# Getting the Story Straight? Some Untimely Thoughts on History, Literature and the Performing Arts in Bali

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**Abstrak**

Sudah cukup jelas bahwa ada hubungan mendalam antara seni pertunjukan dan kesusastraan Bali. Yang mungkin masih kurang jelas adalah karakter dari hubungan tersebut. Para penulis akademis maupun nonakademis seringkali menekankan pentingnya sastra kuno India dan cerita babad untuk lakon wayang kulit, arja, topéng dan lain sebagainya. Walaupun ahli seni pertunjukan dari luar negeri kerapkali menekankan pentingnya sastra kuno, di mana sebenarnya mereka tidak mempunyai latar belakang yang kuat di bidang bahasa lokal dan sastra kuno, mereka jarang sekali mengomentari masalah seni pertunjukan. Memang ada beberapa pengecualian yang penting. Akan tetapi, pada umumnya, itulah keadaan yang terjadi sekarang di bidang studi seni pertunjukan. Artikel ini menggunakan contoh dari sebuah pertunjukan topéng *pajegan* untuk menyarankan bahwa kita perlu memperhatikan sejarah, bahasa dan sastra lokal secara lebih bernuansa. Pendekatan seperti ini mungkin akan lebih sensitif terhadap sisi politik—baik dari seni pertunjukan Bali maupun dari proses pengajarannya.

**Key Words:** Performing Arts, Topéng, History, Power, Literature, Language

> *Balinese texts, known as much through hearing or through dramatic and artistic realizations as through reading, were and still are texts of Balinese society in the broadest possible sense* (Vickers 1990: 159).

It is readily apparent that the performing arts and classical literatures of Bali are closely related. Less obvious however is the nature of their relationship. Scholars frequently cite the importance of the Indic epics and local chronicles in performative genres such

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as the shadow theatre, light opera, masked dance drama, and related forms. Yet, despite the emphasis placed on the textual roots of performance, commentators on theatre have generally lacked the linguistic training required for an independent assessment of the texts in question. And this has affected their interpretation of theatre. Meanwhile, those in a better position to comment on literature have generally refrained from sustained consideration of the dramatic arts. There are notable exceptions to these tendencies (see, for instance, Hinzler 1981, H. Geertz 1991, Hobart 2002, Vickers 2005).[1] But by and large this is the state of the field.

So how are we best to approach the problem of literature and performance? Is it simply a matter of applying philological expertise to dance and drama? Or might there be more intractable issues at play? It is important to recognize from the outset that underpinning the question of literature is the broader problem of tradition. Put perhaps rather too simply: beyond the narrow concerns of 'the text', we are facing the wider question of how to interpret contemporary performance in relation to the sedimented practices of the past. This would most certainly include literary practices. But it would not be limited to them.

This chapter uses the example of interpreting a *topéng pajegan*—a form of masked dance drama—to begin exploring some of the central challenges facing those interested in a more nuanced approach to Balinese theatre. As we shall see, closer attention to history, literature and language may shed some new light on the political sensibilities of both Bali's performing arts and the scholarship that has taken them as its object of study.[2]

[1] There has also been a sustained engagement with the reading practices associated with terms such as *mabasan, mabebasan, pepaosan, pasantian* and the like (see, e.g., Bhadra 1937, Robson 1972; Zurbuchen 1987; Hunter 1988; Rubinstein 1993, 2000; Jendra 1996).

[2] This chapter is reprinted here in revised form with the kind permission of Brill Academic Publishers. The monograph from which the chapter is taken (Fox 2011) is entitled *Critical Reflections on Religion and Media in Contemporary Bali*.

**A Masked Dance Drama**

The performance I would like to consider took place on the afternoon of 3 January 2007, on the occasion of the anniversary ceremony (*odalan*) for a houseyard temple in a semi-rural community in southern Bali. As a distinct performative style, *topéng pajegan* generally features a single actor appearing in a sequence of as many as six or more masks. Each mask is associated with one of several stock characters who take on various roles in accordance with the plot. These characters appear one after another, in a more or less established order, to narrate and enact a series of events as experienced and understood from their respective positions. The latter most commonly include a court servant, often a king or prince, a priest and any number of other characters who are generally lumped together as *bondrés*—a term used to refer to the demotic, and usually comic, figures that exemplify the rough-and-tumble of life outside the privileged circle of the court.

The events recounted in this particular play centered on a challenge to the rule of a Balinese king from the eleventh century, Sri Prabu Udayana.[3] Peace and prosperity in the king's realm had been disturbed by discord among six rival religious sects, each of which claimed superiority over the others. Their squabbling disrupted the performance of ceremonial rites, which, in turn, caused the king great distress and further compromised his ability to govern the realm. A contingent of priests was invited from Java to address the problem, and it was the revered Javanese sage Mpu Kuturan who answered the call. Having appraised the situation, Kuturan organized the quarreling sects into three groups according to their chosen deity, assigning each to one of the Three Sanctuaries (*Kahyangan Tiga*) that was to be built in every Traditional Village (*Désa Pakraman*). He also expanded a series of temples within the Besakih 'mother temple' complex, and saw to the establishment of a further set of sanctuaries where a

[3] See Fox 2011 for a complete transcript, translation and DVD-recording of the performance.

series of major divinities would reside. He went on to call for the construction of a Shrine of Three Chambers (*Rong Tiga*) in each houseyard temple, which—like the Three Sanctuaries that were to be built in every village—provided a place for the worship of 'the Three Powers' (*Brahma, Wisnu, Siwa*). This domestic shrine also provided a place to offer reverence to the Divine Male and Female Ancestors (*Batara-Batari*). With these arrangements in place, and the sectarian squabbling brought to an end, King Udayana was once more able to rule the realm effectively. When the king asked how he might commemorate Mpu Kuturan's beneficence 'for the sake of history', the illustrious sage suggested that his subjects construct a special shrine in each of their houseyard temples containing a deer like the one he had used for transportation from Java to Bali.

