

Postscript

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In the late 1970s a strange thing happened in the Physics Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. A small group of graduate students had abandoned their research on more conventional topics in favor of investigating physical events and processes of a different kind. While the rest of their cohort busied themselves with the ‘normal science’ of the day – superconductivity, low temperature physics and the like – these young men set to work analyzing the movement of roulette wheels, river whorls and washing machines. Among their better-known publications was a meticulously observed study of ‘the dripping faucet’ (Shaw 1984). Why would such a promising group of young physicists have turned their attention to matters so prosaic? How, some had asked, would the scientific community benefit from the study of a leaky tap? As it turned out, these were the early stirrings of what came to be known as ‘chaos theory’. But, at the time, ‘chaos’ was not recognized as a legitimate field of enquiry. There were no experts to consult, nor was there funding available for instruments and experimentation. So they had to make do with what was ready to hand. Examining ordinary objects in the world around them, their aim was to reveal order and determination behind seemingly disorderly and contingent processes – from the minute vibrations of a speedometer needle to the epochal transformations of global climate. What, one may wonder, does all this have to do with script and writing in Bali? Setting aside for the moment their desire to wrest order from chaos, an initial point to be taken is that the physicists’ narrowly focused empirical research (leaky faucets) was conducted in service to a more broadly conceived theoretical end (complex nonlinear causality, or ‘chaos’). In drawing our volume to a close I would like to reflect briefly on whether we can say the same for our own study of Balinese letters, and why this might matter.

Pointed Questions

In at least one sense there can be little doubt as to our positive contribution. To put it crudely, we know ‘more’ about Balinese letters than we did before we compiled the volume. But, as Balinese might be inclined to ask, *napi gunan ipun?* What is the point? What are the more general questions to which our particular research has provided answers – or, at the very least, some new

evidence? As Hornbacher's introduction suggests, the study of Balinese *aksara* speaks eloquently to much that is of broader concern for the human sciences. Drawing our attention to the role of writing in the development of anthropological theory, she notes some of the more important ways in which Balinese uses of script have differed from their broadly Euro-American counterparts. It is in relation to such disjunctures that both ethnography and history often find their wider purpose. Putting the matter too simply, we might say the study of other ways of life not only reveals the parochial nature of many of our received conceptions, but it may also offer new ways of approaching questions that have so far vexed our own tradition of enquiry. Some recent examples might include Mahmood's (2005) study of the women's piety movement in Cairo; Salomon and Niño-Murcia's (2011) ethnography of writing in Peru; or Wiener's (2015a) analysis of Balinese practices of seeing and visuality. In each case, the fine-grained study of non-European thought afforded new insight into broader issues of critical theory. But these insights came not by way of 'applying theory' to something wholly external; nor was advantage gained, by a sort of inversion, through the appropriation of 'native wisdom'. Rather, new headway – however modest – was made on previously intractable problems through a reflexive encounter not unlike what Hobart (2015) has described as 'double discursivity'. That is, as he put it, a recognition of 'the co-existence of two assemblages of presuppositions – those of the analyst or current academic practice and those of the people under investigation – that are not only distinct but at the least partly incommensurate' (2015: 1). This, as I understand it, is premised on an attentiveness to the foundational character of *questioning*, as an aspect of critical enquiry prior to any more nuanced separation of the natural and human sciences. In Collingwoodian fashion, one's observations are implicitly understood as answers to questions, which are themselves based on presuppositions regarding the world and the conditions under which it may be known. To engage in ethnographic or historical research, then, is to open one's line of questioning – and so one's presuppositions – to the challenges posed by another way of life and the assumptions that order its various forms of enquiry and self-understanding. So what were the questions driving our authors' enquiries into Balinese letters? And to what extent did they enable critical reflection on our underlying presuppositions?

Lines of Enquiry: From *Pripih* and *Pupuh* to the Life of Letters

To begin with our final chapter, Hinzler presents a carefully detailed account of the script-related instruments (e.g., *pripih*) employed in rites of establishment

for new buildings and shrines in the westerly regency of Tabanan. Her enumerative style of exposition is reminiscent of her mentor and colleague, the late Professor Hooykaas, who, with characteristic humility, often described his textual reconstructions as preparatory to the proper study of a given practice or institution (see, e.g., 1973b). Central to this approach was a recognition of regional variation in the performance of rites, but also, and as importantly, in the manuscripts that describe them. Hinzler's chapter exemplifies this attention to the specificity of local practice, leaving one to ponder the question of its wider significance. Her analysis frequently relies on terms such as 'purification' and 'symbol' where Balinese would employ a more nuanced terminology often directly contrary to such ready 'equivalents'. This disjuncture is hardly lost on Hinzler, whose knowledge of day-to-day life in Bali is likely unparalleled among foreign experts. However, one gets the sense that the niceties of terminological precision – and its theoretical implications – are beside the point for her approach, which is guided by an ideal of factual description.

