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WHY MEDIA MATTER:
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS
ON RELIGION AND THE
RECENT HISTORY OF
“THE BALINESE”

This is an article about the historical study of religion and why its practitioners should pay closer attention to the technologies, institutions, and practices that we conventionally call “media.” Its central argument is that our understanding of media significantly affects how we interpret the history of religious formations, ranging from the high vantage of the “world religions” down to smaller-scale “new religious movements” and more localized groups. I present this argument with specific reference to the recent history of the Indonesian island of Bali. But the primary target is a more general set of media-related assumptions shared by fields as diverse in their subject matter and approach as the history of religions, British cultural studies, and Old Javanese philology.

My principal aim is to show how prevailing understandings of media have helped to obfuscate both the contingency of, and political commit-

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ments entailed in, authoritative representations of the past. This critique is motivated by a desire to put scholarship on a level playing field with the practices it has taken as its object, with the driving purpose of facilitating a more serious engagement with the myriad ways in which people have understood and worked to transform the worlds in which they live. The nature of my argument requires that it be made with detailed attention to a specific case. But, I also make explicit its broader implications for the study of religion beyond Bali.

RELIGION AND MEDIA

Readers may have noted that recent years have seen a growing interest, both scholarly and otherwise, in the intersection of religion and media. Much of the commentary has been organized around the idea that, as media have taken on the role of a public religion, contemporary religious life has become suffused with sensibilities that derive from television, popular films, and the Internet. It is generally assumed that these changes mark a rupture with the past—a simpler time, when the sacred realm of religion was free from the profane influences of mass culture. In present-day society, or so we have been told, these once-discrete realms have become inextricably entangled with one another.

The most commonly adduced evidence from the United States has included the role of news coverage in the rise of Islamic terrorism, the visibility of the Christian Right in run-up to the elections of 2004, and a long list of pop culture phenomena from Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The X-files*, and *Left Behind*, the remarkably successful Christian Evangelical novels that appeared on the *New York Times* best seller list. Similarly, in Europe, one frequently encounters reference to the controversies surrounding religious attire in French schools, the denigration of Islam in cartoons published in the Danish press, and, before that, the outpouring of religious sentiment surrounding the death of Princess Diana. Of course, examples may be drawn as easily from elsewhere. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, the new Pentecostal and charismatic churches have made extensive use of television to create communities that cut across national boundaries. Similarly, one might look to Indonesia's leading Islamic self-help guru, Aa Gym, whose sermons are broadcast on television to a country of some 240 million. Popular cartoon characters adorn vehicles in Taiwanese funeral processions.¹ Text messaging has been used for the Catholic confessional. And Buddhist merit can be accrued over the Internet. The résumé of examples could no doubt be extended indefinitely. The question is whether such developments mark a fundamental transformation in our

¹ Thanks go to Jennifer Nafziger for this example.

object of study. What, for example, does it mean to analyze social relations in the context of an online religious community? Can the content of television programs offer us any insight into the sensibilities of their viewers? And how are we to evaluate claims of identity and agency for actions that, in our ordinary way of thinking, take place nowhere in the real world (e.g., through social networking Web sites and online gaming)? These are some of the questions posed by those working in the field of religion and media.

Despite the seeming novelty of these issues, it is important to bear in mind that media of one kind or another have long figured prominently in the historical study of religion. From sacred books to cassette sermons, one might even go so far as to argue that historians of religion have been engaged in a form of media studies all along. Yet, given their longstanding importance, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the ways we actually use media in the context of historical inquiry. It is perhaps no longer controversial to suggest more generally that the analysis of media should be a priority for the human sciences. But, in approaching media, which theoretical approach and frame of reference is most appropriate? And what precisely is our object of study? Should it be sought in the structure of institutions? In the signification of texts? Perhaps in the actions of individuals? Or even, somehow, in the totality of society itself? The central term in the problem—namely, “media”—seems curiously over-determined, and possibly for this reason our assessment has been more than a little ambivalent.

One finds, for instance, that, in the singular, the medium tends either to be idealized as an inert conduit for the transmission of a substantIALIZED message (communication) or, alternatively, decried as the source of ideological distortion (alienation). The medium is implicitly extrinsic to its content. But we have also been told that it participates in the very substance of that which it conveys (“the medium is the message”).² We have learned that novels and newspapers provided the ground on which national communities were first imagined. And yet, in the plural, the media comprise that mysteriously unified agent that is said to mollify the masses through commodification and individualization. Media are at once the locus of grassroots organization and the perpetuation of bourgeois *mythologie*. They facilitate both the exercise of Public Reason and the infantilizing effects of entertainment. As an organ of free speech, the media are a bastion of democracy. As an instrument of the Culture Industry (or the Military Industrial Complex, Big Oil, etc.) they act as handmaiden to Capital. Seemingly, it is—or they are—simultaneously a metaphysical

² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 7.

category, an institution, an instrument, and an agent. It would behoove us to disentangle these associations. For, as the Oxford philosopher and historian R. G. Collingwood once said of the various theories of Man, treatment of any one of them would easily fill a book.³ But which, if any, might help us to elucidate the social import of their ostensible object? Is it possible to establish which of these aspects are essential, and which ancillary? If not, could it be that—however prevalent in daily parlance—the term “media” itself is insufficiently precise to be of much use?

In the following pages my aim is to pursue answers to these questions through a sustained consideration of ethnographic and historical research conducted on the Indonesian island of Bali. For reasons that will become apparent, I believe the scholarship on Balinese religion presents an especially illustrative set of problems for analysis in this connection. My strategy in this pursuit will be twofold: I wish to bring the problem of media to the center of historical inquiry while, at the same time, dissolving the grounds on which this decidedly elusive theoretical object has been variously substantialized, instrumentalized, transcendentalized, and attributed with agency.

MEDIA AS A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRACTICES

In the current idiom, the term “media” is most commonly associated with modern technologies such as television, the Internet, text messaging, and the like. On this basis we might be inclined to presume that theoretical questions regarding media pertain primarily to the contemporary scene, or at most to the recent past. But, it is actually quite difficult to discuss religion at all, during any historical period, without reference to media of one form or another. One finds, for example, that new media were an important factor in the rise and development of movements as disparate as the Buddhist Mahāyāna (ca. first century CE), the Protestant Reformation (sixteenth century CE), and Indian Hindu nationalism (twentieth century CE). For the Mahāyāna, it has been argued that written texts allowed new teachings—for example, the *bodhisattva* ideal—to be preserved and disseminated without the direct involvement of the monastically based institutions traditionally responsible for the oral transmission of the Buddha’s discourses and discipline.⁴ Similarly, the use of the printing press in early modern Europe was a necessary precondition for the rise of a vernacular readership and the related decline of clerical control over scriptural interpretation. As a result, for many Christians, a “direct” engagement with

³ R. G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan; or Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 2–3.

⁴ Richard Gombrich, “How the Mahayana Began,” *Journal of Pali and Buddhist Studies* 1 (1988): 29–46.

scripture replaced the Latin liturgy as a primary interface with God.⁵ Finally, in the late 1980s, the epic *Rāmāyana* was serialized and broadcast on Indian state television as part of a broader campaign to generate popular support for a religiously defined nationalism. Reconfigured as an ancient pan-Indian tradition, the image of the divine king Ram has been deployed to articulate “Hindu” political solidarity across divisions of ethnicity, gender, language, class, and sectarian affiliation.⁶ Without wishing to generalize unduly, in each case new forms of religiosity and community were related to the rise of a new medium. But, precisely what does it mean to interpret the written word, the printing press, or television as media?

The primary thrust of my argument will be that no single approach to, or theory of, media can do justice to its ostensible object. This is for the simple reason that the term “media” does not ultimately refer to any particular entity “out there” in the world. Rather, I wish to suggest that what scholars and other commentators are often trying to explain when they invoke “media” (or “the media,” “the medium,” etc.) is the relationship between different kinds of practices—for instance, the practices of writing and those of reading, the practices of advertisers and those of consumers, or the practices of large-scale proselytizing and localized worship. As a theoretical posit, one or another “medium” (text, television, etc.) has been made to do the critical work of linking the two members in each of these paired sets of practices. In short, my central contention is that prevailing understandings of media are inadequate to this crucial task. It is my aim to demonstrate that more nuanced attention to the problem of media will have serious implications for how we think about the history of religions—not merely in our approach to religious configurations enabled by new technologies such as the Internet, but also for those associated with more traditional media, including scripture, music, and poetry.

As my argument centers on the idea of religion in Bali, it will be worth bearing in mind that the island’s popular reputation owes much to the sedimented impressions of a number of distinguished cultural observers.⁷ Among the better known are Sir Stamford Raffles, Miguel Covarrubias, Walter Spies, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, and Clifford Geertz. Each in his or her own way helped to conjure the image of Bali as a garden idyll, a Hindu outpost, a cultural oddity, and a theoretical exemplar.⁸

⁵ Lucian Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450–1800* (London: New Left Books, 1976).

⁶ Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁷ Adrian Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created* (Berkeley, CA, and Singapore: Periplus Editions, 1989).

⁸ James Boon, *The Anthropological Romance of Bali, 1597–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

It should be noted, however, that despite the persistence of these associations in the wider academy, the more focused study of Balinese religion and culture has moved on in recent years to a more sophisticated engagement with local histories and practices.⁹ For instance, the idea that Balinese inhabit a cloistered paradise—or that they ever did—is now recognized for the Orientalist fantasy that it always was.¹⁰ Well before the arrival of the first Europeans at the end of the sixteenth century, Balinese had long been engaged in complex relations of commerce, warfare, and intrigue with other parts of both mainland and insular Southeast Asia, as well as China, India, and elsewhere. As the current scholarship would suggest, to assume that contemporary Balinese are the passive recipients of a discrete cultural tradition is to ignore this cosmopolitan history. However, at the same time, to argue that theirs is an “invented tradition” is—if not tautologous—at the very least to evade the question of how we are to understand present cultural forms in their relation to the past. Generally speaking, the history of religions has taken this relationship between tradition and transformation to be one of its primary points of application. I wish to argue that closer attention to media will help bring into focus a series of theoretical problems in this connection that have been otherwise largely overlooked.

A TRADITIONAL PROBLEM

In order to specify what is at issue in positing the continuity of cultural forms through time, I would like to consider the example of *Ajeg Bali*—a slogan that scholars have rendered with varying emphases as “Bali standing strong,” “Strong and everlasting Bali,” and “Bali erect.”¹¹ In recent years the phrase *Ajeg Bali* has appeared frequently in the titles of television programs, regional competitions, scholarship awards, and beauty pageants. It is invoked in campaign speeches, temple ceremonies, sitcoms, pop songs, advertisements, and theatrical performances. The current literature would suggest that, as a call to defend tradition, this slogan replicates

⁹ See, e.g., Margaret Wiener, *Visible and Invisible Realms: Power, Magic, and Colonial Conquest in Bali* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Mark Hobart, *After Culture: Anthropology as Radical Metaphysical Critique* (Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Duta Wacana University Press, 2000); Hildred Geertz, *Life of a Balinese Temple: Artistry, Imagination, and History in a Peasant Village* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Henk Schulte Nordholt, *Bali: Colonial Conceptions and Political Change, 1700–1940: From Shifting Hierarchies to “Fixed Order”* (Comparative Asian Studies Programme (Rotterdam: Erasmus University, 1986); Adrian Vickers, “Hinduism and Islam in Indonesia: Bali and the Pasisir World,” *Indonesia* 44 (1987): 30–58.

