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Why Do Balinese Make Offerings?

On Religion, Teleology and Complexity

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Abstract

This article attempts to answer the question as to why Balinese make offerings. Eschewing an explanation in terms of a unitary religious or cultural belief, it explores the practices surrounding the preparation and dedication of *banten* (the Balinese term most commonly glossed in English as ‘offerings’), and how these practices embody conflicting articulations of agency, community and the common good. Analysis is directed to highlighting this complexity, while at the same time trying to avoid some of the difficulties and misleading reifications that come with the language of ‘syncretism’, ‘hybridity’, ‘great and little traditions’, and the like.

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Keywords

religion – Bali – ritual – offerings – complexity

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But I am inclined to point to the endless variety of Balinese offerings and the unlimited fantasy underlying them, the frequency in which they are made and the incredible quantities thought to be necessary. This must beset numerous women to such an extent that it would be justified to characterize Balinese religion as one of offerings.

CHRISTIAAN HOOYKAAS 1975:115

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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 1979:67

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Introduction

Why do Balinese make offerings?¹ By a conservative estimate several million offerings are made in Bali every day. The descriptions in tourist guidebooks tend to focus on their colourful and artistic qualities, echoing longstanding stereotypes of Bali as an exotic island paradise. Meanwhile, the scholarly literature has been rather more serious and expository in tone, interpreting the making of offerings as a form of communal ritual, a concrete manifestation of an abstract religious philosophy, or as a modern extrapolation from an ancient scriptural tradition.² The conceptual thread that links these four approaches—

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- 1 I have used the term 'offerings' as a convenient shorthand for what Balinese generically tend to call *banten*. For reasons that will become apparent, I believe neither of these terms—*banten* nor offerings—is especially helpful, as they both link what are often, in practice, distinct and separate things that probably ought to be considered together.
 - 2 For examples of the emphasis on the artistic quality of Balinese offerings, one might look to any of the current guidebooks published, for instance, by Lonely Planet, Frommer's, and

namely, interpreting Balinese offerings as art, ritual, philosophy, or scripture—has been their common lack of attention to the ways Balinese men, women, and children understand and account for their own actions, the reasons and aims these embody, and the historical conditions under which they take place.

This article sets out to explore what it might mean to represent the making of offerings as a practice, or, at the very least, as one of the integral parts of a practice, such as the maintenance of a houseyard (B. *pakaran*), or the performance of ceremonial work (B. *karya*).³ The ideas that inform this approach will require some explication, and there are a couple of key points that I would like to use as markers along the way. First, when approached in terms of practice, the making of offerings is 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, I wish to suggest that these multiple and conflicting purposes are, on closer inspection, the product of what might be described as rival modes of practical reasoning, each of which probably emerged out of quite separate historical circumstances.⁴ In other

Baedeker. Also see Stuart-Fox (1974), Ramseyer (1977:135f.), and Brinkgreve and Stuart-Fox (1992) for scholarly variations on this theme. The idea of offerings as an aspect of communal ritual figures prominently in the works of Belo (1953), Howe (1976, 2001, 2005), Ottino (2000), Reuter (2002), and Pedersen (2005). Although the trope of ‘philosophy’ (I. *filasafat, hakikat*) appears to be of greater importance for Balinese publications (see, for example, Sudarsana 2000, Dharmita 2011), one might also compare Herbst (1997:133) and Hood (2010:135). Finally, for studies that explain the preparation and dedication of offerings with reference to ancient scripture, see Hooykaas-Van Leeuwen Boomkamp (1960), Hooykaas (1977), and Stephen (2002). I have listed the foregoing works with an eye to their central emphasis with respect to offerings, though, from one work to the next, there is much overlap between the four guiding themes (namely art, ritual, philosophy, scripture). It is also worth noting there has long been something of a cottage industry in Balinese publishing, with numerous Indonesian- and Balinese-language titles available on various aspects of ritual and the making of offerings; for an early comment on this, see Hooykaas (1963). A study of these locally produced books and their production and dissemination would be the subject for a separate monograph.

3 I have used the following abbreviations to indicate linguistic register: B. for Balinese; I. for Indonesian; K. for Kawi. Here one must be a little careful in drawing the distinction—particularly in spoken language—between what most speakers of Balinese would consider ‘Kawi’, on the one hand, and literary Balinese or other forms of Javanese and Sanskrit on the other. There is a great deal of overlap between these linguistic registers and, unless stated otherwise, my indications follow local usage. For an insightful discussion of these issues as they pertain to Balinese literary practices, see Rubinstein (2000:25–38); for broader treatment, see Wallis (1980) and Hunter (1988).

4 By practical reasoning I mean very generally those forms of deliberation through which

words, what I wish to argue is that when Balinese make offerings they are at once embodying multiple, and at times conflicting, ways of thinking about agency, community, and the common good; and that this is the outcome of a complex history that is conventionally described in terms of the coming together of various influences: Hindu, Buddhist, animist, Chinese, European, et cetera.

By speaking in terms of practical reasoning, I hope 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', and the like. As a way into the problem of offerings, I would like to consider an interpretive problem that arose during a recent period of fieldwork in a semi-rural ward (B. *banjar*) that I shall simply call Batan Nangka.⁵

Piercing the Road

Bali is famously known as 'the island of a thousand temples'. Leaving aside the question of what it means to call something a 'temple', for present purposes I would like to go along with this description, and even suggest it to be something of an understatement. For not only does each village community have its own major and minor temple complexes, and each Hindu houseyard its own

means and ends are evaluated and decisions to act are taken. Here one might expect reference to such figures as Bourdieu (1998) and Sahlins (1978), who are often cited in the anthropological literature on ethics and the idea of 'practical reason'. However, my approach takes its cue from a rather different line of thought, informed by Alasdair MacIntyre's historical account of rationality in ethical enquiry (see, for example, MacIntyre 1990, 2007). The latter has been crucial for recent anthropological interest in religion, secularism, and ethics (see, for instance, Asad 2003; Mahmood 2005; Scott and Hirschkind 2006), with special reference to the Abrahamic traditions. In my view, a similar approach may be helpful in rethinking questions of religion in Bali.