This play was one of some twenty performances that were recorded, transcribed and discussed with various actors, musicians and others over the course of some nine months' fieldwork carried out between 2006 and 2009.[4] For those with whom I reviewed the transcript and recording, the actor's performance was readily recognized as both apropos of the occasion and exemplary of its style. Not unlike other *topéng pajegan* performed for temple anniversaries, the story turned on the reconsolidation of a king's rule over his realm, achieved by overcoming an obstacle to the completion of ceremonial work. As Mpu Kuturan explained in the voice of the king, 'the performance of ceremonial rites (B. *yadnya*) cannot be disrupted in the land of Bali'. For, as he added

[4] A detailed description of the methods employed in the study is presented elsewhere (Fox 2011), as are my reasons for retaining ethnographic anonymity. I hasten to add that the interpretation of the play was an intensely interactive process that changed continuously depending on whom I was working with, where and when. In tracing its trajectory, I have tried to let this come through as much as possible. It is not altogether clear what it would mean to say that I understood (B. *ngresep*) this performance, or any of the others that I have recorded and discussed over the course of the past few years. But, I was at least able to produce an explication (B. *ngartiang*) of the play that was recognized as intelligible, and even plausible, by most of those with whom I was working. It is this explication, and the process through which it was produced, that this chapter aims to represent.

in his own voice, the well-being of the realm is 'grounded in the performance of *yadnya*'.

**The Problem of Precedent**

As the current scholarship suggests, *topéng* performances frequently depict events similar to those recounted in one or another *babad*, or genealogical chronicle. But this does not necessarily mean that the practice of 'reading *babad*' always—or even usually—offers the most proximate explanation for the shape of a given story. We find, for instance, no precedent in the *babad* literature for the specific sequence of events recounted in our performance. This is not to deny there are numerous accounts of Mpu Kuturan's exploits distributed through a variety of texts (e.g., the *Usana Bali* and various palm-leaf manuscripts with titles such as *Mpu Kuturan*, *Kusuma Déwa*, *Bendésa Mas* and the like). The point is that this particular version of the story does not appear in any single one of them. So how did Mpu Kuturan come to figure in our *topéng pajegan?* And why did the story take the shape that it did? Was this a case of the actor extrapolating from the *babad's* 'bare outlines' as described, for instance, by Bandem and de Boer (1995: 55)? Might he alternatively have been drawing on something else? And, more generally speaking, what precisely do we mean when we say that an actor was 'drawing on' a literary source?

Troubled by problems of precedent and analysis, I raised the question of sources (I. *sumber*) with the actor on several occasions. Each time he skillfully avoided answering directly, offering at most vague reference to 'having a book' (I. *buku*) on the topic.[5] Despite repeated efforts, I was unable to learn to which book he was referring, if indeed such a book existed at all. When I inquired with others who had been present at the performance, the most common response was that the actor was adequately experienced—and so learned—as not to require such 'modern'

[5] In studies of Balinese theatre, the scholarly desire to specify sources and meaning has often resulted in a misplaced sense of certainty.

resources, even if he occasionally consulted them for additional material.[6] Eventually, frustrated at my inability to locate the actor's 'source' for the story, I approached his nephew in the hope that he would be familiar with his uncle's repertoire, and perhaps where he had learned what he knew of Mpu Kuturan. In reply to my query, his nephew simply laughed. He reminded me that he himself had once worked as a cook in one of Bali's more successful Italian restaurants, where the most talented chefs were usually reticent to reveal their best recipes, even to their assistants. Not unlike a skilled actor, they guarded their knowledge so as to retain their efficacy—and as often their jobs![7] Here, knowledge quite explicitly begat power, and the dissemination of the former implicitly entailed a dissipation of the latter. It seemed the sort of directness and disambiguation I was seeking may have been somewhat out of step with the practices in question.

In the end, albeit productive in other respects, my conversations with the actor and various others in the community initially provided little insight into the specific sequence of events through which Mpu Kuturan had come to figure in the *topéng pajegan* performed that afternoon. The story was not requested by the family holding the ceremony, nor was there any obvious connection to the event itself. Moreover, no one particularly remembered this story from previous performances they had attended. Reflecting back on the event several days later, the actor even suggested it was possible that he had not selected the story until he had already put on the mask of the first speaking character, the clown servant who would introduce the plot in his

[6] By referring to books as 'modern', they were differentiating such resources from palm-leaf manuscripts and the style of teacher-apprentice learning through which actors had learned their skills in years prior to the emergence of state-sponsored academic training in the arts.

[7] Strictly speaking, the analogy is not entirely apt in this case, as the actor was performing as a service (B. *ngayah*) to the community. However, more generally, there is a sense among actors that their popularity derives from their particular talents, which they are often known to guard quite carefully.

opening monologue.[8] Given the questions I was hoping to answer, the possibility of an impromptu decision would make the search for precedent all the more pressing. For, unless the actor had simply fabricated the tale of Mpu Kuturan from whole cloth—and there was good reason to think he did not—it should have been possible to locate evidence of some prior occasion on which the various elements of the story had been brought together in a similar fashion.

**A Significant Convergence?**

The temple ceremony itself had taken place on Buda-Kliwon-Pahang. This was the coincidence of (a) the fourth day (*Buda*) of the seven-day calendar and (b) the fifth day (*Kliwon*) of the five-day calendar, during (c) the sixteenth week (*Pahang*) of the Javano-Balinese thirty-week *Pawukon* calendar.[9] This convergence of cycles is readily recognizable on the commercially available calendars that are kept in most Balinese Hindu homes. These calendars are regularly consulted, not only to keep track of such events, but also to determine the appropriate day for any number of activities—from buying farming or computer equipment to the performance of cremations. As a matter of course, the actor used one of these calendars to schedule his own performances, and was frequently approached by other members of the extended family for his skill in explicating the sometimes-enigmatic information these calendars provide. Among other things, at the bottom of the page for each month, there is a list of major temples celebrating their anniversaries on any given date. On the date in question, this list most prominently included Silayukti Temple in the

[8] This would not be entirely unusual, as the improvisational character of Balinese drama permits a great deal of fluidity. For an evocative description, see Spies and de Zoete 2002[1938]: 37-40.

[9] There are thirty named weeks (*wuku*)—each of seven days—that together make up a full 210-day cycle. This temple, like many, celebrates its anniversary every 210 days.

eastern port town of Padangbai.[10] It is unlikely the actor would ordinarily have reason to remember the date for such a distant temple's anniversary. However, under the circumstances, it is not improbable that he would have known that the Silayukti Temple shared its anniversary with the houseyard temples where he was scheduled to perform that day.

