

Ngelidin Sétra, Nepukin Sema? **Thoughts on Language and Writing in Contemporary Bali**

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Abstract

Recent decades have seen a shift in Balinese sensibilities regarding the use of the island's traditional script, and of the texts that are written in that script; and this shift appears to be linked to a series of wider-reaching changes in the way people set about embodying, cultivating and contesting shared ideals of agency, community and the collective good.¹ That is to say there seems to be a link between, on the one hand, the material practices of script and writing and, on the other, broader styles of what I would call social and practical reasoning. I wish to suggest that this empirical observation may have some rather important implications for how we think about cultural preservation, and perhaps especially the challenges facing those working to safeguard the future of Balinese language, script and literature. I would like to present this argument with specific reference to the idea of 'language endangerment', not only on account of its prominence in current debates on language and cultural heritage, but also as the questions it raises have special bearing on the issues

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at stake in contemporary Bali. The recent controversy over the place of Balinese language instruction in the National Curriculum offers a useful way into the problem.

Key words: Balinese language, cultural heritage, endangered languages, language ecology, traditional literacy, religion, power, mass media

The Language of Protest

The protests began in late 2012 and ran through the first several months of 2013. Those assembled at the events included university lecturers and students, but also community organizers, politicians and others who were opposed to the national curricular reforms scheduled to take effect later in the year. Among the prospective reforms was a provision stipulating that instruction in regional languages, such as Balinese, was now to be incorporated into the module for local 'arts and culture'. As the protestors pointed out, the new provision would sharply curtail the number of weekly class hours devoted to the study of Balinese; and this would in turn mean fewer jobs for certified language teachers, to say nothing of the future prospects for those presently studying for university degrees in Balinese language and literature.²

The threat to employment was a concern for many of those directly involved in contesting the curriculum. Yet this was not always foregrounded in the public seminars and media outlets through which they made their demands. Rather, the language of protest emphasized heritage preservation and cultural diversity in a manner at once consonant with the ideals of international human rights and the Indonesian state bureaucratic model of national 'Unity in Diversity'.³ The call to safeguard (I. *menyelamatkan*) Balinese tradition was lent a

² Becoming a language teacher is a common career path pursued by those studying Balinese language and literature at university.

³ *Bhinéka Tunggal Ika*, the official motto of the Indonesian Republic.

certain edge by the appearance of regional discrimination (I. *diskriminasi*) at the national level, deriving in part from the recognition that, unlike Balinese, two of the languages spoken on the neighboring island of Java were to remain as stand-alone subjects (I. *mata pelajaran mandiri*) in the new curriculum.⁴ Citing both local and national legislation, as well as the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, protestors argued that it was the government's 'duty' (I. *wajib*) to protect Balinese language as an essential component of regional 'identity' (I. *identitas, jati diri*).⁵ It was argued in the Op-Ed pages of the local newspapers, and on protest banners, that Balinese provides 'local content' (I. *muatan lokal*) within the framework of the national curriculum, and acts as an important medium for the transmission and preservation of traditional values.⁶ The protection of local language was in this way cast as a cultural bulwark, not only to regional chauvinism on the part of the national government, but also to the globalizing influence of the tourism industry and transnational media.

Whatever challenges may lie ahead, it seems the protestors' efforts to ameliorate the effects of the curricular changes may not have been in vain. After a series of consultations between

⁴ 'The two languages in question were Javanese and Sundanese.

⁵ The Constitution of 1945 (§XV.36) established *Bahasa Indonesia* as the national language of the Republic; and this was followed by additional legislation requiring the use of the Indonesian language in all communication of an official nature (see Articles 26 to 40 of UU24 of 2009). The latter included such things as legal contracts, state documents and presidential speeches, but also scientific correspondence, the naming of buildings and workplace communication. Further, as Helen Creese has noted, 'In the 1990s, specific legislative measures were introduced [at the regional level] to support the maintenance and development of Balinese language, most notably the establishment of the Language, Script and Literature Development Board (Badan Pembina Bahasa, Aksara dan Sastra Bali) in 1995 and the subsequent campaign to include Balinese names for all public signs on the island' (2009: 221).

⁶ An important precedent for this argument was laid out in a series of articles published in the Bali Post in 1986 under the name Nirta (see Sumarta 2001). The language here parallels in many ways that of the broadly western scholarship on Balinese tradition; see Fox 2003 for a discussion of the central metaphors.

representatives of the provincial and national government, it was announced in early April 2013 that – with a series of administrative provisions having been met – the Balinese language would be allowed to join Sundanese and Javanese as a stand-alone subject within the new National Curriculum. With the assurance of weekly class hours, the upshot will likely include increased job security for Balinese language teachers, and so a more stable intake of students for degree programs in Balinese letters. But what of the desired ‘cultural’ impact? What are the longer-term implications of this apparent victory for the preservation of Balinese tradition?

