Religion and performance in Java and Bali  

Spring 2008

HREL 49600
Wed 3:00-5:50pm
Swift Hall Room 208

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Office Hours: Thurs. 12:30-2:30pm

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This course examines the relationship between religion and performance through an analysis of theatrical and related traditions of Java and Bali. In addition to classical forms of masked drama, dance opera and shadow theatre, we will also consider more recent developments in popular music and television with a special emphasis on their importance for our understanding of religion, power and the nation. Although focused primarily on materials from Java and Bali, this course is explicitly directed to a broader series of pressing theoretical issues for scholars working in the history of religions. With this end in mind, a set of opening questions have been provided for each session that focus both on the specific materials in question, as well as on their more general import for the historical study of religion and performance.

Course requirements

- Complete and careful reading of all course material.
- Regular attendance and active participation in discussion.
- At least two in-class presentations, each with a discussion paper of approximately 1000 words.
- One paper of approximately 3000 words; details TBA.
- All work must be submitted on time; no incompletes will be granted for this course, except on grounds of major life disruption.

Course books available at the Seminary Cooperative bookstore


Additional course materials available through CHALK website and on library reserve


Hobart, M (n.d.) *The prince of Nusa Penida redeems his vow; A prèmbon*. Unpublished manuscript.


Transcript of *Topeng Pajegan*, ‘Mpu Kuturan’.


DVD: *BaliVision*.

DVD: *Dewa Ruci: A shadow puppet performance by Ki Manteb Soedharsono*.

DVD: *Gambuh: The ancient dance drama of Bali*.

DVD: *Karaoke Dangdut Ngebor, Inul!*

DVD: *Topeng Pajegan*, ‘Mpu Kuturan’.

YouTube: *Goyang gossip / Goyang Gosip*.

**Selected background reading on the study of theatre and performance**

Selected background reading on religion, culture and performance in Java and Bali

SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS

1. Pamabah: Course introduction
   Wednesday, 2 April 2008

2. Spies and de Zoete: A (romantic) introduction to Dance and Drama
   Wednesday, 9 April 2008

   Reading:

   Opening questions:
   • Is theatrical performance inherently religious? Is religion inherently performative? And, critically speaking, why might it matter?
   • To what are we referring when we use the terms ritual, theatre, dance and performance? And how are these terms related to our use of the term religion?
   • What are some of the key regularities between the different kinds of performance discussed by Spies and de Zoete? And how might they be compared with broadly Euro-American theatrical traditions?

3. Topeng: Religion and the subject of performance
   Wednesday, 16 April 2008

   Reading:
   • Transcript of Topeng Pajegan, ‘Mpu Kuturan’.

   Viewing:
   • DVD: Topeng Pajegan, ‘Mpu Kuturan’.

   Opening questions:
   • What is an ‘actor’? What is a ‘mask’? And how are these things related?
   • How is theatrical performance related to other aspects of social life?
   • What is the underlying theory of religion in Emigh’s account of Topeng?
   • How is power exemplified through the performance of ‘Mpu Kuturan’? And does this square with Emigh’s understanding of Balinese theatre?
**4. Negara: Cabbages or kings?**  
Wednesday, 23 April 2008

Reading:

Opening questions:
- Were Balinese rulers ‘cabbages’ or ‘kings’? And how might one know?
- How is theatre related to kingship on Geertz’s account? And on what grounds does Hobart take issue with this understanding of state power in Bali?
- What precisely is the ‘Babad Nusa’? And in answering what sorts of questions might it potentially provide evidence?

**5. Prembon: Articulating the world**  
Wednesday, 30 April 2008

Reading:
- Hobart, M (n.d.) *The prince of Nusa Penida redeems his vow; A prèmbon*. Unpublished manuscript.

Opening questions:
- What is a ‘prembon’?
- How do text, language and translation figure in this performance? And in the representation of this performance to an Anglophone readership?
- What is involved in transcribing and translating a theatrical performance? And what are the implications of the improvisational nature of Balinese theatre?
- Why are the *penasar*, or clown-servants, such important characters in the play? And what broader significance might this have for our understanding of Balinese society and polity?

**6. Malat: Of princes and power**  
Wednesday, 7 May 2008

Reading:

Opening questions:
- Is the *Malat* a text? What is a ‘text’? And how is it related to ‘performance’?
- What kinds of power figure in the *Malat*?
- How might Vickers account of Balinese history be compared to that of Geertz and Emigh? To that Hobart? And the ‘Babad Nusa’?
7. Seni: The state of the art (and the art of the state)
Wednesday, 14 May 2008

Reading:

Viewing:
- DVD: BaliVision.

Opening questions:
- What is ‘Balinese tradition’? And why has it mattered? To whom? When? And with what consequences?
- Where do popular understandings of Balinese ‘religion’ and ‘art’ come from? And how are they mediated institutionally?
- Does this week’s reading have any implications for how we read Spies and de Zoete, Geertz, Emigh and others?
- Critically speaking, is ‘Bali’ (or, for that matter, ‘Java’) a viable frame of reference?

8. Wayang: The worlds of Javanese shadow theatre
Wednesday, 21 May 2008

Reading:

Viewing:

Opening questions:
- What is a dalang?
- What is the nature of the relationship between past and present in Javanese wayang kulit?
- How might Javanese wayang be compared with the Balinese performative traditions we have already discussed?
- Is shadow theatre inherently conservative? Anti-hegemonic? Both? Or, perhaps, neither?
9. Didalangkan: History, complexity, power  
Wednesday, 28 May 2008

Reading:

Opening questions:
- How is colonialism relevant to our understanding of contemporary religious and theatrical traditions in Java and Bali?
- What does it mean to write *historically* about religion and performance?
- Is it possible to tease out various religious, cultural and other elements evident on the contemporary scene without reifying and/or substantializing them?
- What is the object of historical inquiry? And what purposes does it serve?

10. Dangdut: Islam and ‘the people’  
Wednesday, 4 June 2008

Reading:

Viewing:
- *Goyang gossip / Goyang Gosip* on YouTube.
- DVD: *Karaoke Dangdut Ngebor, Inul!*

Opening questions:
- Are ‘the people’ of Indonesia religious? (And to what does this question refer?)
- Who or what are the Indonesian ‘masses’? Through what media do they become intelligible as an object of commentary? And what are the implications for an historical approach to Indonesian religion, society and polity?
- How does attention to performance—as a critical frame of reference—transform both scholarly and popular understandings of religion, media and nation?

*Final essays (approx 3000 words) due no later than 3pm Tuesday, 10 June 2008. Details TBA.*