

The Meaning of Life, or How to Do Things with Letters

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Scholars of Balinese letters have often noted in passing that the characters, or *aksara*, employed to write Balinese texts are taken to be ‘alive’ by those who use them (see, e.g., Zurbuchen 1987: 56; Rubinstein 2000: 194; Hunter 2007: 283–4). This is arguably one of the more remarkable ways in which Balinese understandings of writing differ from their Euro-american counterparts. But what does it mean to say that Balinese letters are alive? It is all too clear that our received accounts of ‘life’ (Thacker 2010), and of ‘writing’ (Derrida 1974, 1981), engender considerable ambiguity. So, might attention to Balinese practices help us to think more clearly about the use of letters, and perhaps even what it means to be ‘alive’? My contribution to our volume offers some provisional reflections on the question. Its central contention is that contemporary uses of Balinese script are caught between two conflicting conceptions of writing, each allied to a different articulation of agency, life and matter. If having considered these examples our perplexity remains unresolved, the difficulties we encounter along the way should at the very least give us pause to reconsider prevailing approaches to Balinese practices of writing, both ‘textual’ and otherwise.

On Life

Let us begin with life. The idea of *life* is as slippery as it is consequential. Decisions regarding things so important as our care for the unborn and severely disabled entail judgments as to when life begins, ends and is ‘worth living’. Yet even cursory reflection on limit cases – say, the ‘life’ of viruses, or the idea of ‘brain death’ – would suggest our conventional terminology is rather too blunt an instrument for the questions we have allowed it to define. Looking to the historical and ethnographic record, we find others have had quite different ideas about life and what can – and ought to – be done with it. For the ancient Ionians, for example, Nature (φύσις) was itself alive, as evidenced by its movement and capacity for growth and self-transformation. Whereas, by contrast,

the modern world is one in which Nature has been reduced to a 'standing reserve' (*Bestand*), as the later Heidegger so bitterly put it, ready and waiting for exploitation by humanity in its 'technological' quest for progress. Certain trends to the contrary notwithstanding, it seems even our desires for environmental 'preservation' are guided by this logic of utility, and the graded order of life that it presupposes. Given the entrenchment of these ideas, is it even possible to think otherwise than exploitation? Or is the very idea of an 'alternative' mode of thought always already a standing reserve, which, rather like Luke Skywalker in his struggle with the Dark Side, becomes ever more thoroughly coopted the harder we fight? It is with an eye to these and related issues that I propose we examine the various linkages between life and writing in contemporary Bali.

A Note on Terms

When it comes to 'life' the key Balinese words are *urip* and *idup*. As one might expect, we find the most elaborate treatment in van der Tuuk's *Kawi-Balinesesch-Nederlandsch Woordenboek* (KBNW; 1897–1912). Consonant with both the later lexicography (e.g., Barber 1979, Kersten 1984, Warna 1990) and present-day Balinese usage, the KBNW described *urip* as the 'high' (*hoog*) or refined form of *idup*, for which 'life' or 'to live' (*leven*) is offered as a simple equivalent. Under each term – both *urip* and *idup* – is provided a series of cognates in other regional dialects, together with numerous examples of usage. These include words derived directly from the root form (e.g., *ngurip*, *humurip*, *murip* as 'bringing to life' [*in het leven brengen*]), as well as phrases that make use of the root and its derivatives (e.g., *toja pangurip-urip* as a kind of life-giving water [*het levend makend water*]). As in the KBNW more generally, examples are drawn both from literature (e.g., the Tantri stories) and colloquial speech (e.g., an exclamation made following earthquakes). Yet, despite these numerous examples, the KBNW gave no clear indication that the use of these terms might be anything other than equivalent to Dutch, or more broadly European, ideas about 'life'.

This would perhaps pose less of a problem were it not for the fact that Balinese attribute 'life' – that is, *urip* or *idup* – to things that most modern Europeans and Americans would consider 'dead matter'.¹ For example, as

¹ I have had no little difficulty in trying to find a phrase in colloquial Balinese that approximates to the broadly western notion of 'dead matter'. To my amusement, and that of my Balinese consultants, a mechanical rendering of the phrase 'dead matter' – as *lakar mati*, – is more