¹¹ These renderings of the phrase *Ajeg Bali* come, respectively, from: E. Rhoads, “Bali Standing Strong,” *Inside Indonesia*, April–June 2007; Michel Picard, “From Kebalian to *Ajeg Bali*: Tourism and Balinese Identity in the Aftermath of the Kuta Bombing,” in *Tourism in Southeast Asia: Challenges and New Directions*, ed. Michael Hitchcock et al. (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), 99–131; and Degung Santikarma, “Bali Erect,” *Latitudes* 43 (2003): 13–17.

an earlier configuration of Balinese religion, culture, and tradition. The question is how we are to understand the commonality between such an originary moment and its ostensible replication. As a way into the problem, I would like to begin by considering a short excerpt from an article that was written by Ngurah Suryawan, a young Balinese anthropologist and locally prominent public commentator.¹² The article addressed the rise to prominence of *Ajeg Bali* and was published on the opinion page of *Kompas*, one of Indonesia's leading national newspapers. Suryawan opened by setting the scene with a local community meeting:

The atmosphere in the meeting was fairly relaxed when the headman asked the members of the community for any questions or suggestions they might have. This relaxed atmosphere dissipated when one member, sitting off to the side, raised his hand and asked earnestly in high Balinese, "I do not really know much of anything. But in all honesty I wish to ask about this *Ajeg Bali* that I am always hearing about on TV and in the newspaper. What, sir, is this *Ajeg Bali*? And what can I do now to make Bali *Ajeg*?" His awkward speech made some of the members titter trying to hold back their laughter. . . . The headman's response was quite simple: "To make Bali *Ajeg* is to defend tradition and the values of Balinese-ness that have nowadays begun to fade away in Bali." . . . This was a diplomatic and off-the-cuff response, just like those officials in Bali who quite happily use *Ajeg Bali* to comment on anything whatsoever.¹³

The villager asked an interesting question. However, as Suryawan noted, the headman's response merely reiterated the rhetoric of bureaucrats and officials. So, what is this thing called *Ajeg Bali*? And, granted its apparent ubiquity, why might Balinese themselves have been unable to answer this question to their own satisfaction?¹⁴

¹² Ngurah Suryawan, "'Ajeg Bali' dan Lahirnya 'Jago-Jago' Kebudayaan," *Kompas*, January 7, 2004, <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0401/07/Bentara/781054.htm>. In addition to his several books and newspaper articles on various aspects of Balinese politics, culture, and society, Suryawan appears periodically on television programs broadcast on BaliTV, a local channel owned and operated by the Bali Post Media Group (on which, see below).

¹³ Ibid. A brief excerpt from this passage is also cited by Pamela Allen and Carmencita Palermo, "Ajeg Bali: Multiple Meanings, Diverse Agendas," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 33, no. 97 (2005): 240; however, I have somewhat modified their translation. The original Indonesian reads as follows: "Suasana pesangkepan sempat hening ketika kelihan mempersilakan warga usul atau bertanya tentang segala hal. Keheningan itu hilang ketika seorang warga, duduk di pojok, menunjuk tangan dan dengan polos bertanya dalam bahasa Bali halus, 'Saya tidak tahu apa-apa. Saya dengan polos saja ingin bertanya tentang Ajeg Bali yang sering saya dengar di TV dan koran. Saudara kelihan, apa sebenarnya Ajeg Bali itu? Apa perilaku saya untuk meng-ajeg-kan Bali itu sekarang?' Bahasanya yang kaku membuat sebagian warga sempat berbisik-bisik menahan tawa. . . . Jawaban pemimpin adat itu sangat sederhana, 'Meng-ajeg-kan Bali adalah mempertahankan tradisi adat dan nilai-nilai kebalian yang kini mulai luntur di Bali,' . . . Jawaban diplomatik dan nyerocos, seperti para pejabat di Bali yang dengan mudah menggunakan Ajeg Bali untuk mengomentari apa saja."

¹⁴ In my own conversations with Balinese, I have frequently encountered a similar sense of uncertainty on the matter. As one of the clown servants remarked to his partner in a recent

It would appear from the villager's remarks that newspapers and television have played a part in popularizing this call to "defend tradition." But this merely returns us to the question with which we began. Can we assume that newspapers and television are simply a vehicle for the dissemination of an *Ajeg Bali* "ideology"? Or, as I have suggested, might more nuanced attention to media have broader—and more theoretically substantive—implications for our understanding of Balinese tradition? I wish to argue that one's assumptions regarding the nature and theoretical significance of media determine in important ways how one interprets a given religious configuration and its history.¹⁵ Put another way, critical attention to media transforms both the questions we are able to ask and the kinds of answers for which our research might reasonably be expected to provide evidence. For reasons that will become apparent, I believe a review of the recent scholarship on *Ajeg Bali* will help both to clarify the consequences of failing to take the problem of media seriously and to indicate a series of provisional steps toward an alternative approach.

SCHOLARLY CONSENSUS

The rise of *Ajeg Bali* is widely attributed to Satria Naradha, the somewhat reclusive owner of the Bali Post Media Group (BPMG). His organization controls several newspapers, radio stations, and television channels both in Bali and other parts of the archipelago. It would appear that the call to defend tradition under the rubric of *Ajeg Bali* was formally inaugurated in May 2002 at the launch of BaliTV, the BPMG's flagship television station.¹⁶ The slogan took on additional significance in the wake of the Kuta nightclub bombings later that same year, in which 202 people were

shadow play in the provincial capital city of Denpasar, "Bih! Yer mouth says 'Ajeg,' but ya ain't got a clue what yer talkin' about! When we were living back in the mortal world, you were always going on about 'Ajeg . . . Ajeg . . . Ajeg.' Even while throwing back a few drinks at the *warung*, you'd still be nattering on about 'Ajeg!'" (Bih! Né bungut 'gén ngorahang "Ajeg." Jelema sing nepukin unduk né! Dugas idup ajak di Marcapada ajak cang Mélem, kaden sai ngorahang, "Ajeg . . . Ajeg . . . Ajeg . . ." Sambilang ngamah arak di warung, ngorahang ajeg masih!); Pentas Akbar Kolaborasi Wayang Kolosal, dengan Wayang Cenk Blonk (January 6, 2007, Art Centre, Denpasar, Bali). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

¹⁵ The question of whether *Ajeg Bali* might more appropriately be considered under the rubric of "religion" or "culture" is moot (see Richard Fox, "Plus ça change . . . Recent Developments in Old Javanese Studies and their Implications for the Study of Religion in Contemporary Bali," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 161, no. 1 [2005]: 63–97). Although a useful starting point for inquiry, I take it that the category of "religion" is ultimately of little critical use (Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* [Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993]). For a similar argument regarding "culture," see Hobart, *After Culture*.

¹⁶ Henk Schulte Nordholt, *Bali: An Open Fortress, 1995–2005: Regional Autonomy, Electoral Democracy and Entrenched Identities* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), 55–56; Picard, "From Kebalian to *Ajeg Bali*," 113.

killed and many more were seriously injured.¹⁷ Following a sharp drop-off in tourist arrivals and the ensuing decline in the economy, the ideal of *Ajeg Bali* was subsequently deployed in a range of connections—from political campaigns to neighborhood beautification initiatives—to promote a return to tradition as the appropriate response to a wide-reaching crisis.

Scholarly consensus seems lately to have converged on the idea that this new call to identity replicates certain key elements of an earlier Indonesian (and, ultimately, Dutch colonial) configuration of Balinese religion, culture, and tradition. For instance, Michel Picard has recently suggested that, “in these trying circumstances [following the bombings of 2002 and 2005], the *Ajeg Bali* campaign appears as a cultural revival movement fostering a monolithic identity based on *agama Hindu* and *desa pakraman*, which attempts to protect the Balinese from external threats by presenting a united front to the outside.”¹⁸ Picard’s argument is, in short, that elements such as “*agama Hindu* and *desa pakraman*” (very loosely, “Hindu religion” and the “traditional village”)¹⁹ can be traced back to social formations in earlier periods of Balinese history, and that in more recent years they have been brought together in a new configuration under the aegis of *Ajeg Bali* in order to address present concerns. Comparing *Ajeg Bali* with another slogan, *Bali Lestari*, which was promulgated in the 1980s and 1990s by the Balinese provincial government, Degung Santikarma has noted that

ever since the October 2002 Bali bombings and the subsequent trials of Islamic radicals, many Balinese have turned from talking about “*Bali Lestari*” or “Preserved Bali” to calling for “*Ajeg Bali*.” “*Ajeg*” is a Balinese word meaning hard or stable or fixed. It has, to the ears of many Balinese, a distinctly macho sound, resonating with military bravery, unapproachable (*sic*) barricades, and unflagging erections. . . . If Bali Preserved was a sweet village girl being harassed by tourist men, Bali Erect is the urban inhabitant of places like Denpasar and Kuta, over-

¹⁷ On October 12, 2002, a car bomb was detonated in the nightclub district of Kuta, together with two smaller bombs—one in an adjacent bar, the other in the Renon administrative district. Almost three years later, on October 1, 2005, several smaller bombs were detonated in Kuta and Jimbaran, killing some twenty people. These bombings were attributed to an “al-Qaeda affiliated” group that authorities and the press called “Jemaah Islamiah” (see Richard Fox, “Strong and Weak Media? On the Representation of ‘Terorisme’ in Contemporary Indonesia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 40, no. 4 (2006): 993–1052).

¹⁸ Picard, “From *Kebalian* to *Ajeg Bali*,” 126.

¹⁹ In modern Indonesian (and colonial-era Malay), the term *agama* is used predominantly in reference to Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian traditions. It is derived from the Sanskrit term *āgama*, which is associated very generally with “tradition,” but was also used more specifically with reference to tantric treatises of a *śaiva* or *śākta* character. See Jan Gonda, *Sanskrit in Indonesia*, 2nd ed. (1973; New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1998), 499–500.

run by non-Balinese Indonesians who would steal their jobs, undermine their culture or even blow up their guests.²⁰

Jean Couteau has further argued that this virile and quite explicitly xenophobic configuration of Balinese culture and tradition is due especially to the emergence of class conflict that, prior to the bombings of 2002, had been stifled in the interest of capital under the repressive New Order regime (1966–98). The “New Order” (*Orde Baru*) was the authoritarian regime lead by former Indonesian President Suharto, who resigned in 1998 after thirty-two years in power. As Couteau explained,

[Bali’s] traditional elite has long been—and still largely remains—co-opted by the various holders of Indonesian state power, in the same way as they were previously by the Dutch (Vickers 1989: 157–189; Robinson 1995: 19–51). More importantly, even as they lost control over the levers of the island’s economy, the Balinese actually benefited from the system in terms of their living standards, which are today among the highest of Indonesia. A relatively important bourgeoisie appeared under the New Order, their sources of wealth derived mainly from their participation in the tourism industry, land speculation and the development of a dynamic indigenous micro-banking system. . . . [And] all this has kept the Balinese population receptive to the notion of an “Indonesian nation” as well as cosmopolitanism, and blinded them to the contradictions created by thirty years of New Order politics and economic policies which, with the Kuta bombing, are now coming out in the open.²¹

Variations on this vaguely Marxian return of the repressed can be found across much of the recent scholarship on contemporary Bali.²² Yet, while there may be some merit to certain aspects of this interpretation, I believe it raises at least as many questions as it purports to answer. For instance, how are we to understand the relationship between the “contradictions”

²⁰ Santikarma, “Bali Erect,” 14–16.

²¹ Jean Couteau, “After the Kuta Bombing: In Search of the Balinese Soul,” *Antropologi Indonesia* 70 (2003): 50–51.

²² See, e.g., Degung Santikarma, “Ajeg Bali: Dari Gadis Cilik ke Madé Schwarzenegger,” *Kompas*, 2003, <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0312/07/seni/670824.htm>, “Bali Erect,” and “The Model Militia: A New Security Force in Bali is Cloaked in Tradition,” *Inside Indonesia* 73 (2003); Helen Creese, “Reading the Bali Post: Women and Representation in Post-Suharto Bali,” *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 10 (2004), <http://wwwsshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue10/creese.html>; Michael Hitchcock and Nyoman Darma Putra, “Bali after the Bombs: Local Values and Inter-communal Relations,” in *Politik Kebudayaan dan Identitas Etnik*, ed. Wayan Ardika and Nyoman Darma Putra (Denpasar: Fakultas Sastra Universitas Udayana, 2004), 221; H. Schulte Nordholt, “Prolog: Bali: An Open Fortress,” in *Bali: Narasi dalam Kuasa; Politik dan Kekerasan di Bali*, ed. Ngurah Suryawan (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Ombak, 2005), xx; and Picard, “From Kebalian to Ajeg Bali,” 125–26.

of the past and their alleged consequences in the present? Given the emphasis on capital, we must also specify the nature of the relationship between “the island’s economy” and other social or cultural factors. Moreover, with the explicit invocation of class, we are obligated to explain the conditions under which collectivities such as the “bourgeoisie” become intelligible as political agents.²³

REARTICULATING THE PROBLEM

We have seen that *Ajeg Bali* has been said to foster a “monolithic identity” over and against economic and other displacements within Balinese society. I would like to suggest that, in this regard, it may be instructive to consider this cultural formation in terms of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s reworking of Gramscian hegemony.²⁴

On my reading, Gramsci’s point of departure in this connection was the idea that, in the absence of economic determinism, any socioeconomic group—that is, not necessarily “the proletariat”—may potentially hegemonize other groups to form a political bloc.²⁵ This was not simply a matter of outright domination but rather the production of consent through

²³ Here we might compare Couteau’s invocation of the Balinese “bourgeoisie” with that of Picard (“From *Kebalian* to *Ajeg Bali*”) and Schulte Nordholt (*Bali: An Open Fortress*) on Bali’s new “middle class.”