On Silayukti's previous anniversary, the *Bali Post* ran a pair of articles showcasing the temple and its history. The first was entitled 'From Silayukti; The Hindu Community is Reminded to Practice the Teachings of Righteousness' (*Dari Silayukti; Umat Hindu Diingatkan Laksanakan Ajaran Kebenaran;* Bali Post 2006a). Although this title would suggest the article was occasioned by current events, the bulk of its text was devoted to the history of the temple. The piece opened by noting that Silayukti 'is revered as a holy place of His Lordship Mpu Kuturan, a figure who did great service in organizing the social and religious life of the people of Bali around the time of the eleventh century AD'. The piece went on to explain that, when Mpu Kuturan arrived,

> …Balinese social life had just experienced a jarring shock. There were numerous religious sects within the community, and apparently there was a lack of harmony between them. Among the sects, there were six that were particularly large and influential in the lives of the Balinese (I. *kehidupan masyarakat Bali*). The king of Bali requested that Mpu Kuturan organize and unify the people of Bali. Mpu Kuturan, who had been appointed as the kingdom's commander (I. *senapati*), made an appeal to the people, including the leaders of these large sects. It was agreed that a council would be held in Pejeng at the Samuan Tiga Temple. … Thanks to Mpu Kuturan's rapprochement, thought and effort, the sects in Balinese society were successfully mollified and brought together (integrated [*manunggal*]). (*Bali Post* 2006a; final parenthesis in original)[11]

[10] Both editions of the calendar that I have seen for 2007 list the temple of Silayukti as first among several others.

[11] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

As in the *topéng pajegan*, we have a king inviting Mpu Kuturan to restore the social accord that had been disrupted by conflict among six sects; an agreement was reached at Péjéng; and, as a result, the sects were united and peace returned to the kingdom.

The second article (Bali Post 2006b) offered a more or less parallel account, bringing together a series of elements that included the construction of the Three Sanctuaries in each Traditional Village, the expansion of temples within the Besakih complex, the establishment of a further series of all-Bali temples, the worship of the Three-Form Divinity of Brahma-Wisnu-Siwa, the commemoration of Mpu Kuturan's good deeds through the construction of a Manjangan Saluwang shrine in every houseyard temple, and the idea that the revered sage acted 'without desire for recompense' (I. *tanpa pamerih akan hasilnya*). Yet, despite all these commonalities, there was an important difference stated with some force in the concluding paragraphs, which read as follows:

> We (*kita*) ought to reflect more deeply on the establishment of the Three Sanctuaries in every traditional village in Bali as a place for worshipping God (*Tuhan*) as the Three-Form Divinity (*Dewa Tri Murti*). God is not worshipped as the Three-Form Divinity in order to unite conflicting Hindu sects. The professors with expertise in the study of ancient times in Bali whom I have asked stated that there is no historical record of the Hindu sects in Bali being in conflict, let alone at war.
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> Mpu Kuturan's purpose in teaching the worship of God as the Three-Form Divinity was to strengthen the community in its performance of Creation, Maintenance and Destruction (*Utpatti, Stithi dan Pralina*). Creation means actively creating something that should be created. Maintenance means truly sustaining and protecting something that ought to be sustained and protected.
>
> Destruction means doing away with something that should be eliminated. Destruction does not simply mean to destroy. Examples might include getting rid of a drinking habit, especially when celebrating the religious holidays. Or eliminating ignorance and poverty in ways that are good, reasonable and correct. These too are

> included among life's activities that fall under Destruction. Putting Creation, Maintenance and Destruction into practice is not as easy as it is in theory. In order to do so, God's will must come through the worship of the Three-Form Divinity at the Three Sanctuaries.

The concluding passage in this second article from the *Bali Post* seemed to deny explicitly what was central in our *topéng pajegan*. To 'reflect more deeply' on the story of Mpu Kuturan was to recognize that the system of Three Sanctuaries was *not* established in order to resolve a conflict between warring sects. Rather, a more profound understanding would be one that focuses on the imperatives of Creation, Maintenance and Destruction (*Utpatti, Stithi dan Pralina*). These Sanskritic terms are more commonly used—both in Bali as well as in Indic traditions—in reference to the divine acts of Creation, Maintenance and Destruction associated respectively with Brahma, Wisnu and Siwa. However, on the authority of 'the professors', the article from the *Bali Post* recast these macrocosmic processes as actions to be carried out within one's own life, for both personal and social betterment. Perhaps most significantly for our purposes, this interpretation was implicitly proffered as an alternative to a more commonly accepted understanding of Mpu Kuturan and the Three Sanctuaries. A review of articles published in the *Bali Post* over the last decade turns up several examples.

In 2000, for instance, an article on the rise of new spiritual movements (I. *sampradaya, aliran kerohanian*) opened by noting that, for Bali, these emerging groups 'are nothing new. In the era of Mpu Kuturan and the government of His Highness King Udayana in 989-1010 AD, in Bali there were already nine streams of belief' (Bali Post 2000). Similarly, in the English language *Jakarta Post*, a well-known Balinese commentator, and regular contributor to the *Bali Post*, concluded his critique of a schism within the Indonesian Hindu Dharma Council with the following observation:

> Historically speaking, an almost similar situation prevailed in Bali some 1,000 years ago during the reign of King Udayana, when

> various sects competed against each other for hegemonic superiority over the island. Fortunately, a wise priest of the Mahayana Buddhism sect, Mpu Rajakertha – popularly known as Mpu Kuturan – who was also Udayana's most trusted advisor, succeed in negotiating a compromise between the competing sects. He introduced the idea of Tri Murti, which gave equal position, respect and adoration to Brahma, Wisnu and Siwa, thus pacify[ing] the followers of each respective deity. Right now, there is no doubt that Bali desperately needs that kind of figure.[12] (Juniartha 2000)

The rift within the Hindu Dharma Council was seen to engender the potential for social unrest (on which, see Picard *forthcoming*), much as the previous article suggested that there were those who saw danger in the rise of new spiritual movements. In both cases, Mpu Kuturan was deployed as an exemplar of the effort toward harmonious coexistence.