What I would like to suggest is that we step back from the urgency of the public debate for a moment to consider a little more closely the nature of cultural preservation (I. *pelestarian budaya*) and the purposes it is meant to serve. As a first step, we might ask what precisely it is that Balinese stand to lose should they stop speaking their mother tongue; and, conversely, what it might mean to speak, read or write Balinese in the absence of its traditional milieu. Does it matter, for instance, where or how one learns? And with whom? Or perhaps in what script the language is taught?⁷ Assuming the curricular debate has been settled – which one hopes is not assuming too much – there is also the practical question of how one might set about ‘preserving’ (I. *melestarikan*) and ‘protecting’ (I. *melindungi*) a language such as Balinese.⁸

Quite apart from those aspects of the language that are at odds with present-day ideals of social organization and political equality, to study a language in the classroom differs in several

⁷ See Becker (1995) for reflections on the importance of script for language learning in a Burmese context.

⁸ We may also wish to reflect on a potential disjuncture between the ideals of preservation and those of its object. For it seems that, even in otherwise Balinese-language publications, the terminology associated with cultural preservation is exclusively Indonesian, when not derived directly from European languages.

important respects from learning to interact ‘organically’ through imitation, trial and error — for instance, within one’s own household and its environs. We must also bear in mind that, historically speaking, Balinese was never subjected to the sort of grammatical standardization that facilitates classroom learning. As a result, Balinese not only varies regionally; but, in use, its syntax and diction are markedly situational, depending in large part on a highly localized form of shared prior understanding.⁹ Arguably, to speak Balinese ‘by the book’ is to fail to speak it competently, raising the question as to how classroom learning may end up transforming the skills and sensibilities that are acquired through more traditional forms of language learning.

Setting aside issues specific to Balinese, these are obviously questions of wider import; and they have accordingly been part of ongoing discussion in linguistic anthropology and related fields, particularly among those working with what are now conventionally described as ‘endangered languages’. With over 3 million reported speakers, Balinese does not generally appear on published lists of languages under threat of impending disappearance. But I would like to suggest that a brief review of certain recent trends in the scholarship on language endangerment may have something to contribute to our assessment of the situation in Bali; and this may in turn help to sharpen our focus on the nature and purposes of ‘cultural preservation’ on the island.

⁹ In the course of recent research I have asked several people to record their conversations on selected topics. Producing and interpreting transcripts of these informal chats has been informative and at times exceedingly difficult. Among the more challenging aspects has been disentangling the various threads of what people take for granted when not speaking before — let alone solely for the benefit of — a foreign researcher. (NB: All parties to the conversations have given permission for these recordings.) Reference to commonly known people, places and events aside, the grounds for agreement and persuasion are often such as to require extended commentary before they become intelligible to someone without the requisite pre-understanding.

Endangered Liaisons

From the early 1990s the idea of 'language endangerment' grew steadily in importance among both professional linguists and the development agencies that have helped to support their initiatives.¹⁰ The sense of urgency was in part a response to statistical analyses that suggested global linguistic diversity was in rapid decline. It was argued that in traditional societies around the world a younger generation, having been exposed to the influences of globalization and market capitalism, were opting for more cosmopolitan ways of communicating that promised increased access to such things as employment, social mobility and entertainment. Promoted through formal education and related institutions, national and regional idioms were seen to be winning out over local dialects; and, as a result, it was feared the majority of the world's languages would soon die out together with members of the older generations who spoke them.¹¹ As Himmelmann noted in a critical review of the field, '[b]y the year 2000, language endangerment was firmly established as an active field of research in linguistics as evidenced by the usual indicators such as regular and manifold conferences, a steady stream of articles and books, new societies and funds dedicated to the documentation and maintenance of endangered languages, and a special mailing list' (2008: 340).

Alongside its rise to prominence within the academy, however, there has also been some suggestion that the basic premises underpinning the idea of language endangerment may require some rethinking. Several of those working in the field have highlighted the difficulty in defining endangerment and specifying its causes. Others have problematized established approaches to language as an object of study, calling into

¹⁰ Various soundings (e.g., Hale et al. 1992) have been cited by different authors as sounding the 'wake-up call' (compare, e.g., Himmelmann 2008 with Austin & Sallabank 2011).

¹¹ 'Language shift' is now seen to be an even greater accelerant of endangerment than a diminishing population (see, e.g., Grenoble 2011: 27).

question such basic principles as the genealogical ordering of languages in terms of descent within linguistic ‘families’ (e.g., Austronesian, Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan).¹² Still others have noted the inconsistencies, and unintended consequences, arising from the rhetoric of advocacy (Hill 2002, Duchêne and Heller 2007). Meanwhile, it has become increasingly difficult to delimit language ‘itself’ as a human capacity, with the broader socio-cultural milieu figuring ever more prominently in scholarly accounts of language acquisition and use.

These and related challenges to the received notion of language as a uniform and bounded object of study are increasingly cited in support of an ‘ecological’ approach to the analysis and preservation of endangered languages (e.g., Mühlhäusler 1992, Himmelmann 2008). Notwithstanding nuanced differences among its various proponents, the argument for language ecology has generally centered on redefining the object of study – viz. ‘language’ – as being organically integrated within a wider and established, yet ever-changing, ‘way of life’ (see, e.g., Woodbury 1993, Hill 2002).¹³ This has been understood to encompass both cultural norms and the natural environment, with language performing a mediating role in the relationship between human beings and their surroundings.