- 5 Batan Nangka is a pseudonym for one of the seven wards (B. *banjar*) that make up the 'Traditional Village' (B. *Désa Pakraman*) of Pateluan (also a pseudonym), which is itself located in the southerly Balinese regency of Gianyar. The study itself was carried out over the course of ten months, during which time I had the privilege of learning to help prepare and dedicate *banten* with members of the ward community. Although my work focused primarily on the day-to-day work of local commoner (B. *jaba*) women, I also had the opportunity to learn from several of the experts employed in the community, such as offerings specialists (B. *tukang banten*), temple priests (B. *pamangku*), and various high priests (B. *padanda*, *rsi bhujangga*).



FIGURE 1 *Roadside shrine by the outer wall of a houseyard compound at the crossroads*

ancestral shrines, but there are also countless little altars strewn along the roads and passageways that run through every town and village on the island.

Among these, one almost always finds a small shrine, usually made of stone, situated along the outside wall of the houseyards that run adjacent to a crossroads or T-junction. These shrines are generally held to belong to the houseyard on which they abut, though sometimes offerings are also made there by those living in a neighbouring compound. There is usually nothing to distinguish these offerings from those dedicated elsewhere in the compound; what makes these little shrines so interesting, though, is the variety of ways in which their use is construed.

On the face of it there appears to be considerable agreement as to their general purpose—namely, safety. One makes offerings at these shrines so as not to become sick (B. *'pang sing gelem*), so as not to be disturbed (B. *'pang sing gulgul*), so as not to be thrown off-kilter (B. *'pang sing kesiab-kesiab*) and thereby become vulnerable to attack. Should one neglect to erect such a shrine at one's home, or perhaps forget to make the offerings on a given day, it is often said that one's houseyard will become 'hot', or *panes*, rendering the household susceptible to illness and misfortune. But why are these shrines necessary for houseyards that abut on a crossroads, or at a T-junction?⁶ To say that the

6 They also appear in other locations, such as in houseyards abutting a temple (B. *pura*), a ward assembly pavilion (B. *balé banjar*), or a brahmin compound (B. *griya*).

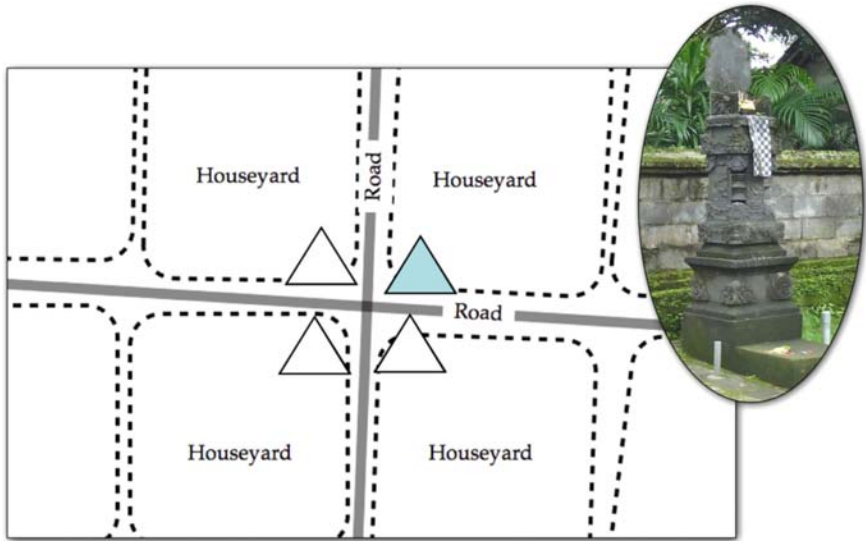


FIGURE 2 Map of the crossroads with its four roadside shrines (Δ = roadside shrine)

crossroads is magically dangerous, or what Balinese often call *tenget*, would appear to beg the question. So why is it that offerings are required at these locations? And, as an instrument, precisely how do they work?⁷

This is where things begin to get interesting, for it depends very much on whom one asks, and when. For many, these little shrines are simply called *panumbak jalan*, a phrase that might be translated as ‘road piercer’, with *jalan* meaning road, and *panumbak* being derived from *tumbak*—like Indonesian *tombak*—meaning ‘spear’ or ‘lance’. On this account, the shrine and its offerings are quite literally a weapon (B. *sanjata*) for defending against malevolent beings and forces that might be travelling along the road. As a middle-aged farmer put it, these shrines work ‘like a fortification’ (B. *sakadi bénténg*). He explained, ‘the houseyard (itself) will be pierced if it doesn’t have a road-piercer’ (B. *pakaranggé ‘kal katumbak yan panumbak jalan sing ada*).

The image here is one of battle, fought out between diametrically opposed forces, and this was among the first of the explanations that I encountered

7 There are subtle and important distinctions drawn between various forms of instrumentality. The term *upakara* is most commonly used for instruments employed in broadly ‘ritual’ contexts, and carries with it a set of ideals regarding purity, and possibly hierarchy, to which I shall return below. The more general terms *prabot* and *sarana* are also significant, as employed in reference to various kinds of tools and means, as is the idea of ornamentation, or *uparengga*. I plan to address these issues in further detail in a separate essay.

when I began inquiring into how these little shrines worked. But, as I moved on to ask others in the community, I found that many of them—who also made the very same sort of offerings at the same shrines—had never even heard of the phrase *panumbak jalan*, let alone the notion of ‘piercing’ those powerful beings and forces thought to be passing by.

Some referred to these shrines instead as *pasimpangan*, or ‘way stations’, where those intangible travellers along the road might be offered some refreshment and a place to rest (B. *masandekan*). I was told the roadside offerings were made not so much to ‘pierce’ a potentially malevolent being, but rather as a form of hospitality to be taken at the roadside, in lieu of passing travellers coming into the houseyard, where they might cause trouble (B. *ngarabéda*). One leaves a little something for them at the *pasimpangan*, and hopefully they will continue on their way.