The upshot of all this would appear to be that the story enacted in our *topéng pajegan* was neither created *ex nihilo*, nor was it drawn directly from the traditional texts with which this dramatic genre is most commonly associated (*viz.*, the genealogical chronicles, or *babad*). There is no way to know with any certainty from which articles, books or other performances the actor might have been extrapolating. Yet, very generally speaking, he seems to have replicated a version of events that had appeared in the newspaper—among other places—with some regularity in recent years.[13] The actions depicted were centered on Mpu Kuturan as an historical personage coming from Java. He was represented as having stabilized Balinese society by amalgamating six religious sects, establishing a series of new socio-religious institutions, and rendering his services without a desire for recompense. As it was also the anniversary of the Silayukti Temple in Padangbai, the date

[12] It may be noted that Mpu Kuturan's religious affiliation often seems to depend on the interests of the author in question.

[13] See Sudharta and Surpha (2006: 13-4), for instance, in which a teleological history of *Agama Hindu* is narrated through a series of bureaucratic 'consolidations', the first of which is represented as having taken place under the direction of Mpu Kuturan.

of our *topéng pajegan* would have made this story a particularly fitting choice. But was this the only reason for its selection?

**A Political Dispute?**

As with the problem of precedent, the actor himself was not forthcoming on the subject of local circumstance. This was, as noted, very much in keeping with the more general tendency among actors to avoid offering definitive interpretations of their own performances. It was eventually a series of conversations with other actors, regarding other performances, that provided the first substantive clues as to what might have been at issue in our *topéng pajegan*.

An interesting perspective was offered by Pak Prana (a pseudonym), a middle aged schoolteacher who was also an actor of some standing in the local community. I had dropped by Prana's house one evening to discuss one of his own performances, and to check the transcription of a couple of passages for which my recording was unclear. The occasion for this performance had been a ceremony directed to the placation of demonic forces (B. *buta yadnya*). Apropos of the occasion, he had chosen the story of a priest known as the Bhujangga Alit, who specialized in precisely such rites.

As with the tale of Mpu Kuturan, the clown servant's opening monologue centered on the disruption of peace in the realm. It seemed the king, Dalem Sagening, had neglected to perform the requisite ceremonial rites, and so Bhujangga Alit stormed off in a huff (B. *ngambul*). As a result of his departure, the land and its resources dried up (B. *gumié sangar*) and the realm descended into a melee of disorder and chaos. Although the king himself was ultimately to blame, his subjects lost their direction in the world as a result of his failure to act; and so they too had participated in bringing about the demise of the realm. One of the *bondrés* characters, whom Prana described as an elder servant to the king, asked rhetorically how it was that ordinary human beings could

cause so much trouble. The character went on to answer his own question quite pointedly:

> It's coz they didn't align their behavior with their position in life. If you're a farmer, you should follow the path of reverence (K./S. *bakti marga*), the path of rites (K./S. *karma marga*). It's different with farmers these days… with farmers playing at politics, sizing up the parties! That's what caused the world to dry up like this. If you're gonna be a farmer, ya can't be thinking about political parties all the time. … If you work as a shopkeeper, then you should keep shop. Don't try to keep shop, all the while getting wrapped up with these parties… to the point your wares don't sell! All your profits will be wasted on supporting your party, huh. Here's proof you should stick to your own dharma![14]

On first hearing these remarks I thought they sounded arrogant, even reactionary. So, when we came to this passage in the transcript, I asked whether he had wished to suggest that farmers and shopkeepers had no place in public politics. At this point, his son—who had been sitting quietly reading the newspaper off to one side—cut in to explain that, although formal campaigns were still several months away, there had been some quite heated political discussion down at the toddy shop a few weeks back. Elections were still almost a year away. But, there had been rumors that the sitting Regent (*Bupati*) would be facing a formidable challenger. The incumbent had longstanding relationships of patronage with prominent members of the community. However, there were those who thought he was high-handed in his dealings with the community, and some were further convinced that he was guilty of corruption. Although the prospective challenger was comparatively inexperienced, they hoped that he might be

[14] 'Wiréh sing nganutan tekin yasan idup iané. Yan dadi petani, patut ngelarang bakti marga, karma marga. Lén petanié jani… berpolitik, ngitungan partai… petanié! Né ba ngajakan sangar gumié. Yan dadi petani, sing dadi ngitungan partai. … Yan geginané madagang, madagang patut laksanaang. De madagang ngitungan partai, dagangané kanti sing payu! Telah batin dagangané anggon ngitungan partai, tooh. Dini bukti darma laksanané!

capable of bringing about much-needed reform.

Apparently things had become particularly tense on New Years' Eve day, when a group of young men had been drinking more heavily than usual in anticipation of the evening's festivities. Physical violence was averted in the end, but only with the timely intervention of the village headman (*B. bendésa*). When I tried to tie this in more closely with the remarks from the king's elder servant ('ya can't be thinking about political parties all the time'), Prana was reticent to confirm the connection. So, I pointed out that these events would have occurred but three days prior to the other actor's *topéng* rendition of Mpu Kuturan and the Three Sanctuaries, which I had discussed with him several days beforehand. He noted that the actor in question would no doubt have known of the incident, and this was likely his intended target (B. *sasaran*).

**The Voice of the People**

Although candidates had not officially been announced, the elections had been a topic of conversation in the coffee stalls for some weeks. And this was reflected in a *prémbon*[15] that had been performed recently in one of the community's central temples. The story enacted was that of Lord White Stone (*Dalem Batu Putih*), the ruler of Jimbaran, who had been separated since birth from his twin brother, Lord Black Stone (*Dalem Batu Selem*). The story turned on their mutual misrecognition, culminating in a battle that was only resolved with the revelation that they were kinsmen (B. *nyama*). This had obvious resonance with the rumored challenge to the incumbent Regent, who was a member of one of the region's more prominent aristocratic houses (B. *puri*). His prospective opponent was from a rival aristocratic line, with

[15] *Prémbon* is a popular form of 'mixed' drama that draws on elements of light opera (*arja*) and masked theatre (*topéng*). For an introduction to the genre and an annotated translation of a complete play, see Hobart 2008. Perhaps significantly, the discussion of both leadership and the organization of the realm was prominent there as well.

ancestral ties to the Regent's own house that were locally thought to date back several centuries. On this estimation, the incumbent and his would-be challenger were kin.