²⁴ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985; London and New York: Verso 2001). The related concepts of *hegemony* and *articulation* have figured prominently in cultural and media studies circles, and have been associated particularly with the work of Stuart Hall. However, for various reasons (see Mark Hobart, “The End of the World News: Articulating Television in Bali,” in *Staying Local in the Global Village: Bali in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Raechelle Rubinstein and Linda Connor [Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999], 265–89; and Richard Fox, “From Text to Television: Mediating Religion in Contemporary Bali” [doctoral diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2002]), I believe Laclau and Mouffe have offered a more logically consistent and analytically useful model. For a critical overview and discussion of Laclau’s work, see the contributions to Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart, eds., *Laclau: A Critical Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

²⁵ The interpretation of Gramsci on hegemony and ideology is contentious. Mouffe has offered a nuanced analysis of the key issues, noting that “if a class becomes hegemonic it is not, as some interpretations of Gramsci would have it, because it has succeeded in imposing its class ideology upon society or in establishing mechanisms legitimising its class power. This kind of interpretation completely alters the nature of Gramsci’s thought because it reduces his conception of ideology to the traditional marxist conceptions of false consciousness which necessarily leads to presenting hegemony as a phenomenon of ideological inculcation. Now, it is precisely against this type of reductionism that Gramsci is rebelling when he proclaims that ‘politics is not a “marché de dupes”’. For him, ideology is not the mystified-mystifying justification of an already constituted class power, it is the ‘terrain on which men acquire consciousness of themselves,’ and hegemony cannot be reduced to a process of ideological domination” (Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci,” in her *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* [London, Boston, and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979], 195–96).

“intellectual and moral leadership.”²⁶ David Howarth wrote: “As against Lenin’s object of constructing temporary alliances between distinct classes in a bid to overthrow class rule, [Gramsci argued] that particular social classes must transcend their narrow economic interests by elaborating a new ideology or ‘common sense.’ . . . This means that different classes and social groups must come to share a common set of political objectives based on new sets of beliefs and practices by forging a ‘collective will.’”²⁷

Yet, although Gramsci’s formulation of hegemony marked a significant departure from earlier Marxian thought, Laclau and Mouffe argued that his account of political practice remained “essentialist” in at least one fundamental respect.²⁸ This residual essentialism consisted in the retention of the “fundamental class of society” (e.g., the Italian working class) as a positive social fact. That is to say, on the one hand, Gramsci recognized political alliances to be tenuous unities that linked or “articulated” otherwise disparate groups. Yet, at the same time, it seemed that the agents responsible for that linkage (e.g., the “fundamental class of society”) were not themselves subject to this logic of articulation. In order to redress this residual essentialism, Laclau and Mouffe retheorized hegemony radically in terms of the articulatory practices through which political identities—such as the Italian working class, but also Couteau’s Balinese “bourgeoisie”—become intelligible in the first place.

It is on this basis that I would like to suggest we approach *Ajeg Bali* as an articulation—that is, as a discursive linkage of disparate elements (e.g., “*agama Hindu* and *desa pakraman*”) aimed at constituting the new “common sense” for a unified social totality. This articulation would comprise an attempt to suture the socioeconomic antagonisms (e.g., between “Bali’s traditional elite” and the “bourgeoisie [that] appeared under the New Order”) that obstruct the full realization of particular social identities (e.g., the notion of a Bali that is *Ajeg*).²⁹ In other words, with the ethnic, religious, and otherwise heterogeneous character of urban Bali,³⁰ and the

²⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 57f.

²⁷ David Howarth, “Hegemony, Political Subjectivity, and Radical Democracy,” in Critchley and Marchart, *Laclau: A Critical Reader*.

²⁸ See *ibid.*, 272 n. 4 for a concise summary of Laclau’s three models of hegemony developed in their respective contexts.

²⁹ Here the antagonisms undoubtedly reach far deeper than those commonly cited in the current literature (e.g., between ethnic Balinese and “non-Balinese Indonesians who would steal their jobs”). For instance, we might add the divisions of gender and generation that cut across the articulation of patriarchal domesticity, national development, and transnational capitalism.

³⁰ Jean Couteau, “Bali: Crise en paradis,” *Archipel* 64 (2002): 231–54.

importance of foreign capital for the island's economy,³¹ it is increasingly difficult to maintain the appearance of a discrete and internally coherent Balinese society.³² As a call to defend "Balinese tradition" in opposition to an incursion of what is not Balinese, *Ajeg Bali* articulates self-presence over displacement, homogeneity over complexity, internal unity over division. In the words of the headman, "To make Bali *Ajeg* is to defend tradition and the values of Balinese-ness that have nowadays begun to fade away in Bali."

WHY MEDIATION MATTERS

In his commentary on Laclau and Mouffe, Hobart emphasized that this kind of articulation does not occur in an abstract realm of pure logic.³³ But, rather, the degree of success or failure of any such attempt to constitute a social totality, or "identity," is to a large extent determined by the way in which it is "mediated." If this is so, what is required, then, is a theory of mediation.³⁴ But, as I suggested in my opening remarks, the referent for the terms "media" and "medium"—let alone "mediation"—is anything but self-evident. To argue for a position on this point requires clarifying what we might mean by these terms. So, with an eye to disentangling the various themes with which I began, I believe the next step should be to specify the sense in which media, and ultimately mediation, might be relevant for an historical account of *Ajeg Bali*.

In this connection, the recent scholarship has pointed to the importance of "mass media" in general—and the BPMG in particular—in disseminating the ideals of *Ajeg Bali*. Graeme MacRae and Nyoman Darma Putra, for instance, have suggested that BaliTV "slowly but surely became the voice of *Ajeg Bali* in ever more active ways."³⁵ They went on to explain, "Its entire program is underpinned by *Ajeg Bali* ideology. There is a weekly program called *Ajeg Bali*, an interactive public forum in which

³¹ George Aditjondro, "Bali, Jakarta's Colony: Social and Ecological Impacts of Jakarta-based Conglomerates in Bali's Tourism Industry," Working Paper no. 58 (Perth: Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, 1995).

³² It must be emphasized that such an account has probably never been a good fit for the complexities of social life Bali. See, e.g., Vickers, "Hinduism and Islam in Indonesia," Adrian Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created*; Jean Couteau, "Bali et l'Islam: Recontre historique," *Archipel: Études interdisciplinaires sur le monde insulindien* 58 (1999): 159–88, and "Bali et l'Islam 2: Coexistence et perspectives contemporaines," *Archipel: Études interdisciplinaires sur le monde insulindien* 60 (2000): 45–64; and Mark Hobart, "Rethinking Balinese Dance," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 35, no. 101 (2007): 107–28.

³³ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*; and Mark Hobart, "The End of the World News," 28.

³⁴ Hobart, "The End of the World News," 24.

³⁵ Graeme MacRae and Nyoman Darma Putra, "A New Theatre-State in Bali? Aristocracies, the Media and Cultural Revival in the 2005 Local Elections," *Asian Studies Review* 31 (2007): 178.

issues of Balinese arts, society and culture are discussed with experts in the studio. This and other similar programs provide opportunities for ordinary Balinese to learn, discuss, and even criticize their culture.³⁶ Similarly, Pamela Allen and Carmencita Palermo have suggested that “a significant feature of *Ajeg Bali* has been its promotion by the media. The regional newspaper *Bali Post* (along with its allied television station *Bali TV*, *Genta* radio station and the tabloid publication *Denpost*), has been an important player in entrenching public awareness of this new concept.”³⁷ Although there is widespread agreement on the general importance of “mass media” in disseminating this “*Ajeg Bali* ideology,”³⁸ there has been little—if any—attention paid to the crucial question of how mass mediated representations might be related to such analytically important, albeit fuzzily defined, entities such as “ordinary Balinese” and “public awareness.”

In this connection I would suggest that, if our account of *Ajeg Bali* is to be of any critical significance, we must ask how its representation in newspapers and on television is—or can be—related to the lives of those men, women, and children actually living in Bali.³⁹ Insofar as the scholarly invocation of “ordinary Balinese”—or, for that matter, “the Balinese population” (Couteau), “the Balinese” (Picard), “many Balinese” (Santikarma), and so forth—is itself an articulation, we must also endeavor to be clear as to how our own knowledge of these collectivities is mediated.⁴⁰ I take it that no sensible person would argue for “unmediated” knowledge of complex social entities. The question is specifically why media matter for our understanding of collectivities such as “the Balinese,” “early Christians,” “the Hindus,” “the Muslim world,” “the Tibetans,” and others. Newspapers and television are frequently cited as sources of information in the literature on *Ajeg Bali*. But, if historical inquiry is a matter of marshaling evidence to answer specific questions, specifically what kinds of questions can one answer—and what sort of evidence can one muster—by reading the *Bali Post* or watching *BaliTV*? In gauging “public awareness,” does it matter to whom one speaks? When? And under what conditions? Is it safe to assume a degree of commensurability between, on the one hand, “the Balinese” with whom we work when conducting field

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Allen and Palermo, “*Ajeg Bali*,” 242.

³⁸ See, e.g., Santikarma, “*Ajeg Bali*,” and “*Bali Erect*”; Creese, “Reading the *Bali Post*”; Suryawan, “*Ajeg Bali*”; Schulte Nordholt, “Prolog; *Bali*,” xix; Rhoads, “*Bali Standing Strong*”; and Picard, “From *Kebalian* to *Ajeg Bali*,” 113.

³⁹ This is not to imply the possibility of grounding representation in one or another account of what would ostensibly comprise immediately lived reality. This is an issue to which I shall return below.

⁴⁰ This invocation of “ordinary Balinese” entails an evacuation of agency parallel to that traced by Roberts in the appropriation of “the everyday” as a critical frame of reference for contemporary cultural studies. See John Roberts, “Philosophizing the Everyday: The Philosophy of Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Studies,” *Radical Philosophy* 98 (1999): 16–29.

research and, on the other, “the Balinese” as a discursive figure in the *Bali Post*?⁴¹

It is with these questions in mind that I wish to suggest mass media have been left quite seriously undertheorized in the scholarly literature on Bali’s recent history. More specifically, I will argue that most representations of the circumstances surrounding *Ajeg Bali* have been uncritical in at least five interrelated ways. They (a) obscure the conditions of their own production by (b) failing to acknowledge the specificity of different media. Instead, their account of recent Balinese history tends (c) to flatten fundamental differences between the various kinds of media that have shaped their research practices—from reading the newspaper to speaking with “ordinary Balinese.” This flattening of difference is inextricably linked to their (d) naturalization of a particular way of representing the relationship between not only past and present, but also (e) among the myriad otherwise incongruous elements that are brought together in their analyses.⁴² As I hope to demonstrate here, the upshot of all this is that, in trying to comment on the recent history of Bali, the current scholarship has overlooked the importance of distinguishing between different kinds of media. And, as a result, it has reinscribed precisely the elitist model of Balinese society that it has more generally set out to critique.

AN ARGUMENT IN THREE PARTS

In an attempt to address these issues systematically, I have broken my analysis into three parts. First, in analogy to the above-cited argument that *Ajeg Bali* replicates elements from an earlier period in Balinese history (namely, the New Order), I shall consider a specific incident in which a present state of affairs might plausibly be explained as replicating an element of the past. My account of this incident in its relation to an earlier moment in Balinese history is meant to specify the issues at stake and demonstrate that they are applicable beyond the isolated case of *Ajeg Bali*. I shall then, second, reexamine this invocation of the past in terms of its underlying presuppositions regarding history and media to argue that prevailing scholarly understandings of Balinese tradition in general—and of *Ajeg Bali* in particular—are both logically and politically fraught,

⁴¹ More traditional ethnography has long recognized the importance of such questions. But, as will become clear in the second part of this article, the same degree of caution has often been lacking in the scholarship on *Ajeg Bali*.

⁴² As I have argued elsewhere (Richard Fox, “Substantial Transmissions: A Presuppositional Analysis of ‘The Old Javanese Text’ as an Object of Knowledge, and Its Implications for the Study of Religion in Bali,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 159, no. 1 [2003]: 65–107, and “Plus ça change”), this tendency in the current scholarship does not represent a new development but is rather a reworking of an older set of assumptions that has long underpinned the scholarly study of Balinese religion and culture.

not to mention empirically questionable. Finally, I shall conclude by laying out the broader implications of my analysis for the historical study of religion.

