

**THE IDEA OF BALINESE TRADITION:  
ON HISTORY, TELEOLOGY AND OFFERINGS**

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*A viable tradition is one which holds together conflicting social, political and even metaphysical claims in a creative way.*

- Alasdair MacIntyre<sup>1</sup>

Bali is nothing if not 'traditional'. On this there has been considerable agreement among scholars, tour guides and television pundits. But what do we mean by tradition? And why might it matter? This seemingly innocuous little term has been made to designate any number of things for as many purposes. Reviewing the literature on Balinese culture and society, we find that it often figures as a loosely conceptualized historical period ('traditional Bali') and a cipher for the lost 'religion' and 'spirituality' mourned in the West. It is a badge of authenticity, and almost as frequently appears as a synecdoche for 'text' ('according to tradition'). It is used to translate *adat*, but is also translated back into Indonesian as *tradisi*—which, of course, is not necessarily coterminous with *adat*. For cultural historians Balinese tradition has been exposed as a 'discourse' of identity linked to shifting articulations of economy and polity; while for government officials it is a form of 'cultural capital', or *modal*, to be judiciously deployed for social and economic development. Balinese 'tradition' has been all these things, and many others besides. And it is of no little consequence that our approach to social change and 'modernization' depends on it for its coherence. This paper aims to describe a series of tensions inherent in prevailing scholarly usage, and propose some novel ways forward through reference to Alasdair MacIntyre's later work on the idea of tradition in ethical inquiry.

In a word, this is a paper about interpretation. I'm interested in the idea of tradition for the simple reason that I believe we require tradition – or something like it – if we wish to render other people's practices intelligible as reasonable human action. And I'll explain what I mean by that in just a moment. First I'd like to review briefly some of ways we tend to talk about tradition in Balinese studies; I'll then say a few words about the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, who I believe offers a useful alternative to our received language about tradition; and I'll conclude with a brief example from my own research on offerings, or *banten*, that highlights some of the advantages of MacIntyre's approach. But first a few words on the idea of tradition in Balinese studies.

## **I. Our Language About Tradition: A Thumbnail Sketch**

In a nutshell, our language about tradition has tended to be of three types, which I would describe as (a) *positive*, (b) *genealogical* and (c) *operationalized*, respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> MacIntyre, A. (1979) 'Social Science Methodology as the Ideology of Bureaucratic Authority'. In M. J. Falco (ed.) *Through the Looking Glass: Epistemology and the Conduct of Enquiry*. University Press of America. Reprinted in Knight, K. (ed., 1998) *The MacIntyre Reader*. Notre Dame Press.

What I'm calling the 'positive' deployment of tradition encompasses those implicitly legitimizing uses, in which we're told that a given art form, ceremonial rite or social institution has its origins in the pre-modern past.<sup>2</sup> Such usage is often at once *positive* in an evaluative sense, while at the same time presuming to refer *positively* to something 'out there' in the world. To this end, the term *tradition* commonly qualifies, or is qualified by, something else. So we have 'local tradition', 'oral tradition', 'traditional theatre, music and dance'; there is 'traditional attire', 'traditional agriculture', 'the tantric tradition', 'the Śaivo-Buddhist tradition' and 'the Javano-Balinese linguistic tradition'; as well as a series of 'returns to tradition', that are informed by the expertise of foreign scholars, and as often underwritten by international aid agencies.<sup>3</sup> Taken together, these contribute to a more generalized notion of 'traditional Bali' as a loosely conceptualized historical period — an idea that is arguably implicit in much of our work, even as we endeavor to write against it.<sup>4</sup>

The second way we tend to speak of tradition — what I've called *the genealogical* — is rather more narrow in focus; and it takes a comparatively critical view of the island's history. If the *positive* deployment of tradition has served to set a fixed point in opposition to which we might recognize change on the contemporary scene, this *genealogical* approach reveals change *within* the 'discourse' of tradition itself.<sup>5</sup> In this case, the term 'tradition' appears most commonly as a translation for *adat*; and, more recently, it has also been linked to the idea of the *désa pakraman*, as the 'traditional village'.<sup>6</sup> It is on this basis that we now look askance at unreflective uses of 'religion', 'culture' and 'tradition' — knowing that *agama*, *budaya* and *adat* each has a history that is closely tied to changing articulations of economy, politics and power. This genealogical sensibility is arguably the default position in Balinese studies today. And it owes much to a series of important publications from James Boon (1977), Henk Schulte Nordholt (1986, 1999) Adrian Vickers (1989) and Michel Picard (1990,