Creese's study of recent *kidung interaktif* radio call-in programs is more explicit in formulating its theoretical concerns. These it frames with reference to Ong's notion of 'religious literacy' (e.g., 1982), which was initially popularized for students of Balinese letters by Zurbuchen's (1987) oft-cited *The Language of the Balinese Shadow Theatre*, and further developed by Rubinstein's (2000) study of *kakawin* composition. Creese's analysis is driven by the question of how changes in media technology have affected Balinese participation in traditional forms of literacy. Contrary to expectation, she finds that radio and television have provided new forums for the declamation and discussion of traditional literature. Having raised the important question of how new media are related to social transformation, her analysis proceeds on the basis of what might best be described as a commonsense (Gramsci 1971) social ontology – as evidenced at a most superficial level in her opposition between 'radio community' and 'full community'. This sociological foundationalism finds support in Ong's theory of religious literacy, with its commitment to an ideal of moral community grounded in the self-presence of the spoken word – which cannot help but to see technological change as profanation. Creese clearly does not wish to go this way, but has difficulty extricating herself from a problematic terminology. A more radical possibility might have been to allow critical attention to the problem of media to unsettle conventional understandings of what it means to constitute a 'community'. Indeed there is much in Creese's chapter to support such an approach. As suggested by her title, both the ephemeral nature of the medium, and the rise of new books printed in Roman script, have contributed to the physical disappearance of written *aksara*. But, interestingly, her radio transcripts show that the efficacious manipulation of inscribed

syllables – described by Hunter as ‘orthographic mysticism’ (2007; also, this volume) – is among the topics frequently discussed ‘on air’. With this mass mediated rearticulation of esoteric wisdom, one wonders to what extent new forms of community are inflected by older forms, and how these developments might help us to re-theorize problems of media and historical precedent – not least those pertaining to ‘the text’. On which, Creese notes that the continued importance of sensibilities regarding the efficacy of letters has been accompanied by a shift in genre – with the more demotic language and meters (*pupuh*) of *gaguritan* displacing the esoteric *tutur* that historically served as a privileged medium for such reflections.

Addressing the *tutur* literature more directly, we have in Acri’s chapter a philological reconstruction of the lists of *akṣara* employed in a procedure he glosses as the ‘Imposition of the Syllabary’ (*mātrkā/svaravyañjana-nyāsa*). Carefully distilling textual order from documentary chaos, Acri’s study is most proximately directed to exposing the derivation of ‘the old Javano-Balinese sources’ from earlier South Asian models. His analysis of textual ‘transmission’, ‘localization’ and ‘corruption’ of these lists is implicitly in service to a broader argument for the relationship between Southeast Asian textual forms and what he describes, following Pollock (1996, 2006), as a translocal ‘Sanskrit Cosmopolis’. Presented as a case in point, his meticulous detective work aims to illustrate the indebtedness of Balinese religion to a common South Asian ‘tantric fund’. Here Acri is clearly breaking new ground insofar as his work examines a vast and woefully understudied body of literature. Yet, while novel in point of application, his more general approach – and its underlying assumptions regarding the nature of ‘religion’ and its textual ‘transmission’ – remain faithful to a colonial-era sensibility long criticized for its philosophical and political infelicities. The literature on ‘religion’ alone is voluminous (see, e.g., J.Z. Smith 1982, Asad 1993, McCutcheon 1997, Masuzawa 2005), to say nothing of critical categories so fraught as ‘scripture’ (see, e.g., Leipoldt & Morenz 1953, W.C. Smith 1993), ‘canon’ (see, e.g., Assmann & Assmann 1987, Collins 1990) and ‘text’ itself (e.g., Palmer 1968, Barthes 1977, Young 1981, Ormiston & Schrift 1990).¹ I have discussed these issues with reference to Bali at some length elsewhere (2003, 2006), and do not wish to belabor the point.²

¹ To be clear, the problem is not simply that of *which* texts one chooses to examine (e.g., *tutur* as opposed to *kakawin*). It is rather the very idea of ‘the text’ itself, and the weak theory of practice underpinning it.

² Schopen (1991) offers an informative discussion of related problems in the study of South Asian Buddhism.