The idea that language is somehow positioned ‘between’ humans and nature has prompted some to argue for one or another form of linguistic relativism, for which Wilhelm von Humboldt and Edward Sapir are frequently – if not always

¹² Among the spurs to reflection has been the recognition of such phenomena as ‘areal diffusion’ (Enfield 2005), in which an otherwise unrelated language has taken on the defining traits (e.g., a tonal system) of a language spoken by a geographically proximate community through ‘contact’ over long periods of time. With this decoupling of essence and filiation, the idea of the ‘language family’ seems to lose at least some of its explanatory power. (On the importance of linguistic borrowing, also see Mühlhäusler 1992: 174.)

¹³ Here it is worth noting that, while the terminology may often be Wittgensteinian in tenor, the broader approach does not always follow suit.

unproblematically – cited as precedents. The case for relativism has most frequently been made in concert with a call to preserve linguistic diversity, arguing its merit through analogy to the benefits of biological diversity. But it is perhaps in drawing more directly on biology that the ecological metaphor for language has been deployed to greatest effect. As one of the early proponents of such an approach observed,

Much of the literature on language preservation and maintenance is concerned with preserving the structures of individual languages. To me this is reminiscent of the following situation described in a textbook on biology (Morgan 1969:34): ‘In the laboratory it is possible (though not easy) to maintain a population of a single species of organism in a container, isolated from all other species, as a pure culture. But without the biologist who maintains it, the population could not survive for long. Thus only two species are related in this situation: man and the organism in the culture. However, under natural conditions, and even in most laboratory situations, the smallest part of the living world that we can conveniently study will consist of many interacting species.’ Preserving languages is often seen to involve putting them into man-made artificial environments such as grammars and dictionaries, high literature, or giving language kits to surviving speakers. Such measures are unlikely to yield success unless the question of language ecology is seriously asked. (Mühlhäusler 1992: 164)

So what would it mean – in a Balinese context – to ask ‘the question of ecology’? On even a quite conservative reading, it would likely entail broadening inquiry – and so efforts toward preservation – to include a much wider set of circumstances than linguistic study has traditionally encompassed.¹⁴ In present-day Bali this would require, among other things, careful attention

¹⁴ It would require a separate, and quite extended essay to explore the implications of a more radical reading – one that called into question, for instance, the unity of language itself as an object of study, or of preservation.

to the articulation of language, hierarchy and exchange. We find for example that, when addressing a superior – and so, ideally, a patron – one is said quite literally to be ‘offering up’ (B. *matur*) one’s words. By contrast, when one’s superior responds – speaking ‘down’ – she or he may be said to bestow a gift of words (B. *mapaica baos*). This terminology parallels that associated with other forms of hierarchically ordered giving and receiving, in which clients offer up (B. *ngaturang*) their support both material and otherwise, while patrons bestow (B. *ngicén*) their beneficence in recognition of service and devotion. To speak in a refined (B. *alus*) fashion, then, is not simply a matter of politesse; but rather it is the proper – and often strategic – positioning of oneself through speech, toward a specific end, in relation to others according to finely graded differences of purity and efficacy (on which, see Hobart 1979). The material nature of these exchanges – and their rootedness in a specific sort of social relation – becomes especially pronounced in the use of Balinese script and other forms of writing.¹⁵ What I would like to suggest is that closer attention to orthographic practices may yield important insights into Balinese articulations of language and power, which, in turn, will have implications for how we think about the preservation of the island’s cultural heritage, both linguistic and otherwise.

A Tale of Two Practices

The first example I would like to consider is taken from a wedding ceremony that I attended in a semi-rural ward (B. *banjar*) of southern Bali in early 2011. It was a commoner couple in their early twenties who were getting married; and a brahmin high priest (B. *padanda*) had been specially invited to complete the ceremony, as is now often the case. For this the bride and

¹⁵ As with spoken language, the idea of ecology has also been used to highlight the embeddedness of written language and literacy in both their natural surroundings and other forms of activity (e.g., Cooper 1986, Barton 2007).

groom were seated on the eastern pavilion (B. *balé dangin*) of the houseyard compound, where many of the important life-cycle rites take place. There the *padanda* performed a set of ceremonial procedures, the culmination of which included inscribing a series of syllables, in honey, on the bodies of the bride and the groom—on their hands, shoulders, foreheads and tongue, among other places.



Figure 1 - Inscribing the Body at the Wedding Ceremony

The inscription took no more than a few minutes, and so appeared to make up but a small part of the ceremony, which, in its entirety, ran to almost an hour.¹⁶ I was told by several of those in attendance that the inscription was no less important for its brevity. Yet, on inquiring, no one was able – or perhaps

¹⁶ The rites performed that afternoon are commonly referred to as *natab maduur* (a 'high', or 'upper', *natab*). On its own the term *natab* (from *tatab*) refers to the wafting motion that is used to draw, e.g., the smoke from incense toward one's body before praying (B. *muspa*). It seems to be an important procedure not only for the rites associated with weddings, but also – among other things – with *upacara ngulapan* (on which, see below) and most life cycle rites. In the case of wedding rites, a prior *natab betén* (a 'lower' *natab*) is said to reduce or eliminate the family's status as *sebel*, which is understood in terms of 'pollution' through opposition to the metaphor of 'purity' (B. *suci*).