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<sup>2</sup> Very generally speaking, this 'positive' use of tradition tends to cut two ways. In the first instance, it may appear as a badge of folk authenticity, set in opposition to the self-conscious creativity of modern art and artifice. In which case, the traditional is often communal, as opposed to individual. Alternatively, tradition may also imply classical standards of excellence—as in the composition of court poetry, where the ideal is aesthetic, as opposed to instrumental.

<sup>3</sup> An important variation on this theme is the use of tradition as a synecdoche for text—as in 'according to tradition', by which we usually mean to refer to a body of evidence, or precedent, in the textual record.

<sup>4</sup> In her study of *kakawin* composition Rachel Rubinstein has offered an explicit statement of the position, where she wrote, 'Traditional Bali is, for me, dominated by a set of nineteenth century or earlier cultural values, including values pertaining to literacy. It cannot be delimited by dates, for strong pockets of traditional Bali exist alongside 'modern Bali', and resist the influence of 'modern Bali', the period that commenced when the Dutch succeeded in colonizing Bali—North Bali in 1849, and South Bali from 1906 to 1908' (2000: 3). Something similar to this understanding of the traditional is implicit in much of our work—though it usually goes without the benefit of such careful qualification.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth emphasizing that the *positive* and *genealogical* uses of tradition are often found together within one and the same publication.

<sup>6</sup> To be clear, in using the term 'genealogical' I do not wish to link this usage too closely with either Nietzsche or the later Foucault. But I do wish to indicate more generally a nuanced attention to both shifting uses of terminology, and a desire to problematize our language of inquiry.

1996 etc.). The decisive procedure here has been one of unmasking—an *ironic* revelation of contingency, complicity and transformation where we had previously assumed an *earnest* determinacy, authenticity and stasis.

We thirdly have what I am calling *operationalized* tradition—by which I mean the various ways in which tradition has been reified and put to work by the state, but also by the tourism industry and in local politics. This is, in the first place, tradition understood as capital, or *modal*, which must be preserved or guarded, and judiciously managed for social and economic development—not to mention more immediate commercial gain. This is the tradition of bureaucrats, of entrepreneurs and managers. But it's also the tradition of Balinese schoolchildren. For, in addition to television, it is in the classroom where one first learns to recognize oneself as embodying distinctively *Balinese* styles of attire and of daily comportment. Speaking very generally, the defining feature of such *operationalized* tradition is deliberate reification aimed at furthering a particular end.<sup>7</sup>

So what are we to make of these three—the *positive*, the *genealogical* and the *operationalized*? How are they related to one another? And in what ways have they contributed to our interpretation of Balinese social life? What I've called operationalized tradition has received a fair bit of attention in the recent literature; and so I'd like to focus for the moment on the other two.

First the *positive* deployment. What I've called the *positive* uses of tradition have the advantage of rendering intelligible both change and our sense of the modern. Yet, this has come at the cost of conceding an essentialized—if not always romanticized—vision of the past as static. In our work this Archimedes' point, from which we view and evaluate the present, has been variously embodied in text, ritual, 'the village republic', 'the theatre state', or some other exemplar of a prior era. Here what is important about tradition is that it *sit still*, so that we might measure Bali's progressive movement away from it.

The *genealogical* deployment, by contrast, recognizes this essentialization for what it is, revealing all such calls to tradition as fundamentally 'invented'. Everything from Balinese culture and religion to the arts has been an elaborate ruse, we're told—serving the will to power, or perhaps, as we now more commonly say, 'the construction of identity'.