Hunter's contribution is also concerned with the 'orthographic mysticism' of Javano-Balinese tradition. But he intends to take a somewhat different line on the relationship between contemporary Balinese practices and their South Asian precursors. Developing ideas initially laid out in an earlier article for a volume edited by La Porta and Shulman (2007), Hunter's central question is why the Javano-Balinese tradition came to 'valorize' writing as particularly efficacious. Did this develop out of a process already underway on the Indian subcontinent? Or was it, alternatively, the product of interaction between Indic and Austronesian 'modes of social and intellectual life'? This line of questioning leads Hunter to East Asia, and to Kūkai's reflections on the relationship between the 'a' vowel (*a-kāra*) and the insubstantial nature of the world and its constituents. Pointing to links between the textual traditions of East and Southeast Asia, he argues that Kūkai's ideas about language are only intelligible in light of a graphic sensibility already implicit in early Indic linguistic science. As he notes in passing, this is potentially comparable to the Derridean revelation of *différance* – and an underlying 'arche-writing' – at work deep within western phonocentrism. This fascinating account exemplifies Hunter's unique combination of philosophical acumen and appreciation for the subtleties of the Javano-Balinese literary tradition. By way of a closing ethnographic vignette, he suggests that his broader point is not that Balinese practices are derivative of their South Asian precursors, nor are the procedures employed by local healers less authentic than those of their brahmanical betters. Yet, Hunter's admiration for 'vernacular' Balinese tradition notwithstanding, at times one wonders whether he protests too much. My complaint, if I have one, is not that Hunter is dismissive of local practice – *that* he certainly is not – but instead that his positive valuation of Balinese tradition might appear a little less strained were his analysis not to begin from a model of history and precedent organized around the idea of textual transmission – a topic to which I shall return briefly at the end.

If our contributions from Hinzler, Creese, Acri and Hunter focus squarely on historical uses of, and ideas about, Balinese letters, the remaining three chapters (Hornbacher, Wiener, Fox) couple their analyses with reflections on the broader implications that follow for a range of issues in the human sciences. We find Hornbacher, for example, employs a combination of textual analysis and ethnography to explore the relationship between competing articulations of religion, writing and knowledge/power. Developing themes introduced in her opening essay (this volume), she draws on Assmann's historical critique of scripture in the Abrahamic 'book religions' to argue against the uncritical export of modern European conceptions – of, e.g., text, canon, meaning – for the interpretation of other peoples' script-related practices. If modern

European ideals seem a good fit for the sensibilities that inform the 'Hindu religion' (*Agama Hindu*) promulgated by the Indonesian state, she suggests the same cannot be said for older Balinese 'ritual' practices – which are both still very much in evidence, and rooted in sharply contrasting understandings of materiality, efficacy and life.

Wiener, in turn, is interested in questions of ontology, animacy and agency, asking how we are to respond to statements that suggest, for example, that Saraswati 'sits' in Balinese letters, or that inscriptions 'protect, enliven or add capacities' to people and other objects. Pointing to some of the difficulties that come with our received ideas about 'culture' and 'belief', she contrasts Balinese with broadly western 'graphic ideologies' and 'techniques' to argue, as she puts it, that 'Balinese do reality differently'. Much as Acri's argument aims to further the cause of Pollock's *Sanskrit Cosmopolis*, Wiener puts her ethnography in service to Latour's Actor Network Theory – and, more specifically, to the 'ontological politics' of recognizing non-human forms of agency, and non-western conceptions of animacy.³ If I have understood Wiener's contribution correctly, my own chapter aims to do similar work, albeit in a different idiom. Grounded in an ethnography of writing in a southerly ward, my aim was to explore the ways in which Balinese conceptions of 'life' are embodied, cultivated and contested through rival styles of practical reasoning. The point of departure was a recognition of the difficulties engendered in broadly Euro-American conceptions of 'life', which loom large in a range of debates on issues of wider import.

Thinking to Some Purpose

Having reviewed their differing foci and lines of enquiry, it is instructive to note that our authors agree at least superficially on a number of key points. Each has shown, for instance, that Balinese employ letters in ways that differ from their modern Euro-American counterparts. It is similarly agreed that the qualities and capacities attributed to Balinese letters are linked historically to precedents on the South Asian subcontinent. And, moreover, there seems to be a general consensus that the use of Balinese letters is changing, as older sensibilities are transformed by new institutions and practices. So, on the face of it, we all seem to be talking about the same thing. But if we ask what is meant by 'the use of letters', and why it matters, some rather important tensions begin

³ As she seems to suggest in passing, such framing of alternatives (e.g., 'non-human') replicates in opposition what it hopes to transcend. Laclau (1996) addressed the formal aspect of this problem in relation to the idea of 'emancipation'.

to emerge – both between, and within, our respective contributions. It is here that Hobart's sense of double-discursivity becomes especially important.