PART 1: BOUQUETS AND BOMB SITES

On the morning of October 2, 2005, several large flower bouquets were delivered to sites in a Balinese beach resort where a string of suicide bombings had killed some twenty people on the previous night.⁴³ Each bouquet bore the inscription *Tat Twam Asi*, which any student of Indic religions would readily recognize as one of the *mahāvākyā*, or Great Sayings, from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad. This religio-philosophical tract was most likely composed sometime between 600 and 400 BCE on the north Gangetic plain of what is now India. The phrase *Tat Twam Asi* itself has been one of the central foci of a rich commentarial tradition spanning some two millennia. Many have taken this ancient Sanskrit dictum—most commonly rendered “Thou art that”—to suggest a monistic identification of one’s inner self with the cosmic principle. Others have understood the import of this phrase rather differently.⁴⁴ But, what was this Great Saying doing on a bouquet at a bomb site in Bali?

As it turns out, the flower arrangements—and, more specifically, their invocation of *Tat Twam Asi* following an incident of “terrorism”—were not without precedent. Going back a few years to the Kuta nightclub bombings of 2002, we find in *Kompas*—Indonesia’s leading national newspaper—a piece entitled “The Bali Tragedy an Affront to ‘*Tat Twam Asi*’” (Tragedi Bali bertentangan dengan “*Tat Twam Asi*”). The article explained, “The bombing tragedy in Kuta on the 12th of October 2002 not only inflicted many casualties and struck at the heart of Balinese society, but it also was an affront to *Tat Twam Asi*, the animating principle of Balinese society that has at its core the ideals of brotherhood, peace and harmony. . . . The Governor of Bali [Dewa Made Beratha] said, Balinese society is familiar with the philosophy of *Tat Twam Asi*, which means I am him and he is me. “Don’t do harm to another person . . . because in effect that means we’re also doing harm to ourselves.”⁴⁵ On the governor’s

⁴³ The bouquets were in the form of large wreaths adorned with a banner bearing their printed message across the center. This form of flower arrangement is often seen at Indonesian—i.e., not necessarily Balinese—funerals and other commemorations. They are, to my knowledge, totally unrelated to the regular offerings (e.g., *banten*, *caru*) that are almost everywhere visible in day-to-day life in Bali.

⁴⁴ Joel P. Brereton, “‘*Tat twam asi*’ in Context,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 136, no. 1 (1986): 98–109.

⁴⁵ “Tragedi peledakan bom di Kuta 12 Oktober 2002 tidak hanya menimbulkan korban jiwa dan luka mendalam di hati masyarakat Bali, tetapi juga bertentangan dengan *Tat Twam Asi*, konsep hidup masyarakat Bali yang berintikan persaudaraan, perdamaian, dan harmoni. . . .

account, the bombing of 2002 not only physically injured and killed its immediate victims, but it was also an affront to the animating principle (*konsep hidup*) of Balinese society—that is, the philosophy of *Tat Twam Asi*. Here, it may be noted that, through his use of the inclusive first-person plural (*kita*), the governor was ostensibly speaking simultaneously about and as a member of—as well as, arguably, to—“Balinese society” (masyarakat Bali).⁴⁶ And this is something to which we shall have cause to return. But, first, why on both occasions was this deemed an appropriate response to “terrorism”?

MEDIATING AGAMA HINDU

Quite apart from the beachside bouquets and the governor’s earlier remarks, the phrase *Tat Twam Asi* was already in fairly widespread use when these two incidents occurred. In recent years it has appeared, for instance, in at least two eponymous pop songs. And, in one of the recent commercially available editions of the Balinese Hindu calendar, these words are printed prominently on the front page for the month of January.⁴⁷ Variably cast as a “concept” (*konsep*), a “philosophy” (*filsafat*), or a “teaching” (*ajaran*), *Tat Twam Asi* tends consistently to be reified and, when in print, spelled with capital letters at the beginning of each word. Writing in 1999, a well-known Balinese anthropologist and civil servant suggested that it “has become one of the most popular quotations in Bali.”⁴⁸ That said, the phrase *Tat Twam Asi* is not—at least to my knowledge—in evidence in the precolonial Balinese textual tradition. So how did this little saying become so “popular”?

Gubernur Bali [, Pak Déwa Madé Berartha,] mengatakan, masyarakat Bali mengenal filosofi *Tat Twam Asi*, yang berarti saya adalah dia dan dia adalah saya. ‘Jangan menyakiti seseorang atau orang lain karena maknanya berarti juga menyakiti diri kita sendiri’” (“Tragedi Bali bertengangan dengan ‘Tat Twam Asi,’” *Kompas*, 2002, <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0211/16/daerah/trag19.htm>).

⁴⁶ The Indonesian language differentiates between two forms of the first-person plural: the inclusive form (*kita*), referring both to the speaker (and possibly others) as well as the addressee(s), and the exclusive form (*kami*) referring to the speaker and others, but not the addressee.

⁴⁷ Pāramita, *Kalender Bali. Karya Asli Drs. I Nym Singgin Wikarman (Alm) dan Dilanjutkan Penyusunannya oleh Putra-Putrinya, I Gede Sutarya dan Adik-Adiknya* (Denpasar: Pāramita, 2007). Similar calendars are produced for sale by several organizations, and they may be found in most Balinese Hindu homes, as well as in government offices, coffee stalls and other places of business.

⁴⁸ I Gdé Pitana, “Status Struggles and the Priesthood in Contemporary Bali,” in *Staying Local in the Global Village*, ed. R. Rubinstein and L. Connor (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), 195. It is, of course, not the only hypostatized motto of its kind. Several other Sanskritic phrases—e.g., *Tri Kaya Parisudha*, *Tri Hita Karana*—have gained a similar prominence, and, as such, an analysis of their use might offer a rather different perspective on public understandings of Balinese religiosity. Here there is, of course, an obvious parallel to *Ajeg Bali* itself.

The earliest Indonesian reference to *Tat Twam Asi* that I have been able to find goes back some fifty years to Indonesia's first president, Soekarno, who reportedly invoked this phrase as the foundation for the Principle of Humanism (*Kemanusiaan*) that would comprise the second of five ideological pillars (*Pancasila*) for the newly independent Indonesian Republic.⁴⁹ At that time, it would appear that a specific link had not yet been forged between *Tat Twam Asi* and the religious tradition of Bali—though, as Bakker has noted, several Hindu Balinese intellectuals would soon thereafter appropriate this phrase in their various attempts to formulate a Hindu orthodoxy.⁵⁰ I shall return to discuss some possible implications of these precedents. But, first, in order to understand how this “popular quotation” might have ended up on a bouquet at a Balinese bomb site, we must examine the more recent history of religion in Bali and, more specifically, the use of television by state and state-supported agencies for the dissemination of a normative “Hindu religion,” or *Agama Hindu*.

The Indonesian Ministry of Religion (*Departemen Agama*) has officially recognized and administered a Hindu form of *agama* in Bali since 1958.⁵¹ But, it would appear that the phrase *Agama Hindu* itself was first used publicly to refer to the officially sanctioned religion of Bali in 1965, when “Sukarno announced the names of the religions that were to qualify for official government sponsorship.”⁵² Later, under former President Suharto’s New Order regime (1966–98), every Indonesian citizen was required to register as an adherent to one of the five officially recognized *agama*: *Agama Buddha*, *Agama Hindu*, *Agama Islam*, *Agama Katolik*, or *Agama Kristen (Protéstan)*.⁵³ Each of these five *agama* was nationally

⁴⁹ See Saafroedin Bahar et al., *Risalah Sidang Badan Penyelidik Usaha-Usaha Persiapan Kemerdekaan Indonesia (BPUPKI), Panitia Persiapan Kemerdekaan Indonesia (PPKI)*, 28 Mei 1945–22 Agustus 1945 (Jakarta: Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, 1995); also cf. Soekarno, “*Tat Twam Asi*;” “*Dia adalah Engkau*;” “*Dia adalah Aku*;” in his opening speech of the Seminar on Rehabilitation, Solo, August 26, 1957 (Jakarta: Kementerian Penerangan R.I., 1957).

⁵⁰ Frederik Lambertus Bakker, *The Struggle of the Hindu Balinese Intellectuals: Developments in Modern Hindu Thinking in Independent Indonesia* (Amsterdam: VU [Vrije Universiteit] University Press, 1993), 75, 132, 169–70, 275, 305.

⁵¹ It should be noted that official recognition came only after several denied petitions. As Pitana explained, “For a religion to be recognized by the state it had to conform to the following framework: it had to be monotheistic; it had to have a unified holy book, a codified system of law for its followers, and a prophet; and its congregation had to extend beyond a single ethnic group” (Pitana, “Status Struggles,” 183).

⁵² Michel Picard, “What’s in a Name? Agama Hindu Bali in the Making,” in *Hinduism in Modern Indonesia: A Minority Religion between Local, National, and Global Interests*, ed. M. Ramstedt (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 68.

⁵³ Following the ban on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), atheism “became a sign of communism and was therefore banned. Every Indonesian had to join one of the recognized religions which, since 1958, included Hinduism and Buddhism as well as Islam, Protestantism and Roman Catholicism” (Bakker, *Struggle of the Hindu Balinese Intellectuals*, 51; cf. Rita Smith Kipp and Susan Rodgers, eds., *Indonesian Religions in Transition* [Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987], 19).

administered by a bureaucratic body that, in the case of *Agama Hindu*, was the Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia.⁵⁴ Established in 1959, and given financial support from the central government, the Parisada was charged with the task of assisting the Department of Hinduism and Buddhism at the Indonesian Ministry of Religion, and, more generally, regulating the religious activities of Balinese Hindus.⁵⁵ This regulatory activity included, among other things, the public interpretation and dissemination of “sacred texts” (*kitab suci, pustaka suci*) to underwrite the validity of a normalized and state-sanctioned form of “Hindu religion.”

Through the end of the 1980s, this bureaucratically regulated *Agama Hindu* was disseminated through a variety of institutions including the system of state education and the production and distribution of mimeographed handbooks.⁵⁶ These handbooks included Indonesian translations of, and commentaries on, the “sacred scriptures” in Sanskrit and Old Javanese, as well as manuals treating a variety of issues ranging from “marriage according to Hindu law” to the proper performance of *agama*-related ceremonies.

In addition to its use of the state educational system and various print media, the Parisada was also later involved in the production of *agama*-related radio and television programming. The importance of television in particular for the Parisada’s drive to disseminate a normalized “Hindu religion” in the later years of the New Order is reflected in the collection of some 270 such programs recorded and transcribed between 1990 and 1995 as part of a collaborative archival project run by the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies working in conjunction with the Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia (Indonesian Academy of Arts) in Denpasar, Bali.⁵⁷ Television programs were selected for inclusion in the archived collection on a systematic basis as a record of Balinese representations of theatrical and more broadly cultural and religious issues and events. As such, this collection of television recordings provides a unique body of materials for an analysis of state-sponsored representations of *Agama Hindu* in late New Order Indonesia.

⁵⁴ Both the organization and the officially recognized Hindu *agama* have undergone various changes, in name and otherwise, through the years. The present-day situation is rather complicated, following—among other things—the formal split between two factions within the Balinese division of the Parisada associated with congresses held in Campuhan and Besakih respectively (see Michel Picard, “From Agama Hindu Bali to Agama Hindu and Back [unpublished manuscript]).

⁵⁵ Bakker, *Struggle of the Hindu Balinese Intellectuals*, 287.

⁵⁶ On state schooling in Bali, see Lynette Parker, “The Creation of Indonesian Citizens in Balinese Primary Schools,” *Review of Indonesian and Malay Affairs* 26, no. 1 (1992): 42–70, and cf. L. Parker, *From Subjects to Citizens: Balinese Villagers in the Indonesian Nation-state* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003), 205–61. For an interesting account of the early days of publishing in Bali, see Christian Hooykaas, “Books Made in Bali,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 119, no. 4 (1963): 371–86.

⁵⁷ Further details on the collection are available online at www.bajra.org.