Previous elections had taken place amid protest and (often violent) conflict between supporters of the various parties contesting the elections. Yet, apart from the battle itself, which took place only in the final moments of the performance, the prospect of violence was not—at least overtly—a central theme in the *prémbon*. Instead, attention was focused on the qualities of a good leader. This came out most prominently in the dialogue between the older and younger male clown servants, Punta and Wijil, in their discussion of Lord White Stone's special capacity for knowledge (B. *pangweruh*) that was known by the Kawi epithet, 'The Voice of the World' (*Sabdaning Bhuwana*).

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Wijil: | Prabué 'to 'pang nawang Sabdaning Buana. 'Pang tawang munyin isin gumié. | A king ought to know The Voice of the World. He should know the voices (B. *munyi*) of those residing in the realm. |
| Punta: | Nah... | Yes... |
| Wijil: | 'Pang sing munyin nyamaé duén bakat padingehang... munyin ané lénan sing bakat runguang. 'Pang sing munyin kelompoké duén bakat dingeh, bakat rambang... munyin panjaké sing bakat runguang. | He shouldn't just heed the voices of his own kinsmen... without a care for the voices of others. He shouldn't only listen to his own cohort (I. *kelompok*), giving them his attention... without giving a thought to the voices of his subjects. |
| Punta: | Mapan rawos panjak pinaka rawos Widi. | Because the word of one's subjects is like unto the word of God (K. *Widi*). |
| Wijil: | Mawinan pamimpiné patut ia nawang tatanin buana, munyi gumatat-gumitit. Saling ké munyin manusa, kadirasa munyin semut patut ia nawang! | That's why a leader must know how the world is ordered,[16] right down to the voices of the itty-bitty little creatures. The voices of human beings aside, he's even got to know what the ants have to say! |
| Punta: | Apang tawang. | He ought to know. |
| Wijil: | 'Pang bisa iraga ngayomin[17] yan suba tawang munyin ané. | You can only protect (your subjects) if you're able to recognize their voice. |

[16] Here it is likely that Wijil was playing off of Punta's use of the term Widi, which is a Sanskrit/Kawi term for Divinity associated with notions of 'rule, law, ordering, regulation' (Zoetmulder 1982: 2262).

[17] This is a Balinese verb (*ngayomin*) formed from the Indonesian root *ayom*, 'to shade, protect or guard'.

The importance of order and the protection of the realm are matters to which we shall return. But Wijil went on to develop further the theme of the good leader, with a play on the term *Prabu*, which was rendered in the foregoing excerpt as 'Lord'. He explained, 'One offers one's services to the realm. That's why he's called the Prabu. *Para* means *near*, and *bu* means *realm*. That's why the *P(a)ra-bu* should be close to the realm!'[18] The elder servant, Punta, asked whether this was in order that the desires of the king might become one (B. *tunggal*) with those of his subjects, to which Wijil readily agreed. From there, the ideal of the good king and his relationship to the realm was played out through multiple iterations, returning several times to the importance of attending to The Voice of the World.

The emphasis on good governance through maintaining close relations with one's subjects was consonant with the valorization of dialogue and transparency that has become *de rigeur* in the popular politics of post-New Order Indonesia. Following the demise of the Suharto regime in 1998, public advocates of reform (I. *reformasi*) have championed 'the little people' (J. *wong cilik*), who had long suffered the consequences of what was known by the acronym KKN, standing for 'corruption, collusion and nepotism' (I. *korupsi, kolusi dan nepotisme*). However, a decade of participatory politics had arguably seen as much street violence as real reform. So, with campaigns on the horizon, and the potential for conflict in the air, the call to responsible leadership must have seemed an eminently sensible intervention. The good Regent, like a good king, would be close to the community, offering protection and sharing the desires of his subjects. Heeding the cautionary tale of Lords White Stone and Black Stone, the community could avert the descent into violence by recognizing the kindred interests of all parties involved.

As a foreign observer, this all sounded perfectly reasonable.

[18] Bakal ngayasayang gumi. Mapan ané madan 'prabu' 'to, 'para' ngaran paek, 'bu' ngaran gumi. 'Pang saja paek ajak gumié.

What is more, it appeared to support the idea that the tale of Mpu Kuturan was aimed directly at the conflict that erupted in the toddy shop on New Year's Eve day. Much as the contributors to the *Bali Post* and *Jakarta Post* found an exemplar of peaceable coexistence in the revered Javanese sage, so too it seemed our actor had turned to Mpu Kuturan to articulate unity and *esprit de corps* ('*sagilik-saguluk ipun manyama braya*') among the community's 'warring sects'. As in each of the above-cited performances, the restoration of social and cosmic well-being in the realm is often a central theme Balinese masked theatre. However, this raises a series of further questions regarding the representation of agency, power and polity. How, for instance, are we to interpret the orderly state of the kingdom prior to its disruption? What are the conditions under which that state was eventually reestablished? And who (or what) is responsible for each of these transformations?

**Orderly States**

Much of the current scholarship on Balinese *topéng* would have us believe that chaos and disruption are the exception, and order the norm—the central assumption being that the performance of ceremonial rites restores the world to a degree-zero of harmonious cooperation between kings, subjects, deified ancestors and the various other forces at work in the realm. Young has suggested, for instance, that

> In all the *Topeng* stories, there is a problem and a solution for the problem. The problem can be, for example, the king has forgotten to do ceremonies, or the people do not know how to do certain ceremonies, … [And, if] the proper ceremonies are not observed, the land ceases to produce, there is sickness, the people rebel, or the king is cursed. The solution to the problem is to establish the king's legitimacy by making the proper ceremonies, prayers and offerings. When the right ceremonies are performed, balance and harmony returns (sic), and Bali prospers. (1980: 251)

On this account, the *topéng* performance would enact the disruption and eventual restoration of a natural order, in which kings are characterized by their legitimacy, the kingdom by its well being, and the world by a more general state of ceremonially established 'balance and harmony'. These themes are developed in various ways across the current literature on Balinese theatre. Coldiron has explained, for instance, that

> The combination of powerfully magic and mysterious elements with light-hearted comedy, satire and buffoonery, all within the context of a sacred ritual drama, may be a rather difficult concept for the contemporary Western observer to comprehend … Yet the Balinese Topeng performer has no problem with these seeming contradictions; indeed, not only the performing tradition but also the religious philosophy of the culture insists that *each of these elements has its place in a balanced dramatic universe.* (2004: 183-4; emphasis added)

Along similar lines, Jenkins has suggested that the clown-servants' switching between linguistic registers 'creates the feeling that all these levels of Balinese life have achieved a *balanced coexistence*, and their multilingual punning is playful proof of the fun to be had in bringing them all together' (1998: 331; emphasis added).