It may be noted in passing that, as either a *panumbak jalan* or as a *pasimpangan*, the shrine was quite explicitly linked to the road and to those beings and forces that travel along it. Whether as weapon or way-station, the shrine was a means (B. *sarana*) of preventing passers-by from entering the houseyard, where they might interfere with one’s family and friends.

Yet, there were still others—again, making the same sort of offerings at the same sort of shrines—who called them something else entirely, namely a *panyawang*, or a place for making offerings to a powerful being whose abode is located too far away for a daily visit.⁸ Here the shrines had little to do with either the road or with passers-by. Rather, on their account, the offerings embodied a request for continued safety and sustenance. No doubt neglecting these beings would be dangerous, but most of those with whom I spoke placed the emphasis squarely on the act of donation (B. *ngaturang*), made in the hope of gaining favour.⁹

Despite their not inconsiderable differences, there nonetheless remained one point of agreement among those using each of these three names for the

8 As an aging actor explained to me, these shrines were especially important back in the day when transportation was still difficult.

9 Here I have used the term ‘donation’ to characterize the presentation of ‘offerings’, where Balinese would use the term *ngaturang*. As the subsequent discussion makes clear, this is not commonly taken to be a disinterested gift. Moreover, despite certain formal associations of the terminology (which implies an act of ‘upward’ giving), to *ngaturang* does not necessarily entail ‘honouring’, or even ‘respecting’, the recipient—as, for instance, when ‘buying off’, or ‘bribing’, a potentially malevolent force. Here one makes a small donation—as to a passing beggar (an example cited by several of those with whom I was working)—so as to be left undisturbed.

shrine, and that was the simple fact that the intended recipients of the offerings were left unspecified. Whether they were understood as regular travellers along the road, or as beings located elsewhere, their identity was generally unknown. It was on precisely this point that these three uses of the roadside shrines differed from yet a fourth, namely those who took it to be dedicated to Sang Hyang Indrabelaka, whom some took to be a malevolent form of the Hindu deity Lord Indra. Those who understood the shrines in this way had usually been instructed by a brahmin ritual advisor, who also explained—usually in Indonesian—that the function (I. *fungsi*) of the shrine and its offerings was to transform the deity from its malevolent manifestation into a more beneficent (B./K. *somya*) form.¹⁰ This transformation was in turn directed to restoring balance and harmony (I. *keseimbangan dan kerukunan*) between the houseyard and its surroundings, understood as a reference to humans, divine beings, and the natural environment.

So it seems we have at least four distinct ways of construing these shrines and their use, organized respectively around the tropes of (a) war, (b) precautionary hospitality, (c) supplication, and (d) transformation. That is, (a) as a *panumbak jalan*—the shrine is a weapon; (b) as a *pasimpangan*—it is a ‘way station’; (c) as a *panyawang*—it relays donation from a distance; and (d) as a shrine to Indrabelaka—it is a site for placating and transforming a potentially dangerous deity. But can all these things be true at once? And, if so, how are we to understand the relationship between such multiple and seemingly disparate sensibilities? Here it is worth noting that, in addition to the fact that we are often talking about one and the same shrine, the offerings themselves are also the same. That is to say, whether one calls it a *panumbak jalan* or a *pasimpangan*—that is, whether piercing the road or providing some refreshment—one still makes the same sort of offering: *banten kopi* and *saiban* in the morning, and both *canang* and *segehan* at twilight, or in the afternoon (see Figure 3).

So, if the same offering can be used as both weapon and roadside snack, what sort of instrument are we dealing with? And how, if at all, does its form relate to its function? Here it is important to emphasize that, whatever else they may be, Balinese offerings are almost never an individual act of devotion. They are, rather, an integral component of a traditional practice, by which I mean roughly three things—namely, that they are (i) aimed at achieving a specific end, which is both (ii) authorized by a recognized precedent (what I will later

10 The discussion of these shrines might be complicated further by pointing out that they come in at least three distinct formats—with one, two, and three chambers (B. *rong*) respectively. Reflecting on this, some local commentators combined the various accounts mentioned above.



FIGURE 3 Photograph of (1) *banten kopi and saiban* (left) for sunrise; and (2) *canang and segehan* (right) for twilight

call tradition), and (iii) accessible to the collective reasoning of a community.¹¹ What I wish to suggest by these three points is that the kind of variation we have seen with the roadside shrine is not simply a matter of error, or of individual caprice—which brings me to the first of my two points along the way: that, approached as a practice, Balinese offerings are teleologically overdetermined. That is to say, they are at once directed to multiple purposes, or ends, at least some of which are incongruous with one another. I would like to suggest that seeing things this way opens the way for a series of new questions, and so, potentially, a novel approach to the study of that congeries of practices we all too easily like to call ‘Balinese religion’ (see H. Geertz 2000).

Rival Styles of Reasoning

I am interested specifically in three types of question, namely those dealing with purpose, community, and the common good. For it seems that, when we attend to these three areas, the ideals embodied in the making of offerings tend to fall into roughly five general clusters, each of which, I suspect, emerged out of a different set of historical circumstances.¹² These five ideals

11 To be clear, I do not mean ‘community’ in the sense of a positive social fact, but rather as the inherently unstable outcome of an articulation—one that attempts to sustain the tension between relations of equivalence (‘identity’) and difference (Laclau 2005).

12 There are obviously many other questions one might ask in relation to the making of offer-

would include those of (1) well-being, (2) power, (3) purity, (4) balance and harmony, and what I am provisionally calling (5) flows and concentrations. What I would like to suggest is that each of these ideals comprise, respectively, the end—or *telos*—that gives direction to a particular style of reasoning. I should perhaps emphasize that the kind of complexity that I see at work here—a sort of overdetermination—differs markedly from the quasi-animistic Hindu-Buddhist syncretism usually attributed both to the Balinese, as well as to many other Southeast Asian societies.