The problem here is that our most prominent genealogists have come unstuck on the question of *community*. I take it that genealogy is correct in highlighting the impossibility of representing Bali 'as it really is'. And yet genealogy falls foul of its own critique when it finds itself referring to 'the Balinese' as a positivity—that is to say, as a 'populace' that is somehow mis-represented by the 'discourse of Balineseness'. On this approach, we eschew

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<sup>7</sup> As many have now pointed out, without the precedent set by the state bureaucratic model of Balinese identity, 'Ajeg Bali' wouldn't have made any sense. My point is not so much that operationalized forms of Balinese tradition are all alike. I simply wish to note a certain commonality—namely, deliberate reification aimed at furthering a particular end. As the engine of cultural tourism, tradition has been a source of revenue. As an instrument of the state, it has been used to foster national unity through the regularization and management of difference. And more recently, with Ajeg Bali, the idea of Balinese tradition has been made to serve the interests of those who wish—among other things—to disenfranchise non-Balinese residents of the island.

universals in one breath, and then reassert them in the very next. And, as a result, the Balinese emerge as the ontology that dare not speak its name. Our genealogical decorum won't countenance open positivism. So we're left to sneak our vision of Balinese society in through the back door, with phrases that we drop in passing—such as 'ordinary Balinese', 'most Balinese', 'the Balinese population at large', 'typical Balinese' and other similarly covert gestures made in the direction of universality.

So what then are the alternatives? What I've called our *positive* invocations of tradition no longer appear viable—and this is largely thanks to the critique from genealogy. Yet, while genealogy seems to offer a more nuanced account of historical change, it too is not without its own skeletons in the metaphysical closet. Cast in grammatical terms, perhaps the lesson to be taken is that representation is *always* carried out in the optative. In other words... society is a *desideratum*, as opposed to a *datum*. It is something that we try to call into being, as opposed to something that is given. And it is here that I think the work of Alasdair MacIntyre may be of some help.

## II. Taking Teleology to Bali

As no doubt many of you know, MacIntyre is an Aristotelian philosopher and Scottish émigré to the United States, perhaps best known for a book called *After Virtue* that was published in the mid-1980s. There MacIntyre presented an historical critique of modern ethics that spurred a series of important developments in various fields, from management studies to the anthropology of Islam. What I'd like to suggest is that his approach to the idea of *tradition* may also have some resonance for Balinese studies.

Without wishing to oversimplify, MacIntyre's approach to moral enquiry centers on what he has called *practices, narratives* and *tradition*. And much rides on both the specification of, and relationship between, these categories. Given constraints on time, I think the most productive way forward would be to proceed by way of an example. And the example I'd like to consider is one with which I'm sure you're all familiar—namely that of *banten*, or the making of what we tend to call 'offerings'. As a first step in the direction of tradition, I'd like to ask what it would mean to approach offerings as a *practice*.

Here we must recognize from the outset that MacIntyre's account of practice is at once normative and quite closely circumscribed.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on both Aristotle and Aquinas, his approach is also teleological. That is to say, it centers on the goods, or the ends, toward which a given activity is directed, as well as the virtues that one must cultivate in order to pursue those goods successfully. On MacIntyre's account, an activity that can rightly be called a practice is also fundamentally *collaborative*. It is the reasoned pursuit of excellence carried out with others. While practitioners are trained through the learning of rules, the

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<sup>8</sup> In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre specified what he meant by *practice* in the following terms, 'By a "practice" I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended' (*After Virtue* 2007 [1981]: 187).

rules themselves may often be revised in the light of changing circumstance and experience. A tradition in good working order, then, is one characterized not by stasis, but rather by ongoing debate — or even *conflict* — between rival accounts of the common good and how it is best pursued. In other words, it is not only the *means*, but also the *ends* or the final purposes of human endeavor, that are up for debate.

So what, then, would it mean to approach the making of offerings as a practice? And how might this help us to think more constructively about tradition? Drawing on a period of fieldwork conducted during the academic year of 2010-11, I'd like to offer the following as a couple of tentative starting points.

First, when approached as a practice, the making of offerings tends to be what I would call *teleologically overdetermined* — which is really just a fancy way of saying that one and the same offering can be made for multiple and often conflicting purposes, or ends — *telos* — what in Balinese we might call *tetujon*.