HINDU DRAMA

If the phrase *Tat Twam Asi* was cited in 1999 as “one of the most popular quotations in Bali,” it also figured quite prominently in the television programs recorded in the early 1990s.⁵⁸ Many of these programs comprise what might be described as “situation dramas,” short dramatic performances of between twenty and thirty minutes set against the backdrop of broadly fictional circumstances.⁵⁹ These performances usually incorporated one or more occasions for the delivery of “religious” advice as, for instance, on a program entitled “My Father, My Husband,” in which an older man was depicted instructing his son in terms resonant with the governor’s remarks following the bombings of 2002: “In the teachings of our religion, there is no ‘I am me’ way of thinking, but (rather) ‘I am you’, ‘you are me’, ‘I am her/him’, ‘I am all’, ‘all are me’. This is what is meant by *Tat Twam Asi*. An adherent to *Tat Twam Asi* is not going to want to offend and hurt the feelings of another person, because that also means offending and hurting one’s own feelings.”⁶⁰

Other programs in the collection are characterized by a sort of “moderated discussion,” in which a theme is identified at the outset by the host and then discussed in a talk show format by various guest speakers who, in a similar fashion, frequently invoked “the sacred scriptures” (*kitab/pustaka suci*) in support of their statements.⁶¹ When asked to comment on “Just and Civilized Humanity,” for instance, a guest speaker on a program entitled *Pancasila*⁶² explained that “an understanding of the concept of universal humanity is written in the Upaniṣadic scriptures in which we

⁵⁸ I do not wish to suggest a specific line of “transmission” between the television programs and one or other of the subsequent invocations of *Tat Twam Asi*. This figure has been articulated through various media, including presidential and gubernatorial speeches, sacred scriptures, mimeographed handbooks, school lessons and textbooks, television programs, pop songs and calendars. The list could no doubt be extended indefinitely, as could the complex of relations between its various members. To be clear: I am using the television programs as evidence of a broader series of practices aimed at articulating a coherent Hindu community.

⁵⁹ All citations of these television programs (e.g., Hin0216) are to recordings held by the Balinese and Javanese Research Archive (BAJRA). References to the BAJRA collection are underlined and made with a four-digit number indicating the transcript filename. The prefix “Hin” indicates that a particular transcript is part of the collection of Hindu-related materials. Hin0216, for instance, refers to the Hindu-related recording and transcript listed as number 0216 in the BAJRA master catalogue. An annotated catalogue of the Hindu-related programs is presented in Fox, “From Text to Television.”

⁶⁰ “Dalam ajaran agama kita, tidak ada cara berpikir ‘saya adalah saya,’ tapi ‘saya adalah kamu,’ ‘kamu adalah saya,’ ‘saya adalah dia,’ ‘saya adalah semua,’ ‘semua adalah saya.’ Inilah yang disebut Tat Twam Asi. Pengaruh Tat Twam Asi tidak akan mau menyakiti dan melukai perasaan orang lain, sebab itu berarti pula menyakiti dan melukai perasaan sendiri.” Hin0033, Mimbar Agama Hindu: Ayahku Swamiku [Hindu forum: My father, my husband], drama, Indonesian language, broadcast 1991-07-03, duration 29:00.

⁶¹ On the contrived nature of these “discussions,” see Fox, “From Text to Television,” 173f.

⁶² Hin0192, Gema rohani Hindu; Pancasila [Hindu spiritual reverberations; Pancasila], discussion, Indonesian language, broadcast 1993-12-07, duration 29:00.

meet with the teaching of *Tat Twam Asi*. You are me, I am you”—a formulation again clearly resonant with the governor’s remarks, not to mention Soekarno’s formulation some forty-five years earlier.

A more general survey of Hindu television broadcasts spanning a four-and-a-half year period between September 1990 and February 1995 shows that the phrase *Tat Twam Asi* was invoked on at least twenty separate programs—including one devoted in its entirety to “*Tat Twam Asi* in social solidarity” (*Tat Twam Asi dalam kesetiakawanan sosial*).⁶³ Without wishing to overgeneralize, a comparison of these clips with other similar programs from the same collection suggests that, while religious authority is configured as predominantly male and/or older, its addressees are often cast as women and children. This implicit paternalism is clearly evident, for instance, on a situation drama simply entitled *Tat Twam Asi*, in which an older well-dressed man advised a group of young ruffians whom he had just seen mistreating a beggar. He explained, “*Tat twam asi*, or compassion, and the feeling of social solidarity, eventually develops into an attitude of deep tolerance—tolerance among us of the same faith, or *dharma*, as well as tolerance between communities that differ in belief. We cannot declare ourselves alone to be right; but we must be able to respect the beliefs of others. Just like when others respect our beliefs.”⁶⁴

As in much of the other Hindu television programming (and, as before, with the governor), we see here the normative collapse of the position of authority within one who enunciates simultaneously to, about, and from within the community. The older man went on to admonish the boys, “If you have money, and you are willing to give that money to him, then you aren’t to consider whether we are of the same faith as the beggar or not. Just like when I said all creatures are the creation of God. So, in this life, people are obligated to assist one another mutually, without differentiating on the basis of belief, ethnicity, race and other such matters.”⁶⁵ Although invoked here as a specifically Hindu teaching, it is significant that this censure of discrimination on the basis of “belief, ethnicity, race and other such matters” exemplifies the broader state ideological configuration of

⁶³ Hin0153, *Penyegaran Rohani Hindu, Tat Twam Asi dalam Kesetiakawanan Sosial* [Hindu spiritual refreshment, *Tat Twam Asi* in social solidarity], discussion, Indonesian language, broadcast 1993-05-31, duration 29:00.

⁶⁴ “Betul sekali. Tat twam asi, atau belas kasihan, dan rasa solidaritas sosial, pada akhirnya bermuara pada sikap toleransi yang tinggi—baik toleransi diantara kita seiman, atau sedarma, maupun toleransi antara umat yang berbeda-beda keyakinan. Kita tidak bisa menyatakan diri kita benar sendiri; tetapi kita harus bisa menghargai keyakinan orang lain. Seperti halnya orang lain yang menghargai keyakinan kita.”

⁶⁵ “Kalau kamu punya uang, dan kamu rela memberikan uang itu kepada dia, maka kamu tidak boleh mempertimbangkan apakah kita seiman dengan pengemis itu atau tidak. Seperti yang saya katakan bahwa semua mahluk itu adalah ciptaan Tuhan. Jadi, didalam hidup ini, manusia itu diwajib-kan untuk saling tolong-menolong, tanpa membédkan adanya keyakinan, suku, bangsa dan sebagainya.”

“Unity in Diversity” (*Bhineka Tunggal Ika*), which is also the national motto of the Indonesian Republic.

As both Kitley and Hobart have noted,⁶⁶ television was an important instrument in the New Order’s drive to articulate the national unity of its citizens over and above—as well as by means of—their self-recognition as members of discrete and governable communities differentiated along lines of religion, ethnicity, race, and the like.⁶⁷ This internally differentiated, yet organically integrated, view of Balinese (and, by extension, Indonesian) society is evident both in the Hindu television programs as well as in the remarks from the governor. Yet, the demonstration of such regularity between New Order television and a post–New Order response to a bombing is not yet an explanation for the latter.

A TENTATIVE EXPLANATION

Here it may be relevant to note that, despite the oft-cited introspection and public ritual that comprised the most internationally visible response to the bombings of 2002,⁶⁸ recent years have also seen the rise to prominence of local Balinese militias (*pecalang*)⁶⁹ and, as indicated above, a vehement xenophobia premised on the perceived threat posed by migrant workers and others described disparagingly as “outsiders” (*orang luar*) and “newcomers” (*pendatang*) to the island.⁷⁰ The latter have been subject to a

⁶⁶ Philip Kitley, *Television, Nation and Culture in Indonesia* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000); and Mark Hobart, “Entertaining Illusions: How Indonesian Élites Imagine Reality TV Affects the Masses,” *Asian Journal of Communication* 16, no. 4 (2006): 393–410.

⁶⁷ The drive to maintain a governable unity among variously differentiated collectivities is evident, among other places, in the long-standing press policy on the basis of which “a range of topics [were] widely recognised as off limits [for public discussion], and have been dubbed with the mnemonic ‘MISS SARA’ which refers to anything deemed seditious, insinuating, sensational, speculative, or likely to antagonise ethnic, religious, racial or ‘group’ (class) tensions.” See David T. Hill, *The Press in New Order Indonesia*, Asia Paper 4 (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press in association with Asia Research Institute on Social, Political and Economic Change, 1994), 45. In line with the latter gloss, the acronym “MISS SARA” stood for the Indonesian terms *Menghasut, Insinuasi, Sensasi, Spekulasi, Suku, Agama, Ras, Aliran* (or, alternatively, *Antar-golongan*).

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Couteau, “After the Kuta Bombing,” 45f.

⁶⁹ Frederick Rawski and John MacDougall have linked the recent rise of *pecalang* to the 1998 congress of Megawati’s Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) in Denpasar (Frederick Rawski and John MacDougall, “Regional Autonomy and Indigenous Exclusivism in Bali,” *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 11 [2004]: 143–57; 152).

⁷⁰ See below for more specific references. More generally on the disjuncture between the commercially expedient fantasy of “peaceful Bali” and the various realities to which it ostensibly refers, see, e.g., Couteau, “Bali: Crise en paradis”; D. Darling, “Unity in Uniformity: Tendencies toward Militarism in Balinese Ritual life,” in *Inequality, Crisis and Social Change in Indonesia: The Muted Worlds of Bali*, ed. Thomas A. Reuter (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Michel Picard, *Bali, Cultural Tourism and Touristic Culture* (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 1996); Santikarma, “Ajeg Bali,” “Bali Erect,” and “The Model Militia”; and Suryawan, “Ajeg Bali,” and *Bali: Narasi dalam Kuasa*.

range of discriminative measures, including various forms of local taxation, extortion, and brute violence at the hands of Balinese.⁷¹ Their treatment is often explicitly justified by local officials and other public commentators through reference to *Ajeg Bali* and a more generalized call to defend Balinese tradition.

In view of these circumstances, I would provisionally argue that, when the governor described the first nightclub bombings in 2002 as “an offence to *Tat Twam Asi*,” he was invoking the ideal of interreligious “tolerance” and “social solidarity” that was espoused by the various fictional characters and guest speakers who appeared on the Hindu television programs of the early 1990s. And, similarly, it was this same catchphrase that was deployed after the second bombings in 2005. Given the prevalence of violence and other discriminative measures that had been taken against “outsiders” in the wake of the first bombings, it does not seem implausible to suggest that the flower arrangements—and their Upaniṣadic inscription—might be interpreted as a prophylactic call to peace “without differentiating on the basis of belief, ethnicity, race and other such matters.”⁷²

If this interpretation is correct, it raises a series of questions—which run directly parallel to those raised in connection with *Ajeg Bali*—regarding the conditions under which present-day circumstances might be interpreted in relation to their historical precursors. We must ask why, on two different occasions—separated by three years—elements of New Order ideology seemed to provide an appropriate response to acts of mass violence. It is by now commonplace to suggest that the post-Suharto era of “reform” (*reformasi*) has fallen short of its promise of a radical departure from the authoritarianism and corruption of the New Order. But the question, then, is how one is to evaluate the relationship between elements of that past and their subsequent reappearance on the contemporary scene. Would it be naïve to assume that *Tat Twam Asi* can be invoked without activating the broader ideological framework within which it was originally propagated?⁷³ Or is the real mark of naïveté to assume the integrity

⁷¹ See, e.g., Santikarma, “The Model Militia”; also International Crisis Group, *The Perils of Private Security in Indonesia: Guards and Militias on Bali and Lombok*, Asia Report no. 67 (2003), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?l=1&id=2353>.

⁷² In addition to promoting solidarity—or at least aiming to do so—such a generalized call to peace would have the added benefit of avoiding the potential risks entailed in a more specific call to action (David Parkin, “The Rhetoric of Responsibility: Bureaucratic Communication in a Kenyan Farming Area,” in *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society*, ed. Maurice Bloch [London: Academic Press, 1975]).

⁷³ I use the term “ideological” to indicate “those discursive forms through which a society tries to institute itself as such on the basis of closure, of the fixation of meaning, of the non-recognition of the infinite play of differences” (see Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* [London: Verso, 1990]). The ideological is thus at once the necessary and impossible condition for the constitution of the social, an idea to which I shall return in my concluding remarks.

of such frameworks through time? Why, for instance, should a phrase like *Tat Twam Asi* carry any more of its ideological baggage from the New Order than it did from ancient India? The answer to these questions rides very much on the terms in which one understands the reemergence of a given element under new circumstances. I submit that, if we are unable to account critically for the relationship between these two moments, we cannot claim to be engaged in historical inquiry in any serious sense of the term.

PART 2: MEDIA, HISTORY, SOCIETY

In the previous section, I used the example of *Tat Twam Asi* to elicit a series of questions pertaining to the relationship between moments separated in time. In this second part of the article I wish to use these questions to interrogate the current literature on *Ajeg Bali*. My aim is to show how scholars have unwittingly replicated the very model of Balinese society that they more generally set out to critique. I will argue that this is the direct result of a failure to differentiate between the various media that have given shape to their research practices—from reading the newspaper and watching television to interviewing bureaucrats and conversing with “ordinary Balinese.” The consequences for our understanding of *Ajeg Bali* will be explicated through an analysis of the prevailing tendency to adopt (a) a tripartite periodization of Balinese history and (b) a related smaller-scale framework of high-profile events and circumstances. As we shall see, the deployment of this periodization and smaller-scale framework will in turn engender (c) a slippage between three separate referents for the phrase “the Balinese.” In the sections to follow, I aim to demonstrate that the scholarly articulation of (a), (b), and (c) helps to produce an image of Balinese society parallel to the one we have already seen implicit both in the governor’s remarks and the Hindu television programming. Put another way, I wish to argue that scholars of Balinese history have offered new legitimacy to the “common sense” of an ostensibly defunct regime. As a way into the problem, I would like to begin with a few more general remarks on the current scholarship and why it might have taken the shape that it has.