Well-Being through Exchange

Let us begin with the seemingly catch-all category of well-being, which encompasses the series of safety, sustenance, and serenity. In short, one wishes to be left undisturbed, sated, and equanimous.¹³ 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 (B. *gulgul*) by its inhabitants (B. *unén-unén*), much as we saw with the earlier example of the *pasimpangan*, or 'way station'—better to leave something out for passers-by than to have them poking around in your houseyard and causing trouble.

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 (B. *nunas ica*) from a superior—often one's deified ancestors, however vaguely construed. Another example might be found, for instance, in the supplications made on the day of *tumpek uduh*, which takes place twenty-five days before the feast day of Galungan. One places a small offering into a notch cut into a fruit- or flower-bearing tree, while knocking on the tree trunk three times and asking 'grandfather' (B. *kaki*) for a bounty of the fruits and vegetables required to complete the coming ceremony (see Figure 4).

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

ings. But these three questions—of purpose, community, and the common good—have been especially helpful in specifying the gaps between what I am calling different styles of practical reasoning.

- 13 In my experience the purpose in making offerings is most commonly articulated in negative terms (for instance, '*pang sing gelem*'; see above). It is not that Balinese are at a loss for words when it comes to well-being (for instance, B. *rahajeng*) and safety (for instance, I. *selamat*). However, at least in the conversations to which I have been party, such generalized and positive statements of purpose are rare—and might even sound odd, or presumptuous.



FIGURE 4 *Dedicating offerings (B. mabanten) on tumppek uduh*

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 (B. *sakala*) 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 neighbours. Or, again, it might be a supplication to a superior. Alternatively, it might also be the payment of a debt, or even a bribe. There are a range of offerings whose names imply just that; a *biyakala* or *béakala* offering, for example, is quite literally a 'payment' to coarse or malevolent forces. So, too, is a *taur* or *panauran*, made either on a regular basis, as part of a larger ceremony, or in expiation for a specific transgression, such as stumbling uninvited into the abode of a river spirit or denizen of the forest.¹⁴

The general model of donation would also include any number of subtle little precautions taken in the run of daily life, such as spilling a little coffee on the ground before drinking any oneself, in order to ensure whatever activity one is engaged in will go smoothly—that is, without interference from others who may be present, but unseen, and who might take offense at not being included in the offering of a little refreshment.¹⁵

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 obli-

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

15 Here it is worth noting that the supplementary payment that accompanies many offerings—commonly in the form of paper money, or coins—appears to follow the same precautionary logic.

gation that is sustained through time. It is fundamentally demotic in character, and appears to reflect very much the sensibilities traditionally associated with a rural peasant existence—namely, those of supplication and subordination, cooperation, and negotiation. It is significant to note that, at least here, gender ideals do not seem especially pronounced. The point is not that certain tasks are not differently allotted to men and women respectively, but rather that, in the idiom of well-being through exchange, the division of labour appears neither self-evidently hierarchical, nor is it sharply regulated.¹⁶ Emphasis is placed, rather, on a more generalized vision of the common good arising from ongoing relations of giving and receiving—debt and repayment—that are calculated with varying degrees of precision. The fruits of collective labour are as often grounds for conflict as they are for accord. But the demands of the common good are nonetheless absolute, as reflected in a common rebuke for failing to recognize one's obligations: '(You're acting) as if someone else were gonna carry yer carcass (to the cemetery)!' (B. *'Asané 'nak lén 'kal ngisidang bangkéné!*).¹⁷

Power through Domination

The ideal of securing well-being through relations of exchange contrasts sharply with a second style of reasoning about offerings—that of power through domination. This links directly to the earlier example of the roadside shrine understood as *panumbak jalan*, the 'road piercer'. Here, as opposed to the ongoing cycle of debt and repayment, we have the model of life as war. This is the world as understood through what Hildred Geertz (1995) once called her '*sakti* conjecture', explaining that

16 Despite the ideal distribution, according to which women sew offerings (B. *majajahatan*) while men chop meat and spices (B. *mébat*), these tasks can be taken on—in small part—by men and women alike when circumstances require. A telling example would be the early-morning preparation and dedication of *banten* by men when their wives have already left the house for salaried office work, and their daughters have gone to school.

17 There is no little anxiety among Balinese as to the treatment of their corpses, and those of their close associates. The handling of mortal remains is arguably one of the more tangible measures of a person's standing in the community (see Connor 1979 on 'corpse abuse'). During a recent visit to Pateluan I attended the cremation ceremony for a woman from an aristocratic house that was seen to have neglected its responsibility to those who had historically provided the palace with labour and other forms of material support. Her funeral bier was dragged along the street for over a kilometer, leaving little ambiguity as to the community's disapproval—all this before a busload of tourists, who appeared largely oblivious to what was happening.

the term *sakti* cannot properly be translated as ‘power’ if taken as merely the capacity to control other people’s actions, as in the usual Western political sense of the word. Rather, *sakti* is the capacity to join in the mortal combat of the competing forces of the universe in order to secure an envelope of safety around oneself and those near one.

GEERTZ 1994:2

She went on, moreover, to note that,

War, in this view [...] 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. 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.

GEERTZ 1994:95

Albeit apparently royal or ‘aristocratic’ in orientation—what those of an Indic bent might be inclined to call *kṣātrīya*—the ideals associated with domination are as accessible to commoners as they are to the gentry—embodied, as they are, in pursuits such as oratory, sorcery, and sex.¹⁸ Here the best defense is a good offense. And the performance of ceremonial rites, or *yadnya*, is but one more means to this end. We might look, for instance, to any of the many offerings that are made in the shape of weapons (B. *sanjata*), or the more general notion of ‘dedicating offerings’ (B. *mabanten*) as itself a form of fortification (with, for instance, the above-cited metaphor of B. *bénténg*, or the holiday called *pagerwesi*, ‘iron wall’). As a variation on this theme, many of Bali’s famed ‘temple dances’ are quite overtly military in character. One might look,

18 Vickers (2005:2–3) has described the world of power and desire in pre-colonial Bali, in which ‘princes drove themselves toward conquest, seducing and slaughtering to live the legendary perfection of the young prince Pañji, the vision of noble masculinity dripping with a sophisticated mastery of courtly beauty and martial terror [...] For the alluring princes, talents in dance, painting and wielding a kris were inseparable from qualities which made them irresistible to women and which created kingdoms out of bands of loyal followers.’