Second, these multiple and conflicting purposes are, on closer inspection, part of what we might describe as rival modes of practical reasoning. In other words, the making of offerings embodies multiple — and at times conflicting — ways of thinking about agency, community and the collective good.<sup>9</sup>

I imagine this all sounds rather abstract. And so, for the sake of clarity, I'd like briefly to compare three of the five styles of practical reasoning that I believe are at work in the making of offerings. For now, we'll call their respective ideals those of (a) *well-being-through-exchange*, (b) *power-through-domination*, and, finally, (c) *balance-and-harmony*.

### **III.a. Mabanten as Well-Being Through Exchange**

To begin with the first ideal, we have the seemingly catch-all category of well-being, which encompasses the series of safety, sustenance and serenity. In short, one makes offerings in order to be left undisturbed, sated and equanimous. These are imminent goods, to be enjoyed here and now by oneself and one's close associates. For instance, one makes offerings at shrines located at the edge of a wooded area or near a ravine in order to avoid being disturbed by its inhabitants — *'pang sing gulgul*.

Meanwhile, many of the offerings dedicated at one's own family shrines are quite explicitly made as a request for sustenance. This is generally construed as begging a gift (*nunas ica*) from a superior — often a deified ancestor, however vaguely construed.

Why should we consider offerings made in supplication, such as these, alongside those made in the hope one won't be disturbed?

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<sup>9</sup> I take it this is the outcome of a complex history characterized by cultural interaction — what is conventionally described as the coming-together of various influences: Hindu, Buddhist, animist, Chinese, European and so on. By speaking in terms of practical reasoning, what I hope to accomplish is to highlight this complexity, while at the same time avoiding some of the difficulties and misleading reifications that tend to come with the analytic language of 'syncretism', 'hybridity', 'great and little traditions' etc.

Critically speaking, what I believe holds these seemingly disparate acts together is the fact that their form appears to be that of an *exchange*. And, as with the exchanges made in one's more tangible social life, the character of this exchange varies greatly depending upon the entity with whom it is carried out. It may be part of an ongoing relationship of reciprocal obligation, not unlike those one sustains with kinsmen and neighbors. Or, again, it could be a supplication to a superior, or the payment of a debt.

The ideal of *community* that is embodied in these practices of donation, supplication and debt seems to be that of a continuing cycle of privilege-and-obligation that is sustained through time.<sup>10</sup> It is arguably plebeian in character, and appears to reflect very much the sensibilities of rural subsistence — namely, those of supplication and subordination, cooperation and negotiation.<sup>11</sup> The common good arises from *ongoing* relations of giving and receiving — debt and repayment — that are calculated with varying degrees of precision.

### III.b. Mabanten as Power Through Domination

This ideal of securing well-being through relations of exchange contrasts quite sharply with a second style of reasoning about offerings — namely, that of power-through-domination. Here, as opposed to the ongoing cycle of debt-and-repayment, we have the model of *life as war*. And, war, on this view, to cite Hildred Geertz,

... is the normal state of the cosmos, and the human world. Conflict is not evidence of chaotic breakdown of the cosmos, but the fundamental characteristic of life. ... 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.<sup>12</sup> (1994: 95)

Albeit apparently royal or 'aristocratic' in orientation — what those of an Indic bent might call *kṣātriya* — these ideals are as accessible to commoners as they are to the gentry — embodied, as they are, in pursuits such as oratory, sex and sorcery. Here the best defense is a good offense. And the performance of ceremonial rites, or *yadnya*, is but one more means to this end. Here we might look to any of the many offerings that are made in the shape of weapons (*sanjata*), or the more general notion of 'dedicating offerings' (*mabanten*) as itself a form of fortification (*bénténg, pagerwesi*).

It is important to emphasize that the community itself — known perhaps most prominently in this register as the *gumi* — is wrought through its own ceremonial work which can only be carried out under the leadership — or perhaps even the 'spell' — of a powerful ruler.

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<sup>10</sup> The résumé of examples might be expanded much further. One can, for instance, make a vow (*sasangi*) to a powerful being, which must then be paid off (*kataur*) when one's request is fulfilled. Failing to do so is to court disaster — 'payback' of a rather different kind.