willing – to offer a more detailed explanation as to why it was necessary.¹⁷ For at least some of those present, it seemed the inscription had something to do with purifying (B. *nyuciang*) the newlyweds. But the rationale for this explanation was vague, at best. When I pressed the issue, it was pointed out that a similar act of writing on the body is performed on several other important occasions, including the consecration of priests (e.g., B. *madiksa*), and during initiatory rites (B. *mawinten*) for those wishing to embark on a new field of study. In these latter cases the inscription is sometimes said to effect a physical transfer of knowledge through writing on the tongue—quite literally a gift from Déwi Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and learning. But why would one inscribe letters on the body during a marriage rite? What was the inscription meant to accomplish? And how? What was its purpose, or its desired end—what we might in Balinese call its *tetujon*? There are literary precedents for writing on the body in both Bali and Java; and I shall return to consider one particularly apt example in just a moment. But first, for the sake of comparison, I would like to reflect briefly on a second use of Balinese script, this time from the newspaper.

On Sundays the island's leading broadsheet, the *Bali Post*, carries a section entitled *Bali Orti*, which might be translated as 'Balinese News' or 'The News of Bali'.¹⁸ In contrast to the paper as a whole, which is printed in the national language of Indonesian, the *Bali Orti* section is written exclusively in the Balinese language, albeit largely in roman transliteration. In addition to local news articles and short stories inspired by the Indic Epics, *Bali Orti* frequently prints poems and short stories

¹⁷ There are no doubt good reasons for this reticence, not least of which would likely have included a desire to avoid speaking of things – especially powerful things – of which one does not have direct, and so certain, knowledge—on which, more below.

¹⁸ The title 'Bali Orti' was taken by many of those with whom I was working as probably playing off the phrase 'Napi Orti?' (*What's the news?*, or perhaps *How are you?*).

addressing topical issues such as environmental pollution, inter-religious marriage and life in the modern city. Again, these are all written in Balinese language that is printed in romanized script. There is, however, one marked exception; and this is a more-or-less regular feature that centers on a brief literary passage that is printed in Balinese script, next to which a roman transliteration appears, sometimes together with a translation into vernacular Balinese or into the national language of Indonesian. As with the bodily inscription, the question I wish to ask is *why*? What purpose is served by this juxtaposition of Balinese script with roman transliteration and Indonesian translation?

Here it is worth a wider look at the newspaper itself. Perusing the *Bali Post*, one often finds letters to the editor and Op-Ed essays lamenting the demise of Balinese language and literature. With the rise of state education and new media—initially radio and television, but now Facebook and Twitter—as

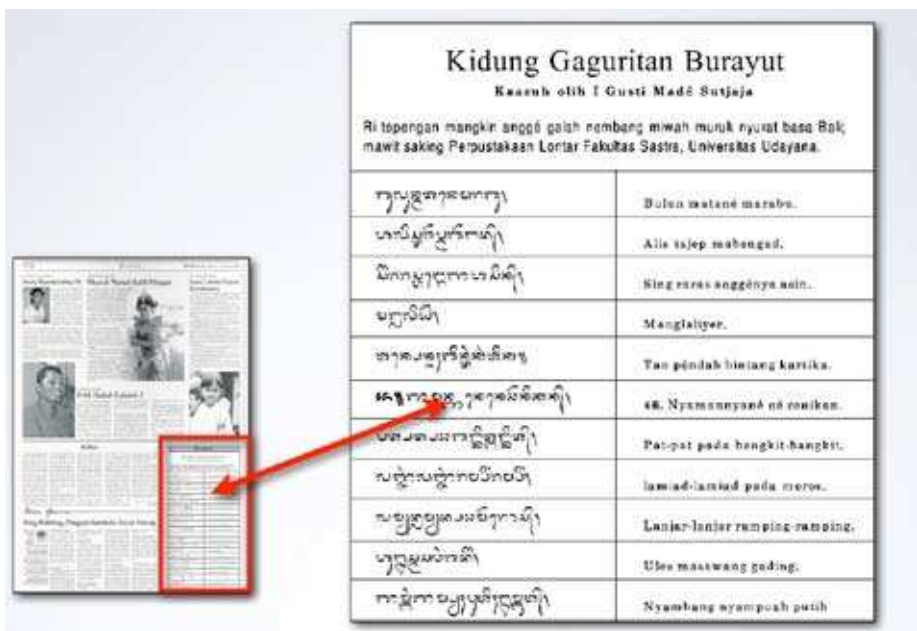


Figure 3 - *Bali Orti*, with photos and articles pertaining to traditional palm-leaf manuscripts.

well as the growing number of non-Balinese Indonesians who are currently living on the island, there has understandably been a shift toward the use of the national language in many forms of daily interaction. In the capital city of Denpasar, for instance, it is not uncommon for Balinese children to grow up with little or no familiarity with what is notionally their mother tongue. It is with reference to these circumstances that the Sunday feature in *Bali Orti* might be interpreted as a call to tradition, encouraging readers to continue speaking, reading and writing in Balinese.