FIGURE 5 *The massive saté tungguh offering (left), fitted with the nine directional weapons of the nawasanga; and detail (right) of a 'trident' (B. trisula) shaped from pig fat*

for example, to the various forms of *baris*, but also to the oft-cited 'keris dance'.¹⁹ In a similar vein, much of the generally ceremonial regalia used in the festivals themselves is precisely that of courtly power—lances, daggers, and the related accoutrements of battle.²⁰

Here it is important to emphasize that the community itself—known perhaps most commonly 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. In contrast to the notion of well-being through exchange, this ideal is resolutely hierarchical in character. Answering to the inherently unstable nature of the cosmos, domination appears as a precondition for well-being.

19 Many of the female dances—for instance, several forms of *Légong*—are also bellicose, involving both fighting and murder (Mark Hobart and Ni Madé Pujawati Hobart, personal communication). Here one must be careful to distinguish earlier forms from the sorts of dance created to exemplify postcolonial ideals of art (i. *seni*) and culture (i. *kebudayaan*), which are, perhaps unsurprisingly, free of such unsavoury elements.

20 In a bit of wordplay, a local actor once told me the word *pura*, which we often translate as temple, is itself suggestive in this regard. 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*).

As Hildred Geertz (1994:95) has pointed out, kings were ‘seen by the Balinese as the potent guardians of their realm’s well-being. As long as they were indeed potent, they were supported by the populace.’ Hence the need for ongoing demonstrations of power and mastery, such as one sees in the *calonarang* performed at midnight in the cremation grounds. Here, those who dare (B. *bani*) will volunteer to act as living corpses (B. *bangké idup*, *bangké-bangkéan*), with their death rites carried out while they are still alive. This act of bravado renders them vulnerable to attack, and so comprises a challenge to all comers, be they sorcerers, demons, or other potential masters of the realm. To survive the confrontation is a tacit demonstration of mastery. When articulated in this idiom of life as never-ending warfare, offerings become a crucial bolt in one’s arsenal.

Purity through Propriety and Separation

Alongside exchange and battle sits a third idiom: that of purity. The materials used in making an offering must be pure or ‘unused’, what is generally called (B.) *sukla*, which, in practice, is to say that these materials must not be ‘used’, ‘left over’, or ‘cast off’ (K./B. *lungsuran*) as part of something offered earlier, whether to a human person or to another sort of being.²¹ So, for instance, the bananas used in the *segehan* offerings made each afternoon should ideally be picked or purchased for the purpose, and the water used in their dedication is drawn freshly from the well or from the tap. Similarly, the rice for the morning *saiban* offerings (also known as *jotan* or *banten tuqu*) is taken from the cooking pot before anyone gets to eat.²² This idea appears to be based on the principle of

21 The term *nglungsur* is associated very generally with requesting something from a superior (compare B. *nunas*), and is often used more specifically in reference to the act of ‘collecting the remains’ of offerings that have already been dedicated. See Zoetmulder (1982:1062) for Old Javanese usage associated with that which is ‘cast off’ or no longer in use.

22 This poses something of a problem when it comes to processed foods, such as the ubiquitous little cakes (B. *jaja*) used in any number of small offerings. Unless one has made the cakes oneself, one never knows their provenance, and so their suitability is always in question. It is possible, for instance, that the coconuts and other ingredients from which the cakes were made may themselves be leftovers (B. *lungsuran*) from a previous ceremony, which, in principle, would render the offering null. There are at least two ways in which the problem is handled. For some, the issue is averted altogether through reference to a moralizing and individual theory of *karma*, according to which the fault would lie with the cake-seller, not the customer—for she would have acted deliberately to deceive, while the intentions of the buyer remained ‘pure’ (B./I. *suci*) or ‘sincere’ (I. *tulus-ikhlas*). This idea of purity through intention is probably a more recent development drawing on a model of

hierarchy, according to which leftovers may be consumed only by an inferior. To offer something to a superior that one has left behind would be a dangerous act of impropriety. This overlaps with the ideal of well-being through exchange, and perhaps more specifically with the service (B. *ayah*) owed by client to patron, petitioner to protector.

In addition to the idea of purity as propriety, there is also the more general notion that ceremonial spaces and ritual instruments must be purified ahead of their use.²³ The little instruments we have been calling ‘offerings’ are an important means to this end. The key term in this case is not *sukla*, but rather *suci*. Sometimes the names of these offerings make their purpose clear, as in the case of *banten suci*, *suci gedé*, and *pasucian*, or the process of purification itself as *nyuciyang*.²⁴ Here the organizing principle would appear to be that of contagion. One becomes ‘impure’, for example, when there has been a death or a miscarriage in the family; and the duration of this impurity is determined by the proximity of one’s relationship to the deceased. Similarly, one is ‘impure’ during periods of menstruation, during which time one is not permitted to enter temples, visit priests, or dedicate offerings.²⁵ If the idea of *sukla* was opposed to *lungsuran*, or ‘leftovers’, then *suci* is opposed to *sebel* or *leteh*, terms commonly understood as a form of impurity through contact.²⁶ In passing it should be noted that the key positive terms for purity—both *sukla* and

personal spirituality linked to the ideal of social balance and harmony, as addressed in the following section. There is also another solution to the problem—more common among older people—in the idea that anything passing through the market is rendered pure (B. *sukla*), once again, through the exchange of money. The mechanism through which this is thought to work is generally left unstated. Whether through recourse to personal responsibility, or the purifying power of the market, the problem is often rendered mute.

