

a younger generation of gamelan girls, uncovering processes of performance and pedagogy both familiar and new. This rich diachronic approach offers a bird's eye view of grassroots change in gender roles, expectations, abilities, and opportunities in Balinese gamelan. The book's Conclusion describes two recent performances that show these changes in action, but it also looks to the future, soberly outlining the 'social and political conditions needed to keep the small movement of girls' gamelans growing' (p. 169).

Gamelan Girls is at once an intimate story and a sweeping theoretical exploration. You care about these girls and young women; you're rooting for them. Downing's carefully researched and nuanced arguments come alive through their voices and experiences. Yet their stories will reverberate far beyond Bali, inspiring closer examination of gender roles and women's and girls' agency in male-dominated musics across the world.

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The materiality and efficacy of Balinese letters: Situating scriptural practices

Edited by RICHARD FOX and ANNETTE HORNBACHER

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In Bali, two contrasting paradigms of literacy have come to coexist. In the first half of the twentieth century the Dutch colonial government, and since 1945 and Indonesia's independence, the Indonesian national government, have promoted as part of their programmes of education and knowledge, mass communication, and religion, a modern form of literacy, which is associated with printed texts and typographic Roman script. This modernist form of literacy has become a fundamental characteristic of Bali's reformed Hinduism (*Agama Hindu*) which requires every citizen to embrace a monotheistic doctrine formally taught in a holy book and which is independent of Balinese traditions of worship focused on local deities and ancestors. In contrast, another quite different understanding and practice of literacy has continued to exist in Bali, one which has deep historical roots in ancient Java and Bali, and South Asia, and which both deploys Balinese script (*aksara*) as a phonetic script representing speech but which also, used in rituals, meditation and secret teachings, is invested with an inherent efficacy and power which can change the world.

Annette Hornbacher in her Introduction, explains that, drawing on philology, linguistics, religious studies and anthropology, the essays included in the present book are intended to reconsider 'an analytical distinction' which anthropologists, historians of religion and philologically based scholarship have drawn between a local Balinese orally and ritually informed orthopractic religiosity and a modern book religiosity linked to an exclusionary universal belief system (p. 70). The essays complement Raechelle Rubinstein's discussion of the ritual and tantric aspects of poetic

literacy in Bali and Andrea Acri's historical studies of Javanese and Balinese *tutur* literature with reference to its Indic precursors. The essays examine aspects of Balinese understandings of the use of script in ritual practice, their relationship to Bali's esoteric *tutur* works and to interactive performances of poetic works. Importantly, they raise questions about the presuppositions which have underlain anthropological, historical and philological research of Balinese scriptural and textual practices and understandings. However, Richard Fox, in his critical assessment of the essays in the book's Postscript, argues that only three of the contributions, those of Annette Hornbacher, Margaret Wiener and his own, explicitly couple 'their analyses [of scriptural practices] with reflections on the broader implications that follow for a range of issues in the human sciences' (p. 212).

Fox in his own chapter, based on participant observer research conducted in a southern Balinese village ward, explains the different forms of agency embodied in Balinese letters. They are understood to represent cultural identity, embody and transmit information, purify, animate and enable, render things usable and so nameable, protect and attack, turn on their users and incur and pay debts (p. 27). He identifies the presence of 'two rival styles of reasoning' in these various uses concerning agency, community and the common good (p. 49): on the one hand, script and writing are considered to be the means of representing and transmitting information, a tendency which he associates with the modernising Indonesian state and book religion, and on the other, as a means of materialising power and so the capability to 'transfer efficacy and vitality between people, places and things' (p. 45).

Margaret Wiener in her essay returns to her fieldnotes to consider the remarks of one of her interlocutors, Ida Bagus Kakiyang. His explanation of *tutur* works as the sources of an embodied form of knowledge leads Wiener to argue that, 'Balinese do reality differently': their 'graphic ideologies' and 'technologies' suggest that they recognise non-human forms of agency and non-Western forms of animacy. Writing, brought to life and animated in rituals employing *mantra* and offerings, she says, contribute 'to transforming people, places and things by activating forces' (p. 69). These observations give her reason to discuss how Balinese graphic ideology 'is entangled with matters of ontology' in the light of a number of theoretical considerations — first, David Abram's explanation of the relationship between the invention of writing and shifts in human experience (p. 63), then a renewed anthropological interest in animism and the ascription of a relational ontology in which beings other than humans are also persons (p. 65), Bruno Latour's reconsideration of animism and advocacy of an ontology in which humans are imagined to participate with non-humans in networks to create social situations (p. 66), and finally, Karen Barad's proposal of an ontology in which 'neither human subjects nor material entities pre-exist', but are engaged in mutual reconfigurations (p. 67). In the end, Wiener offers her commentary not as conclusions but as an opening to further consideration of what it means when Balinese speak of an ontology in which *aksara* are, 'elements, actors, and/or conduits' (p. 69).

Annette Hornbacher explains that the use of *aksara* in ritual presupposes an esoteric knowledge of letters as visual manifestations of elements in a cosmic reality. In esoteric texts (*tutur*), she argues, the characters of Balinese script are both the media and the object of esoteric speculation. These works of esoteric knowledge, while they

convey cosmological ideas, are intended not as compendia of a theoretical knowledge but of a transfigurative knowledge that is embodied in the Balinese practitioners who study them and who practice one form of yoga or another. She points out that literacy is associated with significant social shifts in power–knowledge relationships. The study of *tutur* as sources ‘of a powerful, transformative and potentially harmful knowledge’ was required ‘to be secretly communicated between guru and his disciples’ and attended by purificatory and initiatory rituals (p. 80).