<sup>11</sup> It will also be worth reflecting on *ayah* as the tribute owed by client to patron, petitioner to protector.

<sup>12</sup> Here one might also compare the performance of a *wayang calonarang*, in which the *dalang* challenges to battle all those in the vicinity.

Given the inherently unstable nature of the cosmos, domination is the precondition for the collective good.

### **III.c. Mabanten as Balance and Harmony**

Moving from the warlike to the bureaucratic, we have a third idiom—namely that of balance-and-harmony, *keseimbangan dan kerukunan*. This is the ideal of the Indonesian state that is broadcast on television and disseminated through compulsory religious education. On this account, offerings are cast quite explicitly as ‘a pure sacrifice performed sincerely and without hope for recompense’ — *tanpa pamrih akan hasilnya*.

This too contrasts quite sharply with the ideal of offerings as a form of exchange — as the payment of a debt, for instance; or perhaps a supplication in hope of continued sustenance and safety.<sup>13</sup> What in the past was commonly known as supplicatory donation (*maaturan*) is now increasingly called praying (*sembahyang*). And one is taught to pray individually — or with members of one’s immediate family — three times per day, with a small ‘symbolic’ offering and the recitation of the *tri-sandhya* mantra.

These offerings in prayer are made to restore the natural balance and harmony of the threefold cosmos, now frequently cast in language that is reminiscent of high school lit crit: man-with-man, man-with-God, man-with-nature.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the community of practice is configured as the *umat* – the *umat Hindu* – and its rites are normative, as opposed to constitutive. This contrasts sharply, of course, with the ideal of the community as *gumi*, which we saw with the model of power-and-domination. The normalized and state-sanctioned *umat*, characterized by its ‘balance and harmony’, is one of five, or now six, discrete religious communities which together make up the organically integrated nation. While, by contrast, there is nothing ‘organic’ or ‘natural’ about the unity of the *gumi* — which, again, must be forged through collective endeavor under the spell of a powerful ruler.

## **IV. The End**

Were there time, one might add to this résumé of three ideals (at least) two more—namely, those of *purity* and of what I am provisionally calling *flows-and-concentrations*. And I would argue that each of these styles — or what I might even call ‘languages’ — of ceremonial work, is irreducible to any of the others. That is to say, they are each premised on quite different understandings of human agency, community and the collective good. And, as we’ve seen, these models are often in tension with one another. To take a rather obvious example, the sensibilities associated with power-through-domination negate much of what is essential to the ideal of ‘balance and harmony’ that is promulgated by the state. Much of the recent scholarship on Bali has made note of this contrast between state ideology and village-level practice. Yet it seems that, on closer inspection, what we find is not so much a

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<sup>13</sup> We may note this also draws on the language of purity — with the *korban suci*, the ‘pure sacrifice’ — but now rearticulating this ideal in terms of a moralized and individual spirituality.

<sup>14</sup> Taken together, this is known under the neo-Sanskritic soubriquet of *Tri Hita Karana*.



*duality*, but rather a *multiplicity* of ideals. And I would argue there is no natural meta-language that can embrace them all unproblematically.

It is on this point that I would like to end, as opposed to conclude... As the sedimentation of authorized precedent, Balinese tradition is nothing if not complex. In an essay from the mid-1970s, Alasdair MacIntyre remarked that '[a] viable tradition is one which holds together conflicting social, political and even metaphysical claims in a creative way.' Arguably, these words might as easily have been spoken from the Balinese stage. And, from this vantage, it's hard to imagine there being anywhere more 'traditional' than contemporary Bali. Yet tradition, on this approach, is going to be more dynamic than is implied by our usual *positive* usage, and at the same time more *positive* than our *genealogical* sensibilities would prefer. For reasons we might want to discuss, it is not quite a matter of going *operationalized*. It is, rather, a question of theorizing the related problems of complexity and precedent. To be sure, contemporary practice is unintelligible without reference to precedent. New speech, and action, only makes sense insofar as it reiterates the past. Yet the past is a slippery beast, and arguably nowhere more so than in Bali.