The ideal of social and spiritual equilibrium also serves as the foundation for Foley and Sedana's more recent argument (2005) for an integrative and pluralistic understanding of the world as imagined through Balinese theatre. Significantly, their argument is organized around the idea of 'system' as a metaphor for society. Generalizing from a *topéng sidakarya* performance that was conducted following the Bali nightclub bombings of 2002, they argued that the central character of the play—a Javanese Brahmin spurned and subsequently placated by a Balinese king—'represents a potentially dangerous power that comes from outside the system [and] that must be accommodated by the system' (2005: 173). They described the character of Sidakarya as an 'outsider' who was not 'allowed his part in the ceremony

and therefore [became] a threat to society' (2005: 175). Based on a series of interviews with the performers, they explained that, in the wake of the bombings, this 'threat to society' embodied by Sidakarya served as a commentary on various extrinsic forces—including hedonistic tourists and Javanese Muslims—that required 'integration' within the social system of contemporary Bali. On their account, the broader moral of the story was that 'A society that does not find ways to incorporate the potentially disruptive in positive ways is vulnerable' (2005: 175). And they further suggested that 'This idea of power from outside that must be reconciled within the system is a through-line in Balinese performance' (2005: 175).

While *topéng* performances frequently address issues of power and its uses, it is not altogether self-evident that these ideas are so readily translatable in terms of a 'systemic' metaphor. The central issue is that of internal complexity, and more specifically the manner in which *topéng* performances—not unlike shadow theatre (Becker 1979)—bring together elements from seemingly incongruent worlds. On Foley and Sedana's account, difference is 'incorporated' and given 'a role inside the system', which is itself constituted as 'a structure that naturalizes the alien into the familiar', thereby 'giving the threatening presence a place of spiritual recognition' (2005: 173). This engagement with the Other is directed to reducing difference to a foundational ground which itself constitutes the internally ordered 'system' of a pluralistic society in which everyone gains 'recognition'. Under these conditions, governance would be managerial, with social order depoliticized as the natural state of balance between systematically differentiated and organically integrated social groups and forces. This sounds strikingly similar to the New Order ideal of a national 'Unity in Diversity' among the various religiously, ethnically and otherwise differentiated citizens of Indonesia (see Fox 2011: 55-134). But, is it also a 'through-line in Balinese performance'?

## Master and Realm

Without wishing to generalize unduly, I believe the short answer is probably no. Returning to the transcript for our *topéng pajegan*, we find the king's relationship to his realm to be cast neither in terms of balance and harmony, nor spiritual recognition, but rather *mastery*.[19] And this was more generally the case in each of the twenty odd performances that I was able to record and discuss during the course of my research.[20] The specific words used most frequently in this connection were derivations of the Balinese phrases *ngeréh jagat* and *ngamong jagat*—which might be rendered more or less interchangeably as 'ruling over' and/or 'commanding the world' or 'realm'.[21] This relationship was also frequently described as one of *ngénterang*, which—not unlike the Indonesian term *mengatur*—is open to a range of interpretations including, again, 'to organize, rule or command'. In our play, King Udayana was referred to as both the *panguasa* and *pangeréh jagat*—quite literally, the one who holds power over and commands the world.[22] But, what is the nature of this process through which the king exercises, loses and again gains power in the course of a performance? It is important

[19] This is quite close to Hildred Geertz's assessment of Balinese understandings of power: 'Their ideas are founded on a view of the world as one of a multitude of beings, human and nonhuman, great and small, in competition for control of one another' (1994: 85).

[20] The scholarship on performances from earlier periods and other parts of the island (e.g., H. Geertz 1991 and Hobart 2008) would suggest these themes have been more broadly prevalent for at least the last several decades.

[21] The other terms and phrases most commonly used to represent the ruler's relationship to the realm included *nguasa*, *nguasa-nguasita*, *ngawa*, *ngajegang* and *nyénceng*. Between these various expressions there are subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle, shades of distinction. For instance, the actors and others with whom I was working quite consistently situated the phrase *nguasa-nguasita jagat* at the more authoritarian end of the spectrum, while they associated *ngéncéng jagat* with a more deliberative and dialogic mode of interaction between a ruler and his realm.

[22] This is consonant with earlier models of kingship. As Wiener has pointed out, 'Texts often note that kings *macekin gumi,* "nail down" the country. It is kings who keep the world steady with their own unbending intent and thus keep their subjects safe and prosperous' (1995: 306). For a similar model of kingship as it played out in a *topéng* performance that took place during the Indonesian struggle for independence, see H. Geertz 1991.

to emphasize that the sects themselves did not gain 'recognition' as a result of Mpu Kuturan's intervention. They were 'organized' or 'arranged' (B. *kadabdab*), 'sorted out' (B. *pilah-pilah*) and 'set aright' (B. *mecikang*). Given their distribution through the Three Sanctuaries, one might even go so far as to suggest they were disbanded and reconstituted.

