesses are actually buying and then selling views, that are not theirs to buy or sell. The cliffs of Nusa Penida are relatively untouched by raging project developments, which is one of the island's biggest qualities. Anyhow, in about ten to twenty years, this might already be ancient history, since the first big footprints of the next luxury resort have been spotted on the southern coast, sticking out from the ocean shaped cliffs. As of now, the famous rice terraces of Tegallalang near Ubud embody this principle of capturing and capitalizing views very well. Cafés, restaurants, souvenir shops and other touristic facilities are nudged together onto the western side of the valley competing for the best views. The extreme density of construction is destroying the natural beauty and tranquility they are trying to promote and sell. Actual farmers working in the rice fields are supposed to complete the picture, while they are literally only placed there to pose for pictures. This again refers to the topic of *people* as a commodity, as they are portraying something false, that is perceived as authentic and original.



Figure 7. Farmer at Tegallalang posing for a group of tourists.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, uncontrolled tourism has led to a change in Balinese society and is continuously abstracting cultural identity, the island's landscape as well as the economic focus. However, intercultural exchange and showing interest in Balinese culture by wanting to attend ceremonies or discover vernacular architecture is not reprehensible, as long as it is done with the appropriate respect. Heritage is always connected with a sense of pride and locals seem to feel pride in presenting, although nowadays the financial reward is more likely to be the driving power. Still, exchange is important, in fact, it might be beneficial to the situation after all. More people are becoming aware of the problems on Bali, although the decisionmakers do not seem to have caught up yet. Awareness in the Balinese people themselves is hopefully growing as well, as people are starting to raise their voices. The voices are still in the minority because many people have grown too accustomed to the *new* Balinese way of life and do not have the time to think about it or simply do not care about the consequences.

Normalization of the customs and habits discussed, meaning the habit of commodifying every aspect of Bali and what it stands for, would mean the loss of important cultural and natural heritage. Even from a solely financial standpoint, further sustaining an unsustainable development, that stands for inauthentic culture, obstruction of Balis natural beauty, as well as an unhappy society facing pollution, poverty and water scarcity, could collapse the tourism industry resulting in a loss of capital. At the same time, the financial boost, which could actually benefit the Balinese society in building a better infrastructure and gaining the power to create a *sustainable* development, would diminish.

Seeing as tourism has arguably become a part of the Balinese identity, which is hardly revertible and a somewhat natural process, it could be a blessing in disguise. The distribution of money might be the best angle to tackle environmental, cultural and, of course, economical grievances. The idea of *class for itself*, presented by Cuthbert (2020) and initially thought of by Karl Marx, if interpreted and adjusted to the situation, could be a promising approach for a sustainable future. The capital growth of investors and other people of power is being

carried out on the backs of Balinese society. If a portion, a mere percentage of the money, were to reach the right hands, major changes could be made, starting with more environmental and cultural awareness and an efficient waste management plan.

APPENDIX

This paper means to highlight the process of commodifying the island of Bali, hopefully raising awareness in the reader. It is not intended to worry *whether* one should travel to Bali, but rather *why* and with which intentions they should travel Bali. In my opinion, Bali is not suited to be your typical beach and party destination, portraying the Australian-Asian counterpart to Europe's Mallorca. Rather, it embraces a unique and complex mixture of culture and nature while one is still able to enjoy the modern lifestyle hubs, that attract ambitious, conscious and creative people from all over the world, promoting cultural exchange while providing economic stability to the Balinese society.

Bali is not the first tropical region that has been transformed for and by a growing tourism industry. The process of commodification is speeding up exponentially, its roots arguably dating back all the way to colonial times, resulting in complications exceeding the obvious environmental issues. To grasp the situation, this article categorizes the process into three main areas. Balinese culture, including religious sites and ceremonies, art forms and symbols, as well as society and people's psychology, Balinese natural environment, and the built environment. The realization of profit-oriented projects often disregard their immediate effects on the environment, local culture and urban design, which is contributing to a shifting self-perception in Balinese society. Suartika and Cuthbert (2020) and Picard (1990), although thirty years apart, describe the appropriation of Balinese culture by capitalist ideas of tourism through Balinese society itself, while Suartika and Cuthbert (2018, 2020) report of a returning awareness and emerging resistance movements. Nevertheless, Balinese culture is being transformed to appeal to an international audience for economic growth. The same relates to nature along with the built environment. Conservation efforts and environmental laws are unable to decrease the environmental decay, resulting in mayor problems like pollution and water scarcity. The ongoing commodification of Bali might relate to economic growth, however, it only benefits individuals and powerful interest groups, not Balinese society. Raising awareness to the mindset that has established itself in many tourists and locals alike, through educating and speaking up, as attempted in this paper, could help change the way Bali is perceived globally. The financial means for appropriate and sustainable growth, if utilized reflectively, are given, which would ultimately help the capitalist tourism industry become the solution, rather than the problem. Excessive tourism without reflection, as observed in major touristic hotspots and in cultural heritage sites alike, is unsustainable and can ultimately lead to the collapse of the Balinese economy and environment.

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