CITING THE AUTHORITIES

As noted at the outset, a growing academic literature has begun to emerge around *Ajeg Bali* and the more general call to “defend tradition” in the wake of the bombings of 2002 and 2005. Scholarly consensus seems to have converged on the idea that this movement brings together key elements of an earlier model of Balinese religion, culture, and tradition that dates back to the New Order and, before that, to the Dutch colonial era. Although this interpretation is not without merit, on closer inspection it

often appears to ride as much on received wisdom as it does on primary research. Perhaps in part for this reason, the current work on *Ajeg Bali* is highly citational, drawing consistently on the same series of newspaper and magazine articles by Degung Santikarma and Ngurah Suryawan, as well as on Nyoman Darma Putra's doctoral dissertation.⁷⁴ More generally, as a body of scholarship, it also relies both explicitly and in more subtle ways on an account of Bali's history that is associated in the first instance with Adrian Vickers's *Bali: A Paradise Created* and, secondarily, with Michel Picard's *Bali: Cultural Tourism and Touristic Culture*, as well as a series of his more recent writings.⁷⁵ One reads, for instance, in the introductory paragraphs of Allen and Palermo's recent article on *Ajeg Bali*, that "Vickers (1989) devotes about a third of his groundbreaking book on the 'creation' of Bali to the idea of image making in and of Bali, not only by Europeans but also by the Balinese themselves. From colonial times through Suharto's New Order (1966–98) to post-Suharto *reformasi*, a consistent Balinese response to the 'colonization, Indonesianisation and touristification' alluded to by Picard has been the development of strategies to defend the island from so-called external 'bad influences.'"⁷⁶ Setting aside the rather curious omission of the more than two and a half decades between the end of "colonial times" and the rise of the New Order,⁷⁷ this tripartite periodization warrants closer inspection for, among other reasons,

⁷⁴ Santikarma, "Ajeg Bali," "Bali Erect," and "The Model Militia"; Suryawan, "Ajeg Bali"; Nyoman Darma Putra, "A Literary Mirror: Balinese Reflections on Modernity and Identity in the Twentieth Century" (doctoral diss., University of Queensland, 2003). Unlike other Indonesian newspaper and magazine articles that are predominantly cited as evidence of contemporary "discourse" (on which more in a moment), these three authors are generally accorded the status of interlocutors or at least fellow commentators—which is facilitated in part by the happy congruence of their perspectives with that of their European, Australian, and American readers. This aspect of their writing is likely at least in part a product of their own academic training (Degung Santikarma is a doctoral candidate at Princeton and Visiting Instructor at Haverford College in the United States; Suryawan holds an undergraduate degree in anthropology from Udayana University in Bali and has worked extensively with scholars based in Australia and the Netherlands; and Nyoman Darma Putra holds a PhD from Queensland University in Australia, and he has published articles jointly with scholars based in both New Zealand and the United Kingdom). This background is borne out in their periodized understanding of Balinese history (see below).

⁷⁵ Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created*; Michel Picard, *Bali: Cultural Tourism*, "The Discourse of Kebalian: Transcultural Constructions of Balinese Identity," in Rubinstein and Conor, *Staying Local in the Global Village*, "Agama, adat, budaya: The Dialogic Construction of Kebalian," *Dialog*, 1, no. 1 (2000): 85–124, and "What's in a Name?" cf., e.g., Couteau, "After the Kuta Bombing"; Allen and Palermo, "Ajeg Bali"; Hitchcock and Darma Putra, "Bali after the Bombs"; Creese, "Reading the Bali Post"; and MacRae and Darma Putra, "A New Theatre-State in Bali?"

⁷⁶ Allen and Palermo, "Ajeg Bali," 239.

⁷⁷ Here, it should be noted that this omission is *not* a feature of the histories presented by Vickers (*Bali: A Paradise Created*) and Picard (*Bali, Cultural Tourism and Touristic Culture*, etc.) themselves.

its widespread and largely unexamined acceptance.⁷⁸ In the following sections, I shall argue that the presuppositions underpinning this account of Balinese history are often, as here, at odds with the uses to which it is put, and that this has direct implications for our understanding of *Ajeg Bali* in relation to its precursors.⁷⁹

DISCURSIVE FORMATIONS

Through its opening lines (as cited above), the article by Allen and Palermo activates a historical narrative that subsequently provides the backdrop for a disarmingly simple argument—namely, that *Ajeg Bali* means different things to different people, a point demonstrated through translated excerpts from a series of interviews with various Balinese artists and other commentators.⁸⁰ Their account of these interviews was cast more or less consistently in terms of “discourse.” Although the critical content of this term was never addressed explicitly, it seems in each case to perform—in varying ways—what amounts to a single function.⁸¹ Namely, it appears in their analyses as the surface on which certain aspects of the world—both past and present—congeal as objects of scholarly knowledge (“Much has been written about discourses of *kebalian*”) and local Balinese commentary (“the performers invoked *ajeg* discourse quite extensively”).⁸² As such, the figure of discourse is made to link various elements on the contemporary scene with one another (e.g., “culture, religion and traditional values”), as well as with elements of the past (“Ajeg discourse is undeniably reminiscent of the New Order slogan *melestarikan, membina dan memgembangkan [sic] kebudayaan Bali*”).⁸³ Crucially, it is this series of discursive linkages that underwrites the appearance of continuity through the tripartite periodization, from “colonial times through Suharto’s New Order (1966–98) to post-Suharto *reformasi*.”

⁷⁸ In its deference to “the authorities,” one might argue that the history of Bali has been written predominantly—if not exclusively—following what R. G. Collingwood (*The Idea of History* [1946; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993]) called the method of “scissors and paste.” 257–61.

⁷⁹ A review of the current scholarship would suggest that the work of Vickers and Picard has achieved an almost talismanic quality that can perhaps be demonstrated most clearly by *omission*, as when—even in the absence of any reference to their respective books—they are both still included in the bibliography (see Hitchcock and Darma Putra, “Bali after the Bombs”).

⁸⁰ In passing it is worth noting that not a single interview with a woman is cited, the sole—and only partial—exception being a brief paragraph on Luh Ketut Suryani’s book *Perempuan Bali kini* (Denpasar: Penerbit Bali Post, 2003). It seems that, even in analysis, *Ajeg Bali* retains its androcentric tendencies.

⁸¹ The term “discourse” occurs on the following pages in Allen and Palermo, “*Ajeg Bali*”: 239, 240 (twice), 244, 248, 250 (twice), 251, 252 (4 times), 253, 254; as well as in the title of Picard “The Discourse of Kebalian.”

⁸² Allen and Palermo, “*Ajeg Bali*,” 239, 248.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 240, 252.

The question is how the excerpts quoted from the interviews—taken together as a report on antecedent dialogue—may be related to this broader historical narrative that I have suggested has its roots in the work of Vickers and Picard. I believe there is an important gap between the critical frameworks of “dialogue” and “discourse” that underpin the representation of the interviews and the historical narrative, respectively, in Allen and Palermo’s account. And I would argue that moving between—or, more precisely, linking—these two frames of reference requires a more complex procedure than their analysis would suggest. I believe the problem is ultimately one of inadequate attention to the problem of mediation. However, in order to understand why this is the case—and what implications might follow for our understanding of *Ajeg Bali* and *Tat Twam Asi*—it will be necessary to have a closer look at the presuppositions underpinning this oft-cited account of Bali’s “colonization, Indonesianisation and touristification.”

PERIODICALLY BALINESE

The division of Bali’s history into a series of more or less discrete periods is based, at least in part, on a chronological ordering of the various external powers with which the Balinese have had to contend. Picard argued, for instance, that “modern Balinese history is essentially a story of conquests—of the displacement of its decision-making centers beyond its shores and the resulting erosion of the authority of its indigenous leaders.”⁸⁴ First, it was the Dutch, then the Jakarta-based administration of the new Republic, followed by Suharto’s New Order; and we may now add the comparatively decentralized and rapidly changing era of “reform” (*reformasi*). The argument, in short, is that each of these periods was characterized by different images of Bali and the Balinese, as determined in large part by prevailing relations of economy, polity, and power (broadly, e.g., colonialism, state authoritarianism, and tourism). Through this series of displacements, the Balinese have recurrently figured as the patients of others’ agency.

If this threefold periodization—that is, “colonization, Indonesianisation and touristification”—has provided the backdrop for recognizing “irony” and large-scale shifts in power and capital,⁸⁵ there is also a smaller-scale framework that has provided recent scholarship with a series of hooks on which to hang its interpretation of the present-day situation in general,

⁸⁴ Picard, *Bali: Cultural Tourism*, 17.

⁸⁵ See, e.g., Santikarma, “Ajeg Bali”; and Couteau, “After the Kuta Bombing.” For instance, “one of the ironic results of Balinese resentment toward the repressive power exerted by Suharto’s New Order state has been Balinese claiming the right to exert that same control over their own communities” in the post-Suharto era of reform (Santikarma, “The Model Militia”). With regard to large-scale shifts of power and capital, see, e.g., the passage cited above from Couteau, “After the Kuta Bombing,” 50–51.

and the circumstances surrounding *Ajeg Bali* in particular. This smaller-scale framework takes the bombings of 2002 as its organizing point of reference; and it articulates, around that defining moment, a series of events and other elements that, taken together, are understood to comprise the recent history of Bali. These elements include: (a) various processes of national or supranational scale (e.g., Asian financial crisis, fall of the New Order); (b) more general conditions in pre-bomb Bali (e.g., the history of capital investment from Jakarta, reduced tourism arrivals following 9/11); (c) a series of specific prebomb incidents (e.g., “the Saefuddin affair,” Garuda Wisnu Kencana protests⁸⁶) that are cast in retrospect—and often teleologically—as evidence of a nascent identity movement, which would only come into its own following the bombings; (d) and, finally, the “identity movement” itself as discerned in a more recent sequence of events (e.g., the Bali Post seminar on *Menuju Strategi Ajeg Bali* [Toward a strategy for Ajeg Bali]).

As the product of analytic work, this smaller-scale framework of events and circumstances does not occur in its entirety in any single article or book. And yet, while the relationship between its various elements may differ slightly from one piece of scholarship to another, its more general relevance and coherence as an account of the past is presupposed by almost everyone writing about Bali today. That, of course, is not the same thing as to say that it somehow naturally corresponds to the world; but, rather, that this particular understanding of Balinese history has been naturalized—through repeated deployment—to such an extent as to make commenting on recent events in Bali without reference to it appear uninformed at best.

PERIODIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

It is important to recognize the implications of adopting (a) the tripartite periodization of Balinese history and (b) the smaller-scale framework of high-profile events and circumstances. Briefly put, in so doing we

⁸⁶ With regard to the former, Picard explained, “A. M. Saefuddin, a minister in Habibie’s cabinet and a presidential candidate from the Islamic United Development Party (PPP) . . . declared that Megawati was not a suitable presidential candidate because she worshipped Hindu gods. This was an allusion to the fact that Megawati—whose grandmother was Balinese—was seen praying in Hindu temples whenever she visited Bali” (Picard, “From Kebalian to Ajeg Bali,” 109). Similarly, Couteau described the Garuda Wisnu Kencana project as involving “a gigantic reproduction of Wisnu astride the mythical bird Garuda. Not only did this project actually intend to use the image of a Balinese god for commercial purposes, but it also was to be financed with outside capital. This gave rise to lengthy debates in the written press, on the notion of ‘Balinese culture’ and the appropriateness of turning religious symbols into tourist attractions (Warren 1995).” Couteau, “After the Kuta Bombing,” 54; Carol Warren, “The Garuda Wisnu Kencana Monument Debate: Environment, Culture and the Discourses of Nationalism in Late New Order Bali,” in *Kulturen und Raum; Theoretische Ansätze und empirische Kulturforschung in Indonesien*, ed. W. Benno and W. Samuel (Zürich: Rüegger, 1995), 377–90.

implicitly concede that all other possible interpretations of the world—for example, as it is lived in and understood by servants, day laborers, parking attendants, prostitutes, and small-scale farmers—are ultimately transparent to, and so may be subsumed within, the terms of the two-fold framework comprised of (a) and (b).⁸⁷ My argument is that this subsumption can only appear critically viable when a blind eye is turned to the conditions under which it is performed. In other words, once naturalized, (a) the tripartite periodization and (b) the smaller-scale framework of events and circumstances must then be taken as the broader “context” in which all other ways of understanding and being in the world are (gerundively) to be interpreted. It is my contention that this orientation privileges an account of Bali’s recent past that is organized around an (albeit highly visible) elite minority and their relationship to both capital and a changing state apparatus.⁸⁸ With this elite minority as its exominated agent,⁸⁹ such representations of Balinese society begin to look rather similar to what Barthes famously termed bourgeois *mythologie*.⁹⁰ Put a little more bluntly, this account would implicate ostensibly critical scholarship in the hegemonic project it has taken as its object of study.