The challenges facing written forms of Balinese were given special attention in a series of articles printed on the front page of the *Bali Orti* section in mid-April 2013 (see Figure 3).¹⁹ The spread included two photographs, one depicting a palm-leaf manuscript, or *lontar*, and the other of a young man who appeared to be writing on just such a manuscript, probably as part of a competition (I. *lomba*). The lead headline at the top of the page read, *Palm-Leaf Books, a Documentary Compendium of Balinese Culture* (B. *Cakepan Lontar, Sinunggil Koléksi Dokuméntasi Budaya Bali*). This was accompanied by a second story, carrying the title *They Needn't Always be Seen as Tenget* (B. *Nénten Mesti setata Katengetang*; i.e., as inherently powerful and potentially dangerous). The latter piece cited an official from the Center for Cultural Documentation in the provincial capital, encouraging readers not to be afraid to read *lontar* which were traditionally considered dangerous, or inaccessible to the uninitiated. If the lead story made explicit the link between written language and culture, and the second aimed to alleviate traditional anxieties regarding the power of the written word, the third story confronted its readers with a call to action encapsulated in the headline, *Come Let's Preserve this Cultural Heritage of Ours* (B. *Ngiring Lestariang Tetamian Budaya Druéné*). Opening on a didactic note, the article explained,

¹⁹ The articles cited were published on April 21, 2013.

The word *lontar* is derived from the words *ron* and *tal*, meaning palm-leaves. The leaves come from the palm tree, and they are dried and used as the material on which Balinese characters (B. *aksara*) are written. These texts (I. *naskah*), or traditional books (B. *cakepan*), which are widely known as manuscripts (I. *manuskrip*), are made from palm-leaves, and are treated as a source of historical information (I. *sumber informasi sejarah*) that is kept in museums and libraries. It would be a sad day indeed should the method of writing *lontar* be lost, overrun by our times and technology which are becoming ever more modern. Besides, there are but few among Balinese who wish to read *lontar*.

As members of the community, we ought to embrace the contents of this culture of ours, through means such as writing the traditional script (B. *aksara*) on *lontar* leaves, or reading *lontar* together with other members of the community and those youth who have lost touch with (B. *sampun lali*, 'already forgotten') our culture. Such activities are well-suited to wider use in the effort to preserve the existence of these *lontar*.²⁰

The article called upon readers to safeguard 'this culture of ours' and to rekindle an interest in traditional literacy as a means of inspiring those who had lost touch with their cultural heritage. Here palm-leaf manuscripts are seen to provide access to important 'historical information', while at the same time exemplifying local values and ensuring their preservation.²¹ Put another way, what happens to Balinese

²⁰ It is worth highlighting once again the use of Indonesian terminology in discussing the preservation of Balinese language; the text of the article runs as follows: "Kruna *lontar* mawit saking kruna *ron lan tal* sané maartos daun ental. Daun Puniki mawit saking taru siwulan sané katuhang tur kawigunayang pinaka serana nyurat aksara. Naskah-naskah utawi cakepan sané ketah kasambat manuskrip puniki kakaryanin antuk daun *lontar* puniki kadadosang sinalih tunggil sumber informasi sejarah sané kasimpen ring museum utawi perpustakaan. Sedih pisan rasané yéning tatacara nyurat *lontar* puniki mesti ical santukan kagerus antuk panglimbak masa tur panglimbak teknologi sané sayan modern. Tios punika, akedik arsa para krama sané kayun ngwacén *lontar*. Pinaka krama Bali, nelebin dag-ing budaya sané kaduénang sakadi nyurat aksara ring daun *lontar* utawi ngwacén *lontar* ri kala akéh krama utawi yowana sané sampun lali ring budaya sané kaduénang punika becik pisan. Kahanan sakadi punika patut kalimbakang pinaka usaha nglestariang kawéntenan *lontar* inucap."

²¹ Whatever its other merits, it is important to note the extent to which the

practices when they are rearticulated within the ‘discourse of preservation’ (*I. wacana pelestarian*)?²² It is with this question in mind that I would like to return to my earlier examples in order to compare the purposes of preserving Balinese script, as outlined in the newspaper, with the sensibilities underpinning other, older uses of writing in Bali, as exemplified by the bodily inscription. It is my working conjecture that these two uses of Balinese script are grounded respectively in quite different understandings of media, materiality and what I shall for now simply call conceptions of the collective good. For this we must now return to the wedding.

Traditional Script: It is Alive!

It will be recalled that the bodies of bride and groom were inscribed with a series of syllables; and the question I had asked was, *why*? What purpose might this inscription have served? And how was it thought to work? Those with whom I had discussed the rite on the day were either reticent or unable to provide what I—or even they, for that matter—would consider a satisfactory answer. It must be emphasized that there are several possible reasons for such a response, not all of which would entail ignorance on the part of my interlocutors. Speaking the truth is traditionally thought to be efficacious; and, by the same token, to speak with undue confidence is to court disaster. To presume to comment on something for which one does not have ample evidence is to invoke – and so potentially risk offending – the forces at play, which, as

article’s mode of address (“Come Let’s Preserve...”) and vision of collective life appear to replicate ideals promulgated under former President Suharto’s so-called ‘New Order’ regime.