Howe noted in an early essay on Balinese architecture, ‘all buildings are considered to be «alive». All temples, houses, meeting places, shops, offices, factories and indeed all important constructions, whether permanent or temporary, are «brought to life»’ (1983: 139).² But it is not just buildings that are said to be alive, or to *maurip*. On enquiring one finds that – among other things – many ritual instruments (B. *upakara*), heirlooms (B./I. *pusaka*), both stone and copperplate inscriptions (B./I. *prasasti*), palm-leaf manuscripts (B. *lontar*) and collectivities – such as the village (B. *désa*) and local ward (B. *banjar*) – are also possessed of, or characterized by, ‘life’.³ So, what does it mean to be alive in Bali? I would like to suggest that closer attention to the use of *aksara*, the written characters of the Balinese alphabet, offers a particularly helpful avenue toward answering this question. What I wish to propose in general terms is that we approach ‘life’ as that which ‘living things’ are said to do. To put it another way, I aim to specify what it means to say that letters are alive – or *maurip* – by asking in what ways letters act in the world.⁴ It will be in reflecting on the answer to this question that we may gain some insight, both into the sense in attributing life to other ostensibly ‘inanimate’ things (such as houses, heirlooms and funeral biers), but also how these animating sensibilities are transformed through their relationship with different, and often incongruent ways of articulating agency, life and matter.

readily understood to mean ‘will die’. (*Lakar* is the common term used for the stuff of which something is made; but it is also used to indicate a simple future tense, as in *Tyang lakar madaar*, or ‘I am going to eat’.) It is perhaps telling that the national language of Indonesian, the linguistic register associated with economic development and modernization, has a more readily available equivalent to ‘dead matter’ in the phrase *barang mati*, an ‘inanimate object’.

- 2 The idea of the ‘living house’ is by no means unique to Bali. Of Indonesia more generally Waterson noted that ‘houses are regarded in many societies of the archipelago as having a vitality of their own, interdependent with the vitality of their occupants’ (2009 [1990]: 116).
- 3 I have indicated by parenthetical note, wherever possible, the terminology in use locally, and have specified the linguistic register – usually Indonesian (I.), Balinese (B.) or Kawi (K.). There is obviously a great deal of overlap between these registers, and so my designations have generally aimed to privilege local understandings of these terms, and the ideals with which they are associated. I have also tried to note where local usage departs significantly from current scholarly convention.
- 4 Given my subtitle’s allusion to J.L. Austin, it is worth highlighting the disjuncture between, on the one hand, the figure of agency in his formulation of speech act theory – where one ‘does things with words’ – and, on the other, the sorts of agency we see at work in the ‘uses and acts of *aksara*’, where the inscribed letters are often attributed with the capacity to transform the world in their own right. One might see in the latter a certain parallel to the Latourian notion of ‘actants’, on which see footnote 37; and cf. Wiener, this volume.

Batan Nangka

These reflections are based primarily on research conducted over a period of some six months in a southern Balinese ward (B. *banjar*) that, for present purposes, I shall simply call Batan Nangka. This is one of seven wards that make up the traditional village (*désa pakraman*) of Pateluan, itself also a pseudonym. The ward comprises 108 family households (B. *kuren*; I. *keluarga*) living in 71 houseyards (B. *pakarangan*), with a total reported population of around 480. In matters of marriage and inheritance Batan Nangka is very generally similar to other southerly Balinese wards as described in the anthropological literature (see, e.g., Geertz and Geertz 1975, Hobart 1979; cp. Korn 1932).

The methods employed in conducting this research were those generally associated with ‘participant observation’, which included informal conversation, studying texts and transcripts, helping to prepare for temple festivals, and both producing and discussing video recordings of local events; but it additionally meant playing cards, taking trips to the market, fishing and watching football – that is, the pursuits of day-to-day ‘life’ in a small, semi-rural community. A formal survey was also conducted, documenting the use of Balinese script in each of the 71 houseyards that make up the ward.⁵ Although most members of the community had some – at least limited – facility with Balinese script, with but rare exception the use of inscribed ritual instruments (B. *upakara*) required expert assistance. Enlisting this assistance often drew on networks extending far beyond Batan Nangka and the wider Pateluan area. Those consulted included *inter alia* priests of various kinds (B. *padanda*, *sengguhu*, *pamangku*), healers,⁶ architectural experts⁷ and offerings specialists (B.

5 The survey was carried out with the help of a Balinese collaborator, whom I have elsewhere (2011) called Putu Subrata, and with whom I have often worked in the past. One or other of us would visit a given houseyard, usually in the midmorning, with a camera and a set of questions, which would then form the basis for an informal interview.

6 In Batan Nangka and its environs traditional healers are most commonly addressed as ‘Jero Mangku’, and referred to elliptically as *orang pintar* (‘clever person’, or perhaps ‘one in the know’). As Mark Hobart suggested in personal communication, this is likely a gloss on the Balinese term *wikan*, or *duweg*, which may imply familiarity with intangible beings and forces that can be employed to ends benevolent or otherwise. Although commonly used in the scholarly literature, the term *balian* is locally considered derogatory, perhaps on par with using the English term *quack* in reference to a doctor. Obviously this is not the case everywhere.

7 The residents of Batan Nangka go to a wide range of experts for architectural consultation – including, e.g., *padanda*, *rsi bhujangga*, *mangku masceti*, *mangku mayun* and various types of what they tend simply