Looking more closely at the tripartite periodization of Balinese history and the smaller-scale framework of events and circumstances, we may note that another key component of these representations is their unreflective invocation of “the Balinese” (or, analogously, “the population”) as the subject of historiographic predication. For example, in the article cited by Allen and Palermo, Picard traced the emergence and transformation of the various elements that would come to constitute a self-conscious Balinese identity that was cast in terms of *Kebalian* or “Balinese-ness.” Conceived as an

⁸⁷ To be clear, my point is not that servants, day laborers et al. have a privileged knowledge of the world as it really is. But, rather, my aim here is to highlight the possibility of there being irreducible disjunctions between different forms of life.

⁸⁸ I believe the prevalence of this tendency in the current scholarship reflects, at least in part, the manner in which the research has been conducted, and with whom. A review of the “acknowledgments” section for recent publications is illuminating insofar as it reveals a widespread scholarly reliance on elite informants.

⁸⁹ Following Roland Barthes, cultural and media studies analysts have used the term “exnomination” to address the way in which a particularist view pretends to universality by presenting itself as “objective fact,” rather than as a position attributable to a *named* interest (e.g., “the bourgeoisie”). Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and trans. A. Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972).

⁹⁰ I am indebted to Mark Hobart for this observation. It should be emphasized that the agent of this articulation remains somewhat ambiguous. In this connection one might argue, for instance, that *Ajeg Bali* comprises an attempt, on the part of the Bali Post Media Group, to hegemonize a wide range of groups themselves constituted through various interests and what Laclau has called “democratic demands” (Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* [New York: Verso, 2005]). To pursue this line of inquiry further, one would need to differentiate between various kinds of “elites” including, e.g., traditional status groups, civil servants and the military, non-Balinese entrepreneurs, investors and expatriates, as well as—and perhaps especially—the emerging Balinese “middle class.”

“indivisible unity of *agama* (religion), *adat* (tradition) and *budaya* (culture),” this understanding of what it meant to be Balinese had its origins in the early colonial encounter with the Dutch. However, as Picard argued, this articulation of religion, tradition, and culture would take on new and more widespread importance in response to the rise of “cultural tourism” after the 1960s. This included, among other things, an increasingly self-conscious attitude among Balinese with respect to their culture as “something that is at once precious and perishable, which they ought to preserve as well as promote.”⁹¹ He went on to explain that, in response to this cultural imperative, “the Balinese not only are required to be Balinese, but furthermore, they must be worthy representatives of *Kebalian*: they must become signs of themselves.”⁹² Given its importance for subsequent representations of Bali’s recent history, it is worth taking a closer look at the figure of “the Balinese” as it appears in Picard’s account.

SIGNIFICANTLY BALINESE

The notion of becoming a sign for oneself introduces the possibility of a disjuncture between, on the one hand, the lived realities of those people living in Bali, and, on the other, their representation as subjects of “Balineseness.” By way of analogy, one is reminded of Suryawan’s confused villager who, despite being Balinese, seemed uncertain as to how he should go about instantiating the ideal of *Ajeg Bali*. In this connection, Picard has been careful to distance himself from an evaluation of the correspondence between “sign” and object, emphasizing that, although “the Balinese tend to agree” on the definition of *kebalian*, “my purpose is not to assess the veracity of such a claim, but to elucidate how the Balinese have come to formulate their identity in these very terms.”⁹³ While, generally speaking, I am in agreement with Picard’s efforts to historicize—and thereby denaturalize—the terms in which Balinese are represented on the contemporary scene, I believe his theoretical commitments require careful explication for, among other reasons, their broader significance for what it might mean to write historically about religion in Bali (or anywhere else for that matter).

In the first instance, it may be noted that Picard framed his analysis of *Kebalian* explicitly in terms of “a transcultural discourse,” a critical frame of reference that he described as follows:

A discourse is both a body of cultural assumptions about reality and a set of social practices that establish and maintain that reality, according to the authority of its authors. Describing *Kebalian* as a discourse stresses its constructed, historical

⁹¹ Picard, “*Agama, adat, budaya*: The Dialogic Construction of *Kebalian*,” 85–86.

⁹² Ibid., 86.

⁹³ Ibid.

constitution, while qualifying it as transcultural points to its dialogic, interactive character. While the authors of the discourse of *Kebalian* are Balinese, their discourse is shaped and structured by categories and premises that were imposed on them by outside agencies. In other words, the Balinese are not in a position to choose the terms of their discourse, but they have appropriated and reinterpreted them according to their own cultural values and political concerns.⁹⁴

This is a complex paragraph warranting careful examination. The object of study is cast in terms of “discourse.” And, as with Allen and Palermo, the figure of discourse—as a critical category—articulates a series of potentially incommensurate frames of reference. Evidence of a crucial disjunction between them may be seen in Picard’s slippage between at least three referents for the phrase “the Balinese.” As I shall argue in the section to follow, it is in the movement between these referents, and their respective conditions of intelligibility, that his analysis undercuts its own critical project while, at the same time, appearing—by a sort of discursive *trompe l’oeil*—to link a history of representations to the ostensibly more real lives of living, breathing people.⁹⁵

THOSE SLIPPERY BALINESE

Reviewing the paragraph cited above, we have in the first instance what I would describe as the properly discursive “Balinese”—that is, “the Balinese” as an element figuring in the “transcultural discourse” of *Kebalian*.⁹⁶ An account of the emergence and transformation of this discursive figure is presented in Picard’s analysis through his citation, comparison, and more general scrutiny of excerpts gleaned from pamphlets, magazines, and other archival media. Given his contention that the Balinese “must”—and therefore conceivably might not—“be worthy representatives of *Kebalian*,” the relationship between this representation and its ostensible object emerges from his analysis as contingent. So, in this first sense of the phrase, we cannot necessarily map “the Balinese” onto people who live on the island of Bali.

Second, we have “the Balinese” who “are not in a position to choose the terms of their discourse.” These apparently extra-discursive “Balinese” emerge from this account as the “authors”—not the objects—of discursive representation, while freedom (and so, to a certain extent, agency) is cast in terms of choice. In this connection, Picard went on to explain,

When I talk about “the Balinese” here, I refer in fact to the intellectuals, that is, to those among the Balinese who formulate, propagate and explain the contem-

⁹⁴ Ibid., 86–87.

⁹⁵ In passing, it may be noted that this is directly analogous to Allen and Palermo’s movement between “discourse” and “dialogue.”

⁹⁶ It should be noted, however, that, on this account, these “discourses” seem to occur across “cultures” which are themselves (circularly?) constituted by those very “discourses.”

porary issues and emergent ideas to the rest of the population. Although it would be mistaken to assume that they share the same views or concerns, one finds nonetheless that the members of this educated elite function as mediators between two worlds: traditional and modern, rural and urban, local and global, Balinese and Indonesian. As such, they constitute an “intelligentsia” [straddling the two worlds of] the ethnic group from which they originate, and the wider (colonial or national) collectivity in which they participate.⁹⁷

While “the intelligentsia” surface from this account in the position to enunciate (“formulate, propagate and explain”), we have the concurrent introduction of a third referent—namely, “the Balinese” as “the rest of the population.” It would appear that the latter is meant to refer to the ostensibly ordinary men, women, and children who—for all their lack of “shared views or concerns”—land up on the receiving end of the elite’s formulations, propagations, and explanations of what it means to be Balinese, Indonesian, modern, Hindu, or whatever.

Before going any further I should emphasize that I believe Picard’s analysis brings a wealth of new insight to Balinese historiography by uncovering and synthesizing evidence of these representations. However, I would argue that, at a more fundamental level, his opposed pair of an intelligentsia and its addressees is the product of precisely the elite view of the world that constitutes his object of study. In other words, on his account, the category of “the Balinese” (as “population”) is naturalized through a predominantly archival mode of research and analysis in which privilege is accorded to the educated (read: writing) classes, and the world as they have imagined it.

Setting aside the notoriously slippery category of “population,”⁹⁸ there is no good reason to assume commensurability between the archived world of the intelligentsia and the lives of those whom they presumed to address and represent. While an awareness of this disjuncture is clearly evident in Picard’s analysis, I believe its potential radicality and consequences are more or less consistently overlooked. In this connection, it is important to bear in mind that one of the primary advantages of a poststructuralist argument from *discours* is its avoidance of the Cartesian subject. On its own, Picard’s account of the discursive figure of “the Balinese” could quite easily be read in such broadly poststructuralist terms. However, with his invocation of the intelligentsia as its “authors,” we are thrown back to a subject-centered account of human action, with the naturalization of “population” betraying its Eurocentric and elitist underpinnings.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁹⁸ See, e.g., Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction* (1976; New York: Vintage Books, 1990), and *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977–78* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); also, Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

With “discourse” mediating between these three “Balinese” frames of reference—the intelligentsia, the population, and discursive representation—we are faced with a rather curious configuration of agency, in which the Balinese (“intelligentsia”) are using the Balinese (as a “discursive construct”) to disarticulate the Balinese (i.e., “the rest of the population”).⁹⁹ And this parallels very neatly the normative collapse of authority into one—such as the Governor or any of the many televised spokesmen for *Agama Hindu*—who enunciates simultaneously to, about and from within the community.

The problem is that the ostensible referent for each of these three members of our signifying trinity is underwritten by a different set of presuppositions regarding the world and the conditions under which it can be known. In other words, “the intelligentsia,” “the population,” and their discursive representation are each a different kind of thing, accessible to knowledge through different modes of mediation. The first, cast as “authors,” are speaking subjects; the second are their textually imagined addressees; while the third is an idealized representation that presumes (albeit untenably) to encompass them both.¹⁰⁰ It is only by papering over the disjunctures between these different kinds of subject—and their respective worlds—that Picard and those who follow him manage to hold such a disparate series of elements together within the same argument.¹⁰¹ Given what must be concealed on this approach, their deployment of “discourse” makes for a rather skimpy fig leaf. As a strategy for governance, this articulation of “the Balinese” with its attendant condensation of authority is perhaps not without its advantages. But, as a critical account of Balinese history, it is problematic. Such an approach may allow one to comment authoritatively on *Ajeg Bali*, but not without first replicating one of its most basic tenets—namely, a model of Balinese society as articulated from above.

PART 3: ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF BEING “THE BALINESE”

It would appear that both scholarly and popular accounts of Bali’s recent history—from *Kebalian* and *Agama Hindu* to *Tat Twam Asi* and *Ajeg*

⁹⁹ By “disarticulation” I mean that curious form of representation through which “the Balinese” were rendered discursively visible while, at the same time, the men, women, and children living in Bali were relieved of the ability to comment authoritatively on their own lives and histories. This is the paradoxical link between articulation and silence.

¹⁰⁰ It is pertinent to note that this series of referents replicates the prevailing model of communication in cultural and media studies, which articulates the three moments of production, consumption, and the media text.

¹⁰¹ I wish to emphasize that I have focused primarily on Picard’s work because, as he is undoubtedly one of the most careful and eloquent commentators on the history in question, certain elements of his approach have for good reason come to figure prominently in the work of others.

Bali—tend to proceed from the same basic set of presuppositions regarding Balinese economy, polity, and society. This is exemplified, in the first instance, by the tripartite periodization of “colonization, Indonesianisation and touristification” and second, by the smaller-scale framework of high-profile events and circumstances. I have suggested that, taken together, these two interpretive schemata have contributed to naturalizing an account of Balinese history that is organized around an elite minority and its relationship both to capital and a changing state apparatus. I have argued that Picard’s slippage between three referents for the phrase “the Balinese” is complicit with this elitist representation of Balinese history insofar as it is directly analogous to the configuration of religious authority found both in Hindu television programming and in the governor’s response to the bombings of 2002. While the latter might be dismissed as little more than the standard rumblings of state ideology, I would argue the same tendencies seem a rather ill fit for scholarly inquiry.