²² It may be noted in passing that ‘culture’ (*budaya*) is being reified in a way that would arguably be difficult to express without the aid of Indonesian-language terminology, raising the question as to whether the ideals of preservation are commensurate with those of its ostensible object. *Lestari-ang* is here obviously a Balinese transposition of the Indonesian *lestarian*, with all that it implies.

we shall see, are not inconsiderable in the use of script and writing. So, in the absence of a readily available explanation on the occasion of the bodily inscription, I would like to take a slightly different tack, and look to another traditional use of Balinese letters—namely, the little cloth amulets called *ulap-ulap* that one often finds affixed to newly constructed buildings and shrines.



Figure 4 - An *Ulap-Ulap* Over a Modern Garage, with Detail.

These small sheets of white cloth, inscribed with various combinations of characters and images, are an integral part of the rites that must be performed before any new structure may be inhabited.²³ By local account, the rites themselves are meant to accomplish three things—namely, the purification (B. *nyuciang*), fortification (B. *mamakuh*) and animation (B.

²³ There was considerable variation as to the use of *ulap-ulap* in the banjar where this research was based. Many used them for all buildings (I. *bangunan*) and shrines (B. *palinggih*); several others used them only for shrines; while there were also a few that did not use them at all. To date I have not been able to find a clear explanation for the differences from one houseyard to another (e.g., that one sort of arrangement would correspond to where a given household went for advice on such matters).

ngidupang) of the building itself. It is to the third of these aims that I would like especially to draw attention—that is, to the idea of *animating* a building.

The crucial point is that Balinese buildings are alive. They *maurip*, as one might say in Balinese. In order to begin work on a wooden house, one must first kill a tree. In the act of construction, then, one is working with dead tree matter; and it is for this reason that to inhabit a building prior to its rite of *reanimation* is said to be like sleeping under a corpse (B. *bangké*). A dead building is thought to be inert, and so incapable of defending itself. It is, in effect, open to all comers; while, by contrast, a living building can repel attack, much as a living tree can defend itself with its bark, or even its thorns; and, when harmed, it may then repair itself through its inherent capacity for growth and self-transformation. So how are these little script-bearing amulets—the *ulap-ulap*—employed in the rites of animation? And, in turn, what might this tell us about the purposes of writing on the body?

The name of these little cloth amulets provides a first clue.²⁴ The root word, *ulap*, has many uses. To *ngulapin* is to call someone over, ‘to invite’ or ‘to beckon’. The accompanying gesture is one of waving with a single hand downward toward the body, much as one does in calling a taxi in much of Southeast Asia. Along similar lines, there is a set of rites called (*pa*)*ngulapan*, also derived from the root word *ulap*, in which one’s ‘spirit’ is called back either to the body, in the event of illness, or into a coconut, in the case of death, where the coconut then becomes a temporary vessel for transporting the vital essence of the deceased.²⁵ Here too the movement is a

²⁴ As with such terminology in Bali more generally, the term *ulap-ulap* is probably best understood as indicating a use or function, as opposed to being a proper name. For a similar pattern of ‘naming’ see, e.g., Hooykaas’ (1980) collection of *rarajahan*.

²⁵ There is no little uncertainty when it comes to specifying what is ‘beckoned’ or ‘called in’ (B. *kaulapin*). One’s vital energy, or *bayu*, is a most likely

waving-in toward the body, this time with both hands held out, one moving inward from each side. In Balinese this gesture is called *natab*, which is not only the name of the wedding rite performed by the high priest, but it is also one of its recurrent features. That is to say, both before and after the letters were inscribed on the body, the bride and the groom were instructed to *natab*, or perform this *waving* or *wafting-in*.

Returning to the rite of animation for a new building, it seems that it is the *ulap-ulap* that does the beckoning. It quite literally ‘calls in’ (B. *ngulapin*) the forces that will bring the building ‘back to life’ (B. *ngidupang mawali*) and thereby protect its inhabitants. Having told a local priest that I was having some difficulty in understanding the use of the *ulap-ulap*, he suggested that I think of them as working more or less like a satellite dish (I. parabola), channeling energy in ‘from on high’ (B. *saking luhur*).²⁶ The physical manipulation of written script, he said, is a bit like ‘tuning the television’. Use one set of syllables to reanimate a kitchen; use another for activating one’s ancestral shrine. Changing the arrangement of characters on the cloth, he added, might be compared to changing the channel on the TV. Different channel, different program. Different syllables, different energy. A given configuration might be appropriate for one sort of structure; but it would not have the desired effect on others.

Extrapolating back to the wedding rites, I wish to suggest that a similar *transfer of energy* may have been the aim of the high priest’s inscription on the bodies of the bride and groom.

candidate in my opinion; though people will often say it is their spirit or soul (*jiwa, atma*). Here it is important to note the potential for there being multiple and conflicting anthropologies at play—both in this case, and more generally (see Fox forthcoming).

²⁶ Here one is reminded of the *kidung warga sari*, which is often sung at a crucial stage in the performance of temple ceremonies (B. *odalan*). Here the reference to power coming down from ‘on high’ invokes an ambiguous and potentially ambivalent source of power—*leluhur*, which is often facetiously rendered into English as ‘ancestors’.

By having a series of syllables placed at specific points on the body, one absorbs their energy – perhaps a specific capability or faculty – much as the *ulap-ulap* help to channel the forces of animation that bring a newly-built house ‘back to life’. It is perhaps telling in this respect that in some parts of the island a newlywed couple – prior to this rite – is called a ‘living corpse’ (B. *bangké idup*).