By way of example let us consider the idea of 'the text', a phrase that occurs at least once in each of our chapters. Recalling those aspiring physicists from Santa Cruz, the figure of 'the text' often seems rather like arguments for causation – more easily presupposed than demonstrated.⁴ Yet, even were we to set aside ongoing debates in hermeneutics and critical theory (see, e.g., Vattimo 1997, Culler 2007, Eagleton 2008), our accounts of textuality are neither consistent nor unambiguous. In our more conventional moments, 'the text' appears to be a source of information or evidence – providing access to such things as lists of *akṣara* (Acri), orthographic speculations (Hunter, Hornbacher) and instructions for ceremonial procedure (Hinzler, Fox). Taken here as a repository of information, 'the text' is made to transcend the medium through which we encounter its 'content'. In those passages where we find this usage, it usually does not matter whether we are examining the palm-leaf manuscript, its transcription in the HKS collection, or a printed critical edition.⁵ What we are seeking – at least on these occasions – is the trace of a prior moment, which is at once substantialized and dematerialized – and, for all that, eminently recoverable.⁶ Not insignificantly, this most familiar sense of 'the text' is also democratic in application, as readily deployed in reference to the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* as it is to the works of Foucault, Plato or Hooykaas. That is not to say it is without its ambiguities.

As Hunter's remarks on the Śivagrha charter would suggest, the dematerialized sensibility at work in the foregoing usage conflicts with the ideals that informed the composition of many of the 'texts' in question. It is *a fortiori* at odds with the ways these inscribed objects are generally handled on the contemporary Balinese scene – as, e.g., with *lontar* and *prasasti* that are referred to, and addressed, with honorific titles (see, e.g., Hauser-Schäublin 2012), and as often attributed with volition and efficacy. The chapters collected in this

4 While on the subject of matters more easily presupposed than demonstrated, we might also wish to reflect on the pervasive notion that the world is itself inherently ordered and determinate. On my reading, the latter is presupposed absolutely by chaos theorists and scholars of Balinese culture alike, while it is anything but self-evident that Balinese themselves share this article of faith. (For suggestive examples of 'failed' cosmogony, see Hooykaas 1974; for more general treatment, see H. Geertz 1994.) For now it is perhaps best that we leave as an open question the implications of this disjunction.

5 The point is not that one might differentiate between these three 'forms' of 'the text', but rather that the 'material' medium is taken to be a substrate of no consequence in itself.

6 I have addressed these issues at length elsewhere (2003, 2005), with specific reference to scholarly representations of 'Balinese religion'.

volume offer too many additional examples to cite. It is this disjuncture between broadly western and Balinese sensibilities – and the transformative power of the former – that has inspired both Rubinstein (2000: 225) and Creese (2009a: 545) to lament the impact of western-style scholarship on traditional Balinese literary and legal practices respectively. Yet the point is not so much to choose between these two sets of sensibilities, as if such a thing were possible. As I have tried to argue in my own contribution to the volume, they are both at work simultaneously in what are often one and the same practice. This would seem to argue in favor of ‘the text’ appearing not so much an ‘object’, as a contested point of reference twisting and bending in a tug-of-war between what Wiener described as rival ontologies.

So what is the upshot of all this? Reflecting back on our chapters, it seems there are at least two attitudes we might adopt with respect to this tug-of-war. We can carry on resolutely, intent on wresting order from chaos, confident in the adequacy of our received terminology and the world it presupposes. Alternatively, we might employ our painstakingly detailed studies of Balinese letters – among other things – to engage in a rather different style of enquiry – one that endeavors to take seriously other ways of knowing and being in the world. This would entail asking how Balinese uses of script and writing challenge commonsense notions of historical precedent and textual transmission, but also such fundamental concepts as agency, matter and even life itself. This would not be with an eye to knowledge for its own sake, nor even necessarily to countering the subjugation of ‘Other’ knowledges. Rather, the aim would be to further critical enquiry toward resolving questions – of a general and constructive, or ‘political’ nature – that have so far proved vexing. Or alternatively, when warranted, it might prompt the articulation of new questions. If detailed ethnographic and historical research were not ultimately inspired by such broader purpose, it is hard to imagine why one would go to all the trouble.

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The Materiality and Efficacy of Balinese Letters

Situating Scriptural Practices

Edited by

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B R I L L

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Cover illustration: A script bearing ritual instrument called ulantaga, which is affixed to several of the holy water vessels employed in the performance of cremation rites. PHOTO BY RICHARD FOX.

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