I would like to suggest that the more general theme of re-ordering of the world—as both the referent and aim of *topéng pajegan*—comprises neither the neutralization[23] of difference nor the return to a natural state of equilibrium. Rather, it would appear that the kind of order that is enacted through a *topéng* performance is fundamentally a practical accomplishment effected through the mastery and deployment of heterogeneous forces that, in the end, remain potentially incommensurate, despite their having been brought together for a common purpose. These elements are not primarily brought together for 'spiritual recognition' or 'fun' (*pace* Foley and Sedana, and Jenkins). Difference often entails conflict, as it did with the six sects. As the clown servant remarked, 'it's a matter of the two that are different (K. *rwa bhineda*). No matter how good things are in Bali, there's always someone causing an upheaval'. In a related connection, Hildred Geertz remarked that conflict in Bali

> …is not evidence of chaotic breakdown of the cosmos, but the fundamental characteristic of life. The Balinese world is one in which the many elements are never harmoniously united, in which there is no single all-encompassing principle, no way of comprehending the whole. It is a universe of fluctuating, flowing, shifting forces, which can sometimes be commanded by certain human beings, the masters of *sakti*, who momentarily and precariously can draw some of these forces together into a strong local node of power, which will inevitably later dissolve again. (1994: 95)

[23] The situation is complicated by the fact that many Balinese have come to use the Indonesian term *netralisir* (in principle, roughly, 'to neutralize') in reference both to the actions of a king in these circumstances as well as the desired outcome of offerings (such as *caru*) made to demonic beings (including, e.g., *bhutakala*).

This would suggest that the ordering of the realm through the deployment of disparate forces is an accomplishment—whether achieved in an ancient kingdom or on the contemporary stage. In his critique of Clifford Geertz's account of Balinese kingship, Hobart laid out in some detail the various procedures through which such forces might be drawn together. Through an analysis of power as depicted in a local *prémbon* performance, he explained that the ruler's task was '[to bring] together all the different worlds, manifest and intangible, of his or her various subjects, conflicting and potentially incommensurable as they are' (2000: 267). On this account, the defining characteristic of a Balinese ruler was not his legitimacy, but rather his efficacy—that is, his success or failure in articulating the elements required to complete the work of transforming the world.

**Be afraid?**

This raises the question of what kind of person is capable of such an accomplishment. The examples from the earlier *prémbon*—about Lord White Stone and his sibling rival, Lord Black Stone—highlighted the ruler's familiarity with his realm. This familiarity was embodied in a 'Knowledge of the World' fine-tuned to the voices of all its creatures, from human beings on down to the tiniest insects. However, one must be careful in extrapolating from such details to a broader model of leadership. For, proximity does not necessarily entail unqualified benevolence, a point driven home by the clown servants in the *prémbon* as they reflected on the character of their Lord and his realm.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Wijil: | Kéweh rasa 'kal ngalih maling di gumi Jimbaranė. Mapan makejang suba nganutin ajaran darma. | It's really quite difficult to find a thief in the realm of Jimbaran. That's because everyone adheres to the teachings of dharma. |
| Punta: | Pamekas sing pangabih-pangabih ida! | Especially his ministers and advisors! |
| Wijil: | **Laya wedi.** Gumié jejeh ring linggih Ida Sang Prabu. Apa karana? | **The domain is in fear.** The realm is in fear before His Majesty. Why is that? |
| Punta: | Saja! Apa mawinan? | So true! Why is that? |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Wijil: | Mapan sahaluwiran ané katibakan... ané kayasaang... makejang madasar kapatutan.[24] | Because with every last thing he dispenses... in everything he pursues... it is all founded in the truth. |

Lord White Stone's realm was free from thieves, thanks to his subjects following the teachings of dharma. As in Pak Prana's commentary on 'sizing up the political parties', this dharmic sensibility was characterized by taking up a path appropriate to one's position in life. This was ultimately the same cosmic foundation, or 'truth' (B. *kapatutan*), in which the king was said to have grounded all his actions. Yet, the well-being of the realm was not simply the product of people following the rules out of a sense of duty. There was more to it than mere legitimacy. Rather, Wijil was quite clear in stating that the realm's prosperity also stemmed from a 'fear' (K. *wedi;* B. *jejeh*) of the king. How are we to understand the relationship between this statement and the earlier emphasis on the leader's attentiveness to the voices of his people?

Watching the play in person, I had missed this exchange entirely. It only came to my attention about a week later, when reviewing the dialogue with a local musician with whom I was working on the transcript. On our initial reading, I was more or less content with his explanation for the central Balinese term, *jejeh*, which had been proffered as a gloss on the Kawi *wedi*.[25] The musician suggested that, although ordinarily used in the sense of 'fear' (B. *jerih;* I. *takut*) or 'anxiety' (I. *khawatir*),[26] here it was more accurately understood as something like 'reverence and respect' (B. *mabakti*). Given the fluidity of spoken Balinese, and especially that

[24] Here I have translated the Balinese term *kapatutan* as 'truth', but it is also associated more generally with what is right, correct or simply fitting.

[25] Neither of us knew the Kawi terms, and so we initially turned to the Indonesian edition of Zoetmulder's (1982) Old Javanese dictionary, before seeking clarification from the actor.

[26] Another Balinese term used locally in much the same sense is *nyeh.* Compare Indonesian *takut* and *khawatir*.

of improvised theatrical dialogue, this did not seem unreasonable at the time. And so we passed over the passage quickly, marking it as something to which we might want to return later.

That evening the subject came up again, this time with a group of friends who had gotten together to barbecue and watch the DVD from the performance. When I recited the lines to Pénjor, a young man who had recently begun training as a puppet master, he said it sounded like something he had heard before. Moreover, he was quite certain that to gloss this 'fear' simply as 'reverence and respect' was misleading. So we posed the problem to the wider group, asking for other sentences in which the term *jejeh* might be used in this sense (i.e., as *mabakti*). In the end this proved a dead end, without so much as a single example. Sample sentences offered for other uses of the term *jejeh* included the following: 'I am afraid of that person/criminals/the monetary crisis' (*Tyang jejeh tekén anak ento/préman/krismon*); 'It makes me nervous/afraid to hear a sweet voice' (i.e., from politicians, because they lie; *Tyang jejeh ningeh munyi manis*); 'I am worried lest things go the way they did the last time' (another reference to the elections; *Jejeh hatiné apang tusing cara ané suba liwat*). Having worked through these and several other uses of the term, we decided this was a matter best discussed with the actor himself.