Of Power and Precedence

If the link between writing and power is left unstated elsewhere, it is made quite explicit in traditional accounts of literary composition, where Balinese letters not only channel energy, but are themselves said to be alive—much like trees, human beings, and buildings. That is to say, they have the power to transform both themselves and the world around them. As Rubinstein noted in her study of *kakawin* composition, ‘The association of spelling with life and death ... is more than [mere] convention. It signifies a belief ... that letters have a divine origin, are invested with supernatural life force, and are a powerful weapon that can be employed to influence the course of events’. She went to suggest that, ‘To write and spell properly is to preserve that life force and, conversely, to make errors is to eliminate it – it is to kill letters ... [This] also implies that letters are powerful weapons and that the poet’s manipulation and the scribe’s copying of them is comparable to engaging in battle’ (2000: 194; cp. Hunter 2007).

On this account Balinese orthography is not merely the graphic representation of sound, or of meaning, but is rather participant in bringing about willed changes in the world. As living things, but also as weapons, letters have a dangerously ambivalent power of their own. This may help to explain why Balinese children in previous generations were warned to be careful when they wrote. They were told not to study haphazardly (B. *Eda ngawag-awag malajah!*). For to read and

write Balinese characters without the requisite preparation can render you emotionally unstable, or make you stupid (B. *bisa belog*). They might even drive you crazy (B. *buduh ing sastra*). It is perhaps like giving a small child a set of Sabatier knives as a play thing. A good knife is no doubt a useful tool in the kitchen if one knows how to use it. But, when mishandled, Balinese characters—much like the knives—can cause serious damage.²⁷ This is why only certain types of people are thought capable of safely and effectively handling the ambivalently potent configurations of script that can animate buildings and confer energy on people during life-cycle rites, such as we saw with the wedding.²⁸

Though things may have been different in the past, it seems these days the person most consistently consulted for this purpose—that is, for the handling of letters—is a high priest from a brahmin house to whom one's family owes fealty, through a patron-client relation that usually extends back several generations.²⁹ The power of writing—and the transformative potency of letters—are closely linked to both their materiality and to a *localized* sense of place. I would moreover suggest that this linkage of matter, place and power

²⁷ Here one might make a playful comparison to students – and at times even more advanced scholars – who attempt to handle 'theoretical' texts for which they are ill-prepared. The results can be disastrous.

²⁸ This raises the important question as to why one would require such additional 'energy' when newly married. I would provisionally suggest that the reference to newlyweds as 'living corpses' (see above) is highly suggestive in this connection, and that the etymology of terms such as *leteh* and *sebel* – as perhaps implying a dissipation of vital energy – may have much to teach us about the transformation of Balinese ideas about the aims of ceremonial work (B. *gaé, karya*). But this is a complex topic requiring further research and a quite separate essay. For some initial steps in this direction, see Fox forthcoming.

²⁹ Traditional healers (B. *balian*) are also important manipulators of *aksara*, making one's relationship to such a person potentially risky. Whereas the *padanda's* assistance is required as a matter of course (marriages, death rites, new courses of study, the making of holy water), a *balian's* help is only requested in response to an unanticipated problem, most commonly relating to illness, death and/or sorcery.

only makes sense in the context of a very specific kind of social relation—such as those we find in Bali’s overlapping networks of patrons and clients (Hobart 1975), clans and wards (Korn, Hobart 1979), temple congregations (H Geertz 2004; Stuart-Fox 2002) and extended families (Geertz and Geertz 1975). These are relations of but loosely calculated giving and receiving that are sustained through time. But they are also, significantly, relations that are closely tied to specific places and objects—such as rice land, rivers and trees, but also temples, palm-leaf manuscripts, cloth amulets and heirloom daggers. These objects, like the letters that may be inscribed on them, are very much alive (*B. maurip*)—which is to say they can effect change in the world. And this potency is inseparable from their material being, and by extension both their location and the forms of social organization through which they are controlled and deployed.

In the Sunday Papers

Recalling the discussion of ‘language ecology’ – and its broadening of the field of inquiry – I would argue that it is on precisely these three points—namely, those of matter, locality and social relation—that the practice of writing on the body may be contrasted with what we saw in the Sunday newspaper, where the power of script seemed not so much to be immanent in its materiality. Instead, its power—if indeed it had any—consisted in its ability to point beyond itself. The Balinese characters appearing in the special feature on the Bali Orti page ‘stood for’—as opposed to embodied (*B. maraga*)—an ideal of cultural identity and tradition; and, crucially, this broadly cultural ideal transcended any one of its material instantiations. Unlike the cloth amulets, or *ulap-ulap*, the newspaper can be printed over and over again, and yet still remain ‘the same newspaper’—something that cannot be said for these small

script-bearing amulets with their aura of singularity.³⁰ So it seems we may be dealing with two quite different sensibilities regarding Balinese script. One is resolutely immanent, the other representational. In anticipating my conclusion, it is worth here reflecting briefly on the preconditions for the latter—that is, for the use of Balinese script as it appears in the newspaper.