23 See Hobart (1979:463–8) for a detailed treatment of contrasting ideals of purity in Bali.

24 Along similar lines we also have the various forms of *caru* offering that are made to placate or transform malevolent forces, and thereby ensure a rite or ceremony will not be disturbed. This process is understood in any number of ways, one of which is purification (B. *nyuciyang*); another is the relative neologism, *netralisir* (1.; to neutralize?). The number and size of such an offering is generally determined by the scale of the ceremony and the period of time since its last performance.

25 In this regard, and in contrast to well-being-through-exchange, the model of purity appears strongly androcentric, with women figuring as a necessary but problematic means to an end. It is perhaps this androcentrism that has helped to make purity so readily amenable to rearticulation under the modernizing rubric of ‘Hindu religion’ (I. *agama Hindu*), with its familial ideal of patriarchal domesticity (see Fox 2011:85–132).

26 We find, for instance, that the little cup in which one carries coffee for the morning’s *prawedangan* offerings must never be used for human consumption.

suci—are Sanskritic in derivation, while their most commonly used antonyms are Malay or Austronesian in origin.²⁷ This is something to which I shall return in just a moment.

I should perhaps at this point state clearly that my aim is not to argue à la Dumont for a Balinese *homo hierarchicus*. Yet, if the foregoing model of power through domination seemed aristocratic in nature, and that preceding it demotic, then the idiom of purity with its paired emphases of hierarchy and contagion would appear on the face of it to be rather priestly, or, more specifically, brahmanical. Perhaps appropriately, then, the community ideal is reminiscent of Mary Douglas (1966), with the common good achieved through the isolation and/or elimination of impurity, understood as matter out of place.

Balance and Harmony

Moving on from the priestly to the bureaucratic, we have the idiom of social and spiritual balance and harmony, or *keseimbangan dan kerukunan*. This is the ideal of the Indonesian state that is broadcast on television and disseminated through compulsory religious education. With balance and harmony, authority is generally located in the exegesis of textual precedent, with passages cited and translated into Indonesian either from well-known Hindu scriptures such as the *Bhagawadgita*, or the more arcane palm-leaf manuscripts indigenous to the Javano-Balinese world (Fox 2011:93–5). On this account, offerings are cast quite explicitly as ‘a pure sacrifice performed sincerely and without hope for recompense’ (i. *korban suci yang dilaksanakan dengan tulus ikhlas tanpa pamrih akan hasilnya*).

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

In this idiom one’s offerings in prayer are made to restore the natural balance and harmony—again, *keseimbangan dan kerukunan*, or even *keharmonisan*—

27 In addition to these terms (b. *sebel, leteh*) there is also the less commonly used, and possibly Sanskritically derived, *cuntaka* (see Van der Tuuk 1897–1912, I:574–5; Zoetmulder 1982:342).

of the threefold cosmos, understood as comprising a series of relationships: man with man, man with God, and man with nature. Taken together, this is known under the neo-Sanskritic soubriquet of *Tri Hita Karana*. The community of practice is configured as the *umat Hindu*, and its rites are normative, as opposed to constitutive. This contrasts sharply 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 endeavour under the spell of a powerful ruler.

Here I should mention that language has been extremely important in discerning the differences between these various styles of reasoning, with something so subtle as a recurring shift in register often being the first clue as to something more significant. For example, despite being comparatively difficult to articulate in colloquial Balinese, these ideas about balance and harmony sound quite natural when spoken in Indonesian, replete with a Sanskritic technical vocabulary (for instance, the various *daftar istilah* learnt in school and enumerated on television). I suggested this as a bureaucratic ideal both for its taxonomic style of reasoning and for the simple fact that it is promulgated by the Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia (Indonesian Hindu Dharma Council) with the interests of the bureaucratic state in mind. To make offerings in this idiom is, at one level, I suppose, a form of exchange—but it is one in which we cannot hope for anything in return for our donation (B. *dana punia*). That is to say, in practice, it is rather like *gotong royong*, the ‘mutual cooperation’ so efficiently exploited under former President Soeharto’s so-called New Order regime.

Flows and Concentrations

In addition to the more readily apparent languages of ‘balance and harmony’, ‘purity’, ‘well-being’ and ‘power’, what I have found to be especially interesting in thinking about offerings are a set of ideals that are at once most difficult to specify and at the same time very clearly important for Balinese self-understanding and social practice. It is perhaps not unlike the way one can hear the English, Dutch, or French syntax at work behind the utterances of American and European speakers of Indonesian. In much the same way, when one listens carefully, I believe one can discern a subtle echo rippling through the language of well-being, of power, and of purity. This ‘echo’, for lack of a better metaphor, gives form to a series of habits, sensibilities, and desires that are organized around an ideal that I am provisionally calling ‘flows and concentrations’.

It is my working conjecture that these ideals are very closely connected to the centrality of water (B. *yéh*) in Balinese geographic and anatomical thought (see Weck 1937; Hobart 1978; Schulte Nordholt 1986; Bellows 2003).²⁸ The specific character of these ‘flows and concentrations’ must remain largely conjectural for now, but it seems quite clear to me that there is a certain ‘watery’ logic underpinning the use of what I have, until now, perhaps rather facetiously called ‘offerings’.

This world of ‘flows and concentrations’ would be one of dynamic change, in which a subtle life force moves freely over surfaces and is channelled into various byways and passages. It flows where it meets no resistance. It concentrates in those locations that mark a substantial rupture in the continuity of form, such as the unusual geography of large rocks, trees, or river gullies, but also in living things such as animals and human beings. It is at precisely these points of potential blockage that offerings must be made at regular intervals.