One might object that the approach I have taken amounts to yet another strategy for relieving Balinese of agency. And, in one very narrow sense, I believe I am compelled to concede the point. By calling attention to the history of its emergence—and thereby implying its contingency—I have argued against the possibility of instantiating an ostensibly timeless ideal of what it is to be Balinese. In this regard, my argument puts me at odds with Suryawan’s headman and his call “to defend tradition and the values of Balinese-ness that have nowadays begun to fade away in Bali.” To be clear, my aim here is not to argue against the continued importance of Bali’s plastic and performing arts, classical literatures and language, or any of the many other indices of what is now felt to be under threat of loss. But rather, given the political complexities of life in contemporary Bali, my purpose is to argue for an approach that would attempt to take seriously the conditions under which people living in Bali might (or might not) be seen as agents in the representation and transformation of the worlds in which they live.

It was with this aim in mind that I began with the passage from Suryawan’s article. We have seen that the headman offered one kind of answer to the villager’s question—namely, “What, sir, is this *Ajeg Bali*?”—and I think we may now be in a position to offer an answer of a different kind. I noted in passing that a critical redescription of prevailing scholarly understandings of *Ajeg Bali* would line up rather neatly with Laclau and Mouffe’s account of articulation.¹⁰² And here I believe the full implications of this redescription may be more readily appreciable. On this approach, the “discourse” on *Ajeg Bali* would be dispersed into the various practices through which it has been articulated in the attempt to constitute a unified social totality over and against the various antagonisms

¹⁰² Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

that characterize the economic, political, and more broadly social life of those living on the island. These antagonisms have arisen specifically out of the failure of earlier articulations to deliver on their utopian promise of an enduring and internally coherent Balinese society.¹⁰³ So, the drive to establish a Bali that is *Ajeg* may be understood as an attempt to suture the disjunctions that have emerged following the failure of the New Order to constitute a perduring society of people “obligated to assist one another mutually, without differentiating on the basis of belief, ethnicity, race and other such matters.” It is the partial, but incomplete, success of the latter articulation that accounts for the reappearance of certain of its elements (e.g., *Tat Twam Asi*) on the contemporary scene. It is its partial, but incomplete, failure that explains the emergence of new antagonisms (e.g., between the interests of ethnic Balinese and “non-Balinese Indonesians who would steal their jobs”) and so the necessity for rearticulation (e.g., through *Ajeg Bali* as appropriating and linking elements such as “*agama Hindu* and *desa pakraman*”).

To argue that *Ajeg Bali* entails an attempt to neutralize antagonisms that emerged out of the articulatory failures of the New Order might at first appear to replicate the very periodization I have criticized in the work of others. In other words, given my own analysis, one might conceivably object that the chronology allowing me to recognize *Ajeg Bali* as replicating elements of an articulation that was associated with the New Order is itself determined by that very articulation, and it thereby loses all explanatory power. I believe this objection holds, however, only if my account can be shown to engender the same epistemic slippage I have found in the work of both Picard and of Allen and Palermo. To put it more concretely: I think it is correct to say that the figure of “the Balinese” has emerged historically—as the outcome of repeated articulation—through an account of the past organized around the tripartite periodization and smaller-scale framework of events and circumstances that I have addressed above. We run into trouble only when we try to map this figure and its chronology onto an ostensibly more “real” world that is understood in opposition to “discourse.”

However, I have already implied that it is precisely such a mapping—or at least something akin to it—that is required if our account of *Ajeg Bali* is to be of any critical significance. If our work is to be anything beyond a sterile description of television programs and newspaper articles, it must address the question of how these representations are—or

¹⁰³ This would refer primarily to those antagonisms linked to the “cultural tourism” and crony capitalism associated with Suharto’s New Order regime. As Couteau noted, “Ironically, such was the prestige of cultural tourism that, for 30 years, the Balinese kept on welcoming with local dances and flower offerings, the very officials and (often crony) investors who were signing contracts for the purchase of hundreds of hectares of prime investment Balinese land” (“After the Kuta Bombing,” 53).

can be—related to the lives of people living in Bali. Unfortunately, such crucial links are generally left unexplained in the current scholarship.

For Allen and Palermo, for example, the disjunction between discourse and dialogue was elided without qualification. It was simply assumed—without further comment—that the objects of discourse and the objects invoked in dialogue with various Balinese men comprised mutually commensurable elements of a unitary and continuous world. In that regard, their account might more accurately be described as part of the discourse on *Ajeg Bali*, as opposed to a commentary on it. With Picard, things were a bit more complicated. He quite explicitly claimed not to comment on the relationship between the discursive figure of “Balineseness” and the world of living, breathing Balinese bodies. (Here it may be recalled that, in assessing statements regarding the nature of *Kebalian*, Picard asserted “my purpose is not to assess the veracity of such a claim.”) However, on closer inspection, he was untrue to his caveat, as evidenced by his slippage between three referents for the phrase “the Balinese.” Despite statements to the contrary, in his movement between these three frames of reference, Picard implicitly made precisely the linkage that he explicitly eschewed.

SIGNIFYING NOTHING

I believe the imprecision of “the Balinese” as a category in Picard’s analysis arises not so much as a shortcoming of his work in particular, but rather as a symptom of a more fundamental problem—namely, the impossibility of constituting such a complex social entity tout court. The articulation of any such totality—for example, society, culture, the people—will run into a parallel set of difficulties. At issue is not merely the quantitative challenge of accurately reflecting at once the truth of each element of the totality (i.e., the fantasy of sociological positivism). Rather, the problem inheres in the very grounds on which such totalities are constituted in the first place.

I have argued that prevailing uses of the term “discourse” in the scholarship on *Ajeg Bali* obscured some rather serious theoretical problems. However, to clarify the issue of “the Balinese,” I now wish to reintroduce this term in a closely circumscribed sense—namely, with reference to the structured complex of elements resulting from an articulatory practice. Here, I am again following Laclau and Mouffe: “We will call *articulation* any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call *discourse*. The differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse, we will call *moments*. By contrast we will call *element* any difference that is not discursively articulated.”¹⁰⁴ Approached in these terms, the identity

¹⁰⁴ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 105.

of elements such as *desa pakraman* and *agama Hindu* would be seen to undergo a certain modification through articulation in terms of *Ajeg Bali*. This modification may be explained by the fact that the identity (i.e., intelligibility) of each element is determined by its differential relation to all other positions within that structured totality. However, as Laclau explained elsewhere in this connection,

We know, from Saussure, that language (and by extension, all signifying systems) is a system of differences, that linguistic identities—values—are purely relational and that, as a result, the totality of language is involved in each single act of signification. Now, in that case, it is clear that the totality is essentially required—if the differences did not constitute a system, no signification at all would be possible. The problem, however, is that the very possibility of signification is the system, and the very possibility of the system is the possibility of its limits. We can say, with Hegel, that to think of the limits of something is the same as thinking of what is beyond those limits. But if what we are talking about are the limits of a *signifying system*, it is clear that those limits cannot be themselves signified, but have to *show themselves as the interruption or breakdown* of the process of signification.¹⁰⁵

I would like to suggest that, with Picard's invocation of "the Balinese," we are dealing with the consequences of precisely such an "*interruption* or *breakdown* in the process of signification." And this breakdown is the product of a certain ambivalence in identity that arises from the constitutive interplay of difference and equivalence.

We have seen that the identity of a given element is determined by its differential relation to the other elements brought together in the attempt to constitute a discursive system. For instance, the significance of *Tat Twam Asi* was determined by its specific relation to "mutual assistance," "social solidarity," and so forth. The fixity of these differential positions—and so the possibility of signification—requires the closure of the system through the production of an exclusionary limit. Here, we might look to the discursively prominent, if implausible, position allotted to "newcomers" and "outsiders," who are repeatedly cast as the primary threat to Balinese livelihood. In relation to this limit, the differential relations constituting *Ajeg Bali* are themselves rendered equivalent to one another. In other words, *agama Hindu* and *desa pakraman* (as well as the subject positions constituted therein) are rendered interchangeable in their common opposition to that which poses a threat of negation—for example, Santikarma's "non-Balinese Indonesians who would steal their jobs, undermine their culture or even blow up their guests."

¹⁰⁵ Ernesto Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," in his *Emancipation(s)* (New York and London: Verso, 1996), 37.

Herein lies the above-cited ambivalence that emerges out of the movement between difference and equivalence. On the one hand, the particular identity of a given element is established differentially in relation to all other elements brought together in the attempt to constitute a system. On the other, their collective or universal identity is determined by an equivalence established in relation to the exclusion that would ideally ground the system as such. It is precisely the latter equivalence—negatively determined by exclusion—that constitutes the ground on which collective identities (such as *Ajeg Bali*) are founded. As such, their shared identity (i.e., equivalence in opposition to a constitutive outside) consists precisely in that which they are not. The attempt to express this constitutive lack in positive terms gives rise to what Laclau called an “empty signifier.”¹⁰⁶ This is a position within the discursive system that emerges from the paradoxically necessary yet impossible gesture of closure required to provide the fixity of differential positions.

It was in a closely related connection that Hobart remarked on the need for an account of mediation to link this logic of articulation to the practices that, taken together, make up the lives of those living in Bali.¹⁰⁷ I suggested that these issues have direct implications for the historical study of religions and that closer attention to media would potentially highlight a series of theoretical problems that had been largely overlooked in this connection. As a way into the problem, I asked how we might go about accounting for the figures of *Tat Twam Asi* and *Ajeg Bali* in relation to earlier configurations of Balinese tradition. At stake, among other things, was the relationship between tradition and transformation that has long been a central concern for scholars of religion. To argue that such-and-such a religious formation bears a specific relation to the past—or to another place—is to beg the question of what underpins that relationship. So, by way of conclusion, I would suggest that interpreting either *Tat Twam Asi* or *Ajeg Bali* through recourse to earlier moments in Balinese history would require specifying at least four sets of relations. These would include relations (i) between the elements in question as they had previously been articulated under the New Order;¹⁰⁸ (ii) between specific elements of that New Order articulation and their apparent rearticulation under new circumstances; (iii) between our account of these respective articulations and the other practices that constitute the lives of those whom they ostensibly addressed and represented; and, finally, (iv) between these three sets

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Hobart, “The End of the World News.”

¹⁰⁸ I take it that the intelligibility of an “element” prior to its articulation is always achieved through a retroactive procedure that calls into being what it purports to express. Here one might compare Butler on gendered identities or Althusser on the interpellation of “the individual” as a “subject”—it is *always already* the case.

of relations as they have been brought together within my own analysis. We have seen that an element at any given moment is only analytically intelligible through an account of (i). Arguing for the replication of that element at a subsequent moment would require an explicit account of (ii). Relating either of these moments to the lives of those notionally subjected to these articulations would entail an account of (iii). Finally, insofar as a critical approach engenders taking stock of its own conditions of possibility, we would also need an account of (iv).

I hasten to add that there is no self-evident reason to assume commensurability between these four sets of relations. For instance, my analysis of Picard's work was devoted to uncovering a series of disjunctions between the first three (i–iii). It became evident that "the Balinese" comprised a different kind of thing at each step.¹⁰⁹ I argued that the slippage between them was premised on ignoring key differences between the practices through which each of these figures became intelligible—from reading the newspaper and watching television to interviewing bureaucrats and speaking with "ordinary Balinese." It was Picard himself who brought these frames of reference together—with their respective modes of mediation—in order to produce an account of Bali's recent history. However, in so doing, he did not address with any specificity the conditions under which this series of linkages was being made (iv). In neglecting to account explicitly for his own articulation, he naturalized that of the state—as elicited, for example, through his reading of the archival documents and his interviews with civil servants and others. Under these circumstances, one might argue that his Balinese authors and interlocutors were implicitly accorded a position of authority parallel to that of the governor—but also the televised proponents of *Agama Hindu*—who could at once speak to, about, and from within the community. By presenting a critique of Picard's historiography, I do not wish to suggest that a seamless narrative bridging these various frames of reference would have been desirable—or even possible. For, as Saussure already recognized, the "difference in nature between chronological succession and simultaneous coexistence, between facts affecting parts and facts affecting the whole, makes it impossible to include both as subject matter of one and the same science."¹¹⁰ Yet, this is precisely what the history of religions has generally set out to do—namely, to link up representations that are separated in space and time, as moments in the transformation of one or another tradition. Not unlike Indonesian state television, this is an articulatory practice—and ineluctably so.

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¹⁰⁹ With respect to the fourth case, Picard's "Balinese" differed again from each of the previous three.

¹¹⁰ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. H. Harris (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court Classics, 1983), 86 (124).