The actor in question was one of the island's better known performing artists. He held both a postgraduate degree and a position as a lecturer at one of the leading institutions of higher learning in Denpasar. But, he also had a reputation as a textual scholar and something of a social critic. Later that week I arranged to meet with him together with a couple of friends at his home to discuss the play. Before turning to the specific question of 'fear', we talked more generally about the performances we had been filming, and the emphasis they placed on the importance of ceremonial rites. The actor said these rites were perhaps best understood as a 'weapon' (B. *sanjata*) for protecting the realm. He then went on to explain that, prior to the arrival of the sage

Markandya, the island had been wild and unruly. Often credited with introducing Hinduism to Bali, Markandya is revered as the first to perform ceremonial rites and, as a consequence of his efforts, the people of Bali could finally be civilized. We were speaking Indonesian at this point, and the phrase he used was *bisa ditakutkan*—literally, 'could be frightened'. Before I could interject, he went on to explain that the purpose of establishing the various temples distributed throughout the island was to guard its inhabitants from danger by forming a protective wall (B./I. *tabeng témbok*) around the inhabited land.

The musician with whom I had been working on the transcript pointed out that this paralleled themes from the earlier *topéng pajegan* with Mpu Kuturan, which we had discussed with the actor on a previous occasion. I reminded him that Bali's fame was there cast as its last line of defense (B. *tabeng ténggéng*), while the all-Bali temples were established to ensure the various divinities would reside in the land. The actor picked up the thread, playing on the Balinese term for temple, *pura*. He explained that *Pur-* came from *Pul*, or 'fortification' (B. *bénténg*), and the 'a' was borrowed from *agama* ('religion')—'that's why we call the temple a *pur-a,* a religious fortification' (B. *bénténg agama*). On this account, the performance of ceremonial rites was at once a means of constituting the community and ensuring its safety. The responsibility for this act lies with the king, as it was his will or desire (B. *pakayunan*) that was actualized through the work of his subjects.[27] But, it was the realm itself—through its unity in subjection—that ultimately became the agent of its own transformation.[28]

[27] Wiener made a similar point in her ethnographic study of history and memory in Klungkung (1995: 57-8).

[28] This parallels the paradox of subjectivation (F. *assujettissement*) embodied in social norms—'the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms' (Butler 1993: 15; for an important critique of the poststructuralist tendency to valorize agency as autonomy and the resignification of norms, see Mahmood 2005).

**All Together Now?**

We must be a little cautious in trying to tie together these various performances and commentaries to form a seamless whole. For, on reflection, the points that resisted closure were at least as numerous as those that were readily resolved. There was, perhaps most importantly, a degree of ambivalence in the relationship between lord and subject, as an allegory for relations between the prospective Regent and his people. On the one hand we had the language of fear, on the other an ideal of respect and reverence premised on the leader's closeness to his people. The apparent incongruity of these ideals may be more a product of cross-cultural translation than anything else. But, it must be emphasized that the difficulties in interpretation arise not simply in translating between Balinese theatre and the western academy. There also appears to be an important shift taking place between differing configurations of power and polity in Bali itself.

In conversation the actor explicitly attributed the civilization of the island to the sage Markandya, and more specifically to his role in 'frightening' the Balinese into subjection. He claimed this was accomplished through the introduction of ceremonial rites. Yet, at the same time, he was adamant in his refusal to identify this 'fear' with the kind of fear one might feel toward a criminal (I. *préman*) or an impending economic crisis (I. *kriskon*), as exemplified by the sample sentences proposed at the barbecue. I do not wish to argue that in Bali reverence is really fear, or vice versa. Rather, I would simply like to suggest that the actor's remarks in the *prémbon* brought two things together (fear and good governance) that under other circumstances he preferred to distinguish. That is to say, the model of kingship and community embodied in the performative habits of Balinese drama seemed to be at odds with those of the progressive politics that his character, Wijil, wished to espouse on the occasion. The subsequent discussion of the play would suggest that our actors and other commentators were caught up in the antagonistic disjunctures between these two

visions of agency, polity and power, as they sought to make sense of—and potentially transform—the circumstances in which they were living.

By way of conclusion I would simply emphasize that closer attention to language and history will help to highlight the complex, and often conflicting political sensibilities that characterize the performing arts of contemporary Bali. It is on these grounds that I believe it would be a mistake to see Balinese theatre as modeling the ideal of social and spiritual 'balance' that is so frequently cited in the extent literature.

This, of course, leaves us with a rather awkward question. Given its relative absence in the performances themselves, how did the trope of 'balance' come to figure so prominently in the scholarship on Balinese theatre? There is not—at least, as far as I am aware—a readily available Balinese term that fits this usage. Although, in principle, this would not disqualify balance as an analytical concept, I think something else may have been at work here. It is merely an educated guess, but I suspect that scholars' use of this word is most likely a gloss on the Indonesian term *keseimbangan*. If this were correct, the next question would be why one would have to borrow an Indonesian term in order to discuss what is purportedly so central to 'the religious philosophy of the culture' of Bali.

Albeit conjectural, the answer may be as straightforward as it is unsettling—offering, as it does, yet one more example of scholarly complicity with an oppressive regime. A careful look at the European and American scholarship on *topéng* would suggest that very few of the authors actually speak or understand any Balinese, let alone read Kawi or Sanskrit. Moreover, with but a few notable exceptions, scholars of Balinese theatre going back to the early 1970s seem to have drawn on the same small group of informants for their translations and interpretation of Balinese plays. Most of these informants have been directly employed as

*pegawai negeri*, or civil servants, of the Indonesian state.[29] It is no secret that the bureaucratized promotion of 'the arts' was one of the key pillars in the New Order's drive to produce a viable public face in the wake of the mass slaughter of some half a million alleged communists in 1965-66. Somewhere around 80,000 of those were killed in Bali, no more than a year (and probably less) before the Indonesian Academy of Fine Arts was established in Denpasar.[30] It is safe to assume that those were complex times, and that the artists and other intellectuals involved in establishing the Academy were for the most part trying desperately to make the best of a terrifying and potentially life-threatening situation. However, given the history of the New Order's use of the performing arts, it appears we may have failed to recognize that our work has helped to naturalize a myth of 'balance and harmony' that was designed to gloss over a massacre. Perhaps it will be the job of the next generation of scholars to begin bringing to the study of theatre the kind of historical sensibilities that are increasingly evident in the wider study of Balinese economy, polity and culture.

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[29] Those who were not working directly for the state were nonetheless involved, in one way or another, with arts education and the promotion of Balinese music, dance and drama.

[30] With the important exception of a recent article by John Emigh (2008), scholars have glossed over the implications of this history for their approach to Bali's performing arts.

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