We find similarly that houseyard architecture is designed with apertures and causeways to ensure the free movement of unseen beings and forces (Howe 1983). Based largely on their placement, I am beginning to think that many of the little instruments we call ‘offerings’ may have something to do with this. If one juxtaposes indigenous anatomical schemes of the human body with maps of village roads, irrigation canals, and houseyard architecture, one finds a common association between well-being and fluid movement. Massage is employed along similar lines to unblock stoppage and to keep one’s energy flowing. In fact, a common folk etymology for beauty, or ‘the good’, *rahayu*, is that of having ‘good blood’ (B. *rah ayu*), which is to say blood that flows well. If the blood ceases to flow smoothly, one becomes ill (B. *gelem*), which is also what happens if one fails to make offerings where unseen forces are thought to congregate.²⁹ Turning to a street map, we find offerings are made at precisely those locations where there is a threat of stoppage, or concentration (see Figure 6). Without wishing to tie things up too neatly, I believe this might speak directly to the opening example of the *panumbak jalan*, little altars placed exactly at those points where the flow of traffic—both tangible and otherwise—might become congested.

I would like to suggest that part of the reason this language of ‘flows and concentrations’ is so difficult to see clearly—despite its importance—is that it

28 This might be seen as a variation on Hooykaas’s (1964) characterization of Balinese religion as *Agama Tirtha*.

29 The language of heat (*panes*)—as a point of juncture between illness and sorcery—warrants further exploration (see, for example, Lovric 1986).

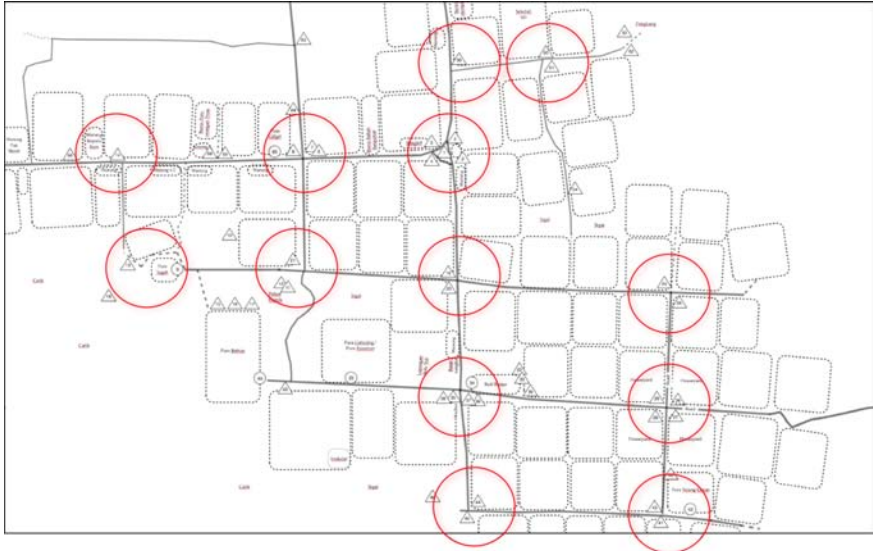


FIGURE 6 Roadmap of Batan Nangka, indicating concentrations of roadside shrines

has been translated and partially (but not wholly) displaced by a series of Indo-European sensibilities that are associated both with ‘purity’ and a soul-centred anthropology.³⁰ In other words, there are several very good reasons to believe that much of daily life in Bali—prior to secondary and tertiary elaboration—carries on perfectly well without either the concepts of purity or a unique and unitary soul (that is, a *roh*, *atma(n)*, or *jiwa*). Here I believe it is significant that there is no way to refer to this ‘soul thing’ in Balinese without using a Sanskrit or an Arabic loan word. Yet colloquial Balinese, by contrast, offers myriad ways to articulate the idea of a more-or-less amorphous and free-flowing soul-stuff or energy.

We find, for instance, any number of small rites linked to illness and recovery that point away from the model of a unitary soul, and toward something more conducive to quantification, than simple absence or presence.³¹ Contrary to present-day interpretation, so too does the idea of rebirth (B./K. *numitis*)—once, that is, one gets away from the Indic model of transmigrating souls. As a flow, or sprinkling (B./K. *titis*), it, too, has water as its organizing principle.

30 This would be mediated primarily through Sanskrit, by way of Kawi, and later Dutch, English, et cetera.

31 We might also look to what are often glossed as one’s four spiritual siblings, the *kanda* or *nyama mpat*.

Its relative concentration, or dissipation, is seen to determine health and illness, vigour and lassitude, serenity and distress. Accordingly, the gathering-up of these constituents is at the centre of a series of rites directed to healing and invigoration, safety, and protection. Although at odds with much of what is said of 'Hindu Bali', these observations fit well with more general trends in the wider Southeast Asian region. The ethnographic literature offers numerous examples of what might be described as a decentred, or internally complex, human subject, for which agency tends to be understood as the product of sustained endeavour, and often ceremonial work. Here we might compare, for example, the rites of (*pa*)*ngulapan* in Bali with those of the *pralung* in Cambodia (Thompson 2004) or the *kwhan* among the Thai-Lao (Yukio 2003; compare Tambiah 1970:223–51).

Albeit conjectural, I believe a similar line of reasoning might be helpful in interpreting a series of important terms in contemporary Balinese—such as *tenget* and *taksu*—that are exceedingly difficult to interpret in the present-day idiom, but which make very good sense when approached from the perspective of a certain vital energy that may be concentrated and managed (if one is able) in greater or lesser quantity, and to greater or lesser effect.³² Earlier uses of terms now associated with impurity—such as *leteh* and *sebel*, mentioned above—may also potentially lend further support to this idea.³³

To be sure, etymology is not destiny. But I believe, in addition to the other, more readily apparent ideals of purity, power, and so on, that the practices of making *banten*, or 'offerings', are at least partially organized around this set of 'watery' sensibilities that are largely lost to the more deliberate theorizing of

32 The Balinese term *tenget* has been glossed as, for example, 'uncanny, mysterious, magically powerful' (Barber: 1979); 'magically dangerous' (Lovric 1987); and 'sacred, supernaturally charged' (Rubinstein 2000). For *taksu* we find, for instance, 'trained performer's inspiration' (Bandem and DeBoer 1995:14); 'charisma and spiritual energy in performance' (Vitale 1996); and 'a mysterious power which gives intelligence and power to work wonders' (Barber 1979). When it comes to these terms, I have found Balinese are as prone to circumlocution as their Western counterparts.