Recent estimations would suggest that Bali is home to some four million people, approximately ninety percent of whom are formally registered as adherents to the state-sanctioned form of Hinduism, *Agama Hindu*. Here it is important to bear in mind that, albeit a majority on the island itself, Balinese Hindus are nationally a minority, making up less than 2% of Indonesia's population of some 240 million.³¹ In the early years of the Republic it was in part this sense of numerical disadvantage that drove certain among the urban intellectual élite to seek formal state recognition for Hinduism.³² It was feared that, without formal recognition, Balinese would be seen as backward tribalists who had 'not yet' embraced a World Religion; and they would consequently become targets for conversion at the hands of the country's larger and institutionally established Islamic and Christian communities. To qualify for state recognition, the Ministry of Religion had stipulated certain criteria—namely a belief in One God, the testimony of a prophet, the possession of a holy text, and a community of adherents that extended beyond the boundaries of a single ethnic group (Pitana 1999).

As we have seen, traditional uses of Balinese script—such as the *ulap-ulap* and writing on the body—are rooted in both

³⁰ These days *ulap-ulap* are commonly silkscreened, regarding which there is a wide range of opinions in the southerly Balinese community where I have been working.

³¹ The question of numbers, and who counts as a Hindu, is anything but straightforward. See Fox 2013 for a discussion of some of the political considerations.

³² See Picard 2011 for a nuanced account of the issues and events surrounding the emergence of *Agama Hindu*.

matter and in place, but also within a series of long-established social relations. They are unremittingly local. By contrast, the need to constitute a religious community extending not only beyond the immediate locale, but indeed beyond Bali itself, required an account of community that transcended the sort of localizing solidarities characteristic of the island's traditional forms of social organization. The requirement for a canon of sacred scripture further called for an account of 'the text' that, unlike older ideas of script and writing—transcended the bounds of matter and its physical presence. What we have, in effect, are two parallel sets of relations. On one side, a materially immanent theory of writing and power linked to a localizing form of social organization; on the other, a displaced and dematerialized theory of writing linked to translocal forms of solidarity associated with the postcolonial nation state. Put another way, as I indicated at the outset, there appears to be a link between (a) the material practices of script and writing, on the one hand, and (b) broader styles of social and practical reasoning, on the other.

Returning at last to the issue of language and cultural preservation I wish to end on an inquisitive note, with a few questions. First, with reference to these shifting sensibilities regarding script and writing, how are efforts toward preservation most likely to transform their object? That is, in what ways will 'preserving Balinese tradition' (I. *melestarikan tradisi Bali*) change the nature of traditional Balinese practices? The Greek Ancient, Heraclitus, is frequently cited for having said one cannot step into the same river twice. Yet, on the face of it, this is often precisely what cultural preservation programs set out to accomplish. Meanwhile, the invocation of timeless ideals – 'culture', 'heritage', 'values' – is rarely accompanied by a clearly stated account of how their preservation relates to the wider form of collective life that such efforts aim to bring about. Here I am thinking of those aspects of community commonly

understood under the rubrics of economy, law and politics. It is important to bear in mind that, were Balinese able to 'preserve' their traditions wholesale, we would be looking at a return to farming, fishing and high 'Indic' culture, but also to slavery, internecine warfare and bride capture (B. *malegandang*), which traditionally began with what is perhaps best described as a period of community-sanctioned rape.

Clearly, cultural heritage is a selective business.³³ But what are the criteria for choosing those aspects of Balinese tradition suitable for preservation? And whose interests are to be given priority? It is important to recognize there is no neutral ground here. For example, the desire to reduce status markers in the language (starting, e.g., with *sor/singgi* distinctions) serve a particular vision of collective life based on the articulation of equality with a specific understanding of the common good. These ideals obviously differ from those of the opposed argument for retaining 'language levels' that would register distinctions of relative purity and efficacy between, e.g., *anak jaba* ('commoners') and *triwangsa* ('gentry'). To adjudicate between these rival visions of collective life is to upgrade a particular view to the status of universal wisdom—a hegemonic substitution of part for whole (Laclau 2005). What is the upshot of all this? *Napi kasuksmaan ipun?* Decisions regarding preservation are directed toward a specific purpose (B. *tetujon*), even when this purpose is not clearly stated. So perhaps we ought to reflect carefully on the purposes of cultural heritage. What have they been in the past? And what ought they to be now, with an eye to the kind of polity (or *gumi?*) Balinese wish to cultivate for the future? To be sure, the protests against the

³³ I take this point from a recent performance on the Balinese stage, where one of the comic *bondrés* characters explained, 'We are indeed the heirs (to tradition)... (But) you should carry on only with those (parts of tradition that are) fit to be carried on! And get rid of what needs to be gotten rid of! Don't (try to keep) all of it! (B. *Nak mula ragaé dadi sentana, ané patut tulad, tulad! Ané patut kutang, kutang! De jek makejang.*)

2013 curricular reform averted one sort of disaster. But their success has given rise to a whole new set of challenges that ought to be recognized as no less daunting. Let us hope the protestors' success in opposing the new National Curriculum is not ultimately a case of *ngelidin sétra, nepukin sema*—'avoiding the cemetery only to land up in the graveyard'.³⁴

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³⁴ Perhaps the best English-language equivalent to this Balinese saying is 'out of the frying pan and into the fire'.

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