

# Ubud: Benteng Terbuka

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## Abstract

This article discusses evolution and present problems of Ubud as a tourist town in the context of Bali tourism development. Ubud has always provided an alternative vision of what tourism in Bali could be. The metaphor of an Open Fortress provides a useful lens for looking at Ubud over the past century. "Tourism" in Ubud has always been closely linked to an expatriate community and other international economic activities. Tourism is not a one-way process – it is always a dialectical process between local communities and visitors (as Michel Picard told us long ago). This process is always changing and in Ubud it has now entered a new phase – involving a tourism/expat nexus that is quite disconnected from local community and culture.

*Key words:* Ubud, Open Fortress, Bali tourism, cultural tourism, expatriate, tourism economy

## Introduction

Ubud has always been the alter ego of Balinese tourism - providing an alternative vision of what tourism in Bali could be - a model closer to the "cultural tourism" proposed in the original plan for tourism development in 1974 than what has developed since then in the coastal resorts of Kuta/Seminyak, Sanur and Nusa Dua. It has achieved this by becoming a kind of *benteng terbuka* – a combination of openness to foreign visitors and tourism, but counter-balanced by a certain amount

of *kebentengan* against perceived undesirable developments. This has enabled Ubud to maintain a distinctive style of development characterised by a high level of cultural integrity and local ownership and control – at least until recently.

The first tourist to Ubud was the Dutch politician van Kol in 1902. Tjokorde Gede Sukawati, the ruler of Ubud, invited him to his puri, where van Kol was reportedly very impressed with both the opulence of the furnishings and the Tjokorde's taste in spirits (van Kol 1914: 346-8). This was the beginning of a tradition of hospitality to foreigners initiated by Puri Ubud. Two years earlier, while the other kingdoms of south Bali were preparing for their fierce but futile resistance to the Dutch invasion, Tjokorde Sukawati had responded to the Dutch in a different way, engineering an invitation for a peaceful takeover of the kingdom of Gianyar, which included Ubud (MacRae 1997:338-9).

The first style of tourism that developed in the wake of the Dutch takeover of south Bali was initiated not by Balinese hospitality, but by the Dutch government and expatriate travel agents and tour operators. This only changed two decades later, again as the result of the *tebukaan* of Puri Ubud, when Tj. Sukawati's son Tjokorde Raka Sukawati enticed the charismatic German artist and musician Walter Spies to move to Ubud from Yogyakarta. Spies in turn attracted other western artists, scholars and celebrities from Europe and America. This led to the first flowering of a culturally-oriented tourism in Ubud, through the 1930s.

By this time Ubud had established itself, unlike some other parts of Bali, as very *terbuka* toward foreigners. But Ubud was also selective about the kinds of foreigners it invited and the kind of tourism it encouraged – one based on art, culture and cross-cultural exchange. This was not quite a *benteng*, but

it was a kind of filter. It was also different from the tourism developing in Denpasar, where the Dutch established an official hotel and tours, while at Kuta, foreigners such as the Kokes and K'tut Tantri were already building the first hotels on the beach (Vickers 1989:109). The other distinctive feature of Ubud tourism was that many of these tourists stayed on – for weeks, months, even years. From the start “tourism” in Ubud was linked to an expatriate community.

By the end of the 1930s, the expatriate community was in decline as a result of Dutch policy discouraging the bohemian lifestyles of well-known expatriates, including Walter Spies, and when the Japanese invaded in 1939, both tourism and expatriate communities came to an abrupt halt. Neither recovered significantly during the post-war decades of economic and political turmoil, despite Sukarno's attempts to establish a tourism industry. It was not until the enforced “peace” of the New Order that tourists began returning and the government began planning for a serious tourism industry. The official plan, developed by French consultants, for the World Bank, with UNDP funding, was for large-scale, high-end tourism – wealthy visitors staying in big hotels for a few days– all contained in the southern corner of the island, including the development of Nusa Dua as a resort centre. The plan openly acknowledged the damage that tourism would inevitably wreak on “Balinese culture”, so their strategy was a kind of reversed *benteng*, to contain the damage in areas believed to be less culturally authentic than the rest of the island (Picard 1996:47-8). But the *benteng* did not work.

The people who came were not all wealthy and they didn't want to stay in a 5-star benteng. Many were young, on shoestring budgets and they wanted to get to know local people - stay in their houses and experience daily life, local dance and

music, food and religious ceremonies. Some of them went to Kuta, swam, surfed, and hung out on the beach watching the sunset, but those who wanted to discover Balinese culture more deeply headed inland to Ubud. Some of them stayed, for weeks, months or years and once again there developed an expatriate scene in some ways similar to that of the 1930s. Some were students of dance or music, others were artists or academics and some just wanted to experience a culture that made more sense than their own. In the process they got to know Balinese and Balinese got to know them and they learnt from each other, did business with each other and married each other.