The essays of Thomas Hunter and Andrea Acri provide readers with insights into aspects of the history of scriptural practices in ancient Java and their relationship with ancient South Asian practices on the one hand and contemporary Balinese practices on the other. Hunter identifies, what he terms, a shift from the ‘sonorous aspect of speech in South Asian ritual and tantric practice’ to one ‘that puts equal — if not greater — weight on the chirographic representation of speech’ as one of special importance (p. 100). The appearance of a *citra-kāvya* form of poetry whose effects ‘depend upon the quasi-pictorial rendering of graphic sequences’, in the Śivagr̥ha inscription of 856 CE and were intended ‘to heighten the power and status of the inscription’ (p. 101), like the chirographic metaphors which became prevalent in *kakawin* literature more generally (p. 121), he proposes, are possible evidence of the shift he has identified.

Andrea Acri’s survey of the practice of the ritual imposition of the Sanskrit and Balinese syllabary onto the human body provides readers with valuable insights into the different manifestations of this practice in both South Asian texts and traditions and in the Javano-Balinese works he discusses. His research has left him in no doubt that the important role played by *aksara* as powerful elements in Balinese ritual and meditative practice are related to an analogous set of speculations and practices found in South Asian Tantric texts. Acri bases his inquiry on a methodology that he refers to as a ‘comparative approach’, which, he argues, has allowed him to trace practices and speculations from known Old Javanese and Balinese works back to their historical ‘prototypical’ sources discovered in the corpus of mediaeval Tantric Śaiva works in Sanskrit. Where this proved impossible, Acri explains, he has resorted to a ‘context of supralocal Tantric theory and praxis’ to extrapolate the ‘changes, adaptations, distortions, and innovations that have occurred in Java and Bali as a result of “localization”’. Following this methodology, he draws on a number of South Asian Śaiva Sanskrit sources from non-dualist Śakti- or Bhairava-oriented currents to establish what he calls ‘a common pattern’ in ‘a ‘standard list’ of descriptions/prescriptions of the placement of *aksara* onto limbs or other parts of the human body. He sources this ‘standard list’ in Abhinavagupta’s eleventh century *Tantraloka*, the *Agnipurāṇa* and a number of other Nepalese texts of Śākta orientation.

Helen Creese, in her essay, discusses contemporary literary performances which take the form of interactive on-air broadcasts of traditional works, daily on radio and weekly on television stations, and which are now the focus of widespread public attention. In contrast with the practices involved in the transmission of esoteric *tutur*, these broadcasts, she argues, make available a once restricted knowledge to a wider Balinese audience globally networked and digitally savvy (p. 189). These on-air performances retain a traditional format: recitation of a written text and oral glossing and discussion of the content. However, *lontar* manuscripts inscribed with *aksara* have given way to

printed romanised books and hand-written notebooks so that *aksara* are entirely absent in the context of these broadcasts. Nevertheless, the broadcasts do provide evidence of a continuing interest in Bali's 'orthographic mysticism'. Amongst the selected examples that Creese provides her readers, she draws attention to four which display a strong interest in the *dasaksara*, one aspect of Bali's 'orthographic mysticism' (pp. 180–87).

Finally, from interviews, recordings, films and manuscripts assembled and consulted in the course of fieldwork and library research, Hedi Hinzler provides readers with a detailed and well-illustrated description of the deployment of *aksara* in the interweaving of ritual and building in the construction of a variety of architectural structures. She pays particular attention to the *mulang dasar* ritual in honour of the goddess of the earth, Prethiwi, which is required before any earth is disturbed and before building can begin. Central in this ritual is the offering of a brick painted with an eight-petalled lotus, each petal inscribed actually or invisibly with one *aksara* of the *Ekadasa Aksara*, the Eleven Letters. These *aksara* represent the *Trimurti*, the gods Brahma, Siwa and Wisnu in the lotus' centre and on the surrounding eight petals aspects of the god Siwa. Once completed, the structure must be consecrated (*mlaspas*) to bring it to life (*urip*) before it is ready for use. Hinzler describes a series of rituals during which consecrated offerings are deposited in specified parts of the building. These offerings, along with a variety of precious stones, seeds, miniature agricultural tools and kitchen utensils, include *pripih*, small metal sheets of gold, silver, copper, iron and a mixture of red copper and gold, each inscribed invisibly or actually with *aksara* representing the *trimurti*, Siwa, Brahma and Wisnu.

The present collection of essays is a valuable contribution to our understanding of Balinese literacy and its history. This heterogeneous collection of essays provides readers with the means to reconsider the terms in which Clifford Geertz and Christiaan Hooykaas famously debated the nature of Balinese religion (pp. 2–4) and to better understand the innovations which modernist religious (*Agama Hindu*) thinking has introduced into the religious thought and ritual practice of contemporary Balinese. The essays also provide insight into moments in the history of chirographic ideologies and technologies in Java and Bali and their relationship with analogous practices in South Asia. They give cause to reconsider poetic figures and the role these chirographic practices have for the yogic practice of the authoring of poetic works and the intention of their authors to transform the world. Finally, and not least, what the essays tell us about the transmission of an esoteric embodied form of knowledge under the guidance of a teacher has important lessons for philologists interested in the history of Javanese and Balinese practices of textual transmission.

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