33 In several languages from the broad Malayo-Javanese region we find at least two clusters of terms linking states of weariness, disappointment, or frustration to conditions of bad luck and ill fortune. These include *sebel* and *sebal* on the one hand, and *letah*, *leteh*, *letéh* and *letih* on the other. Here it may be worth trying to look beyond what is taken for granted in secondary elaboration on the contemporary scene—namely, that *sebel* and *leteh* are antonyms of *suci*—to see whether some of the rites for which these terms are thought so important may in fact be ordered around a logic other than that of purity—for example, around the idea of vital energy and what I am calling 'flows and concentrations'.

present-day life. It is my running conjecture that these sensibilities have been transformed in various ways through their collision with the other languages in which Balinese social life is organized.³⁴ Despite the strength of these other languages (Asad 1986), I suspect the sensibilities associated with what I am calling ‘flows and concentrations’ have persisted in part due to their close ties to practices of social organization, architecture, agriculture, and healing; but this requires further reflection, and more research.

Some Concluding Remarks

So why do Balinese make offerings? I began by suggesting that offerings are made for a variety of purposes, and this was followed by a brief outline of what I take to be five of the most important styles of reasoning embodied therein. On reflection, I would provisionally 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, they are each premised on different understandings of human agency, community, and the common good, and, as we have seen, these ideals are often in tension with one another. To take a rather conspicuous 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. The recent scholarship on Bali has made note of this contrast between ‘state ideology’ and ‘village-level practice’ (see, for example, Warren 1993; Parker 2003). Yet it seems that, on closer inspection, what we find is not a duality, but rather a multiplicity of ideals; it appears there is no natural meta-language that can embrace them all unproblematically.

Depending on circumstance these disparate ‘languages’, or styles of reasoning, may transform, supplant, or be assimilated to one another. In the messiness of day-to-day life they rub up against each other, and, at times, their incongruity—experienced as antagonisms or as displacements that arise between them—becomes palpable and requires articulation. A recent example would be the seemingly growing need to instruct local temple priests and

34 As that master of heterogeneity, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981:291), put it: ‘Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. These “languages” of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying “languages”’.

other ritual experts in the 'proper' execution of their ceremonial work. One might similarly look to weekly television programmes, such as *Upakara* on Bali-TV, in which a brahmin specialist offers point-by-point instructions for the preparation of complex offerings and other ritual instruments.

By way of conclusion I would like to anticipate what I take to be a few of the more likely objections to my argument. There is, first, what I would call the textualist objection, that I have failed to identify the textual precedents for the practices I have described. I have little doubt that one could locate literary parallels to several of these practices and the ideals they embody, and I think this is potentially a worthwhile endeavour. However, for such parallels to be of any historical value, it would be incumbent on the textual scholar to account empirically for the relationship between their palm-leaf manuscripts and the practices of contemporary Balinese. As sociologists well know, the appearance of a correlation does not an explanation make. A more serious objection would come from those of a socio-economic bent. These might argue that, in attempting to take Balinese understandings seriously, I have ignored the real material conditions under which offerings are made and accounts of them given. To address this objection properly would take us into difficult theoretical territory extending far beyond the scope of the present essay. The central issue is that of adjudicating between conflicting presuppositions regarding the nature of the world and our ability to know it. Put another way, it is a question of how Balinese explanations relate to their broadly Western counterparts. Before rushing to dismiss indigenous metaphysics, in favour of social science, we might be well advised to reflect on the difficulties entailed in our own explanations. We might ask, for instance, whether an argument from 'material conditions' requires a coherent theory of matter; or whether the attribution of rational choice entails a universal and consistent account of reason. As the history of European philosophy makes abundantly clear, neither of these can be taken as unproblematic. Similar questions might be asked of any number of our basic categories—from the classic examples of space, time, and causality to such things as life and agency. It is precisely these difficulties that necessitate a more nuanced approach to local practices. On this matter there is but one final objection that I wish to mention, which is that I am unjustified in extrapolating to 'Bali' from such a limited sample. This, I must admit, would come as a most welcome criticism, as one of my central aims has been to clear the way for further inquiry of a more open-ended nature. In a word, this is meant as a beginning, and hopefully not just for myself.

My working list of five ideals neither precludes there being others, nor is it much more than a provisional answer to my initial question as to why Balinese

make offerings.³⁵ The real question is now: How did things come to be the way they are? That is, what were the historical circumstances out of which each of these ideals arose? How have they changed through time? And why? I perhaps overstated my case in referring to the first three as demotic, aristocratic, and brahmanical;³⁶ I believe, though, that the more general notion of their each having a specific genealogy is correct. Coming to grips with this history and its inherent complexity would be no small feat. It would likely require the collaborative efforts of experts in literature, language, and monumental architecture, many of whom have long bemoaned the inattentiveness to history of their more ethnographically inclined colleagues. There is no doubt some truth to the claim that the anthropological study of religion in Bali requires greater attention to the *longue durée*. But ethnographic sensibilities would also have much to contribute to philological approaches to history and precedent, which, to date, remain both philosophically and politically fraught.

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35 I should add that, by focusing on these five ideals, I do not wish to exclude other, potentially equally important, styles of social and practical reasoning. We might look, for example, to the growing importance of spiritual groups, *aliran* of various stripes, such as Hare Krishna or Sai Baba. As in the rest of Indonesia, the language of self-actualization and New Age spirituality is also growing in importance. Much like purity, power, well-being, and the rest, these ideals have specific histories.

36 To be clear, my aim is not to suggest a class- or caste-based 'origin' for any one of these ideals, but rather to specify their exemplification of certain goods and virtues.

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