The story of the expatriate scene of the 1970s and 80s has yet to be told<sup>1</sup>, but my point here is that to understand tourism, we need to expand our definition of it in two ways. The first is that Ubud tourism has never just been short-term tourism – there have always been people who stay longer and make Bali their home – in Ubud the shifting process of tourism and the more stable expatriate community are part of the same process. The second is that it is not possible to understand this tourism/expatriate nexus just by looking at the visitors – we need to understand the Balinese side as well and especially the relationship and interaction between them. As Michel Picard, also a veteran of the 1970s expat scene, pointed out long ago “Tourism is ... a process transforming Balinese culture from the inside ... an integral part of Bali’s culture” (1990:74) and this is even more so when we expand our understanding of tourism to include the ones who stay - the expatriate communities.

But since the 1980s a lot has changed. Tourist numbers

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1 The main exception is Made Wijaya’s celebratory scrapbook *Stranger in Paradise: the diary of an expatriate in Bali, 1979-80*. Work is also in progress on a book on this period (MacRae, forthcoming).

grew steadily and during the 1990s the local governing body (LKMD) began to define and control the kind of tourism that was appropriate for Ubud. They shut down a cinema that ran in the *wantilan* in the middle of town and began traditional dance performances instead. In 1994 they shut down a lively night market that was very popular with tourists, locals and Balinese from outside Ubud. While LKMD functioned as a kind of “chamber of commerce” representing the business elite of Ubud, it was in fact dominated by the traditional elite, the *puri*. This was the beginning of a kind of cultural *benteng*, keeping out undesirable economic and cultural influences and defining Ubud as distinctively Balinese and traditional but with the *puri* at the centre of it.

At the same time, Tjokorde Agung Suyasa, head of of Puri Saren Kauh, began a programme of sponsorship of renovations of temples, barongs and dance/music groups – first in Ubud, then beyond Ubud, especially up the Wos Valley, and finally as far as Pura Semeru in East Java and Kutai in East Kalimantan. This involved massive investment of financial capital, but in turn produced massive symbolic capital, establishing Ubud as the centre of a renaissance of ritual and temple construction. This was aimed primarily at rebuilding a *kerajaan budaya* among people, but it also had the effect of turning temples and ritual into even more of a tourist attraction (MacRae 1999).

By this time, the kinds of tourists attracted to Ubud had changed – the most prominent cohort was older European people interested in arts and culture. The newer generation of expatriates were western women married to Balinese men or artists and they established restaurants or export businesses to support themselves. They were starting to live more western-style lifestyles and an expatriate culture more separate from



Photo 1.

Photo 1.2.3 Royal cremation in Ubud as part of tradition and become tourist attractions.



Photo 2.



Photo 3.

local culture began to develop.

After the bombs in 2002 and 2005, tourist numbers dropped catastrophically and a reflective minority of Balinese saw this as timely respite from unregulated growth and an opportunity for “introspection” about appropriate kinds of tourism and culture for the future. But the vast majority of people were by now totally dependent (indirectly if not directly) on tourism for their livelihoods and were interested only in attracting tourists back to Bali. In Ubud this led to three new initiatives. The puri invented a tradition of “last great royal cremations” – each with a taller bade, more people carrying it, more advertising, a bigger international media presence and correspondingly more visitors (MacRae 2004). Janet de Neefe, owner of a very successful restaurant and other businesses and married to a local, started the Ubud Readers and Writers Festival. This attracted a new kind of visitor (interested in literature) from all over the world. Ten years on it has become a major stop on the international literary festival circuit and is said to be attended by 25,000 people. At around the same time, another foreign/Balinese couple established a yoga centre (The Yoga Barn) and then an annual festival (Bali Spirit Festival) of new age spirituality and music. This too succeeded in attracting 5,000 visitors from over 50 countries.

The latter two festivals, both initiated by foreign residents, have succeeded in bringing large numbers of visitors into Ubud, but for reasons having little (if anything) to do with local culture or community – Ubud is a pleasant and convenient location, but either festival could be anywhere. Together they mark a significant change in the direction of tourism development in Ubud – a new *terbukaan* without the old *benteng* of traditional culture.



## The New Tourism

By 2007, tourism numbers were back to pre-bomb levels and since then both tourism and the expatriate community have grown rapidly. In the case of tourism, there have been two main growth areas. One is mass tourism from East Asia, especially China. The most obvious form of this is the daily arrivals of enormous buses which clog the main street and disgorge their cargoes of tourists who troop around a predetermined circuit including the palace, the market and a famous *warung babi guling* before returning to their buses. While this conforms superficially to a “cultural tourism” model it is of the lowest-common-denominator type providing little obvious value to either the visitors or the local community<sup>2</sup>. Less obvious is an increase of Chinese tourists actually staying (one or more nights) in Ubud from less than 9 thousand in 2011 to more than 23 thousand in 2013.

The other part of the new tourism economy is the yoga and “spiritual” tourism boosted by the Bali Spirit Festival. This is now the biggest business in town, with hundreds of spas and yoga centres, specialist shops and restaurants specialising in raw, vegan and “high-vibe” cuisine. The 2014 festival was attended by over 6,000 people, most of them from overseas and many of them stay for weeks or months on end. The founders of Bali Spirit believe that this is a positive kind of tourism that brings benefits to Ubud. Others say these people know and care nothing about local culture, are completely disconnected from the local community and at worst have little respect for either. Because some of them stay so long, they now overlap

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2 The financial benefits go most obviously to the non-local tour companies and less obviously to the *puri* which is paid a commission by the tour operators.

with the new expatriate community.

### **The New Expat Scene**

The expatriate community in Ubud has also grown enormously over the past decade, but it has also changed in shape and style. Until the 1990s, most expats in Ubud were interested in local culture, married to locals or artists and were usually attached to local families in some way. Since then a new and larger expat community has developed involving people choosing to live in Ubud for quite different reasons, many of them unrelated to Ubud or even to Bali. There have been several key steps in this process.

Since the introduction of special retirement visas in 1999, increasing numbers of especially Australian retirees have moved to Bali, mostly because of climate, relatively cheap cost of living, availability of pembantus to help them. There are around 10,000 Australians retired in Bali, and it is likely that at least 1000 of them are in the Ubud area. In 2006 a new and innovative international school, the Green School opened in Sibang, a few kilometres west of Ubud and now has more than 200 students. Most of them are international and many of their families have relocated to Bali, mostly in the Ubud area, specifically so they could attend this school. This has created another major expatriate sub-community with no necessary connection to local culture/community. In 2012, Ubud was connected to a fibre-optic internet service. This high-speed connection enabled people to work online, anywhere in the world, from Ubud. Since then hundreds of people who describe themselves as online entrepreneurs or digital nomads, have settled in Ubud. Their reasons for choosing Ubud are the same ones - pleasant environment and climate, relative safety, good schools and what they call “community” – by which they mean

a pre-existing community of people like themselves. They describe their lifestyles as “location independent” and local community and culture are largely irrelevant to their choice of Ubud. Once here, they may or may not take an interest. There is also considerable overlap between this community and the spiritual tourism community.

Together, these groups have massively increased the size of the expat population, creating a new expatriate community that is a world unto itself, more or less insulated from the local community. This structure of two separate communities, with very few links, and separated by large gaps of language, culture and wealth, will obviously have consequences, but it is not yet clear what these will be. This is not so much a *benteng terbuka*, but *benteng yang tidak masih ada* – the fortress walls are down.

### Local Responses

Local people are reluctant to speak ill of visitors (*tamu*) and if asked, most say that they see no problem as long as they bring business to Ubud and as long as “they don’t interfere (*mengganggu*) with us”. A minority of more reflective or critical-minded people are more sceptical. These range from a perceived gap between the “spiritual” pretensions of some visitors and their actual behaviour, the “exclusiveness” of some expatriate businesses and cultural events, to concerns about local loss of control land and local businesses. One woman with a successful business and long experience of dealing with foreigners, referred to their habit of building walls (*tembok*) around their villas, as a metaphor for the growing separation between the two communities.

Prominent figures in the new expat community are aware of this gap and have expressed concern about possible “backlashes”. In recent months there has been an escalating



Photo 4. Ubud is well known for its performing arts (Photo Darma Putra).

pattern of robberies, sexual assaults and physical violence against expats around Ubud. These came to a head in May 2014, when a British woman was murdered in a villa near Ubud. Expatriate groups held several meetings in which sentiments were expressed along the lines of our streets are no longer safe” and “we are not safe in our own community” (One wonders whose community they are talking about). More extreme voices called for police and government action and for embassies to issue travel warnings. Those trying to coordinate the response are aware that the situation needs to be handled carefully, and that they need to balance legitimate concerns over safety with the consequences of the gap between the communities. Could this be the beginning of a new benteng, constructed by the new expat community, to protect itself against the “foreign”, “dangerous” Balinese community?

## Conclusions

Ubud is not the perfect solution to the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in a tourism-based economy, but it provides a rather different, perhaps unique model of what tourism could be. One way of understanding this is through the double process of opening and closing – *terbukaaan* and *ke-benteng-an* – of the local community toward outsiders of various kinds. But conventional models of tourism are inadequate for understanding Ubud, we need a model that is expanded in two ways. Firstly, we need to expand the concept to include the tourists who stay longer – the expats. Secondly, we need to recognise that tourism is not a one-way process – the local community are part of this process too – we need to understand all the elements of “community” in relationship to each other.

When we reconceptualise what is happening in Ubud in this way we need to ask whether “tourism” is really the most useful concept for thinking about it – or is it an obstacle to understanding what is happening? Might it be more useful to think of it something like “cosmopolitan economic/cultural development”? If we look at the present problems in Ubud – which include traffic as well as violent crime – how does talk about tourism help us understand them? They are problems of cosmopolitan societies anywhere in the world and maybe the time has come to start thinking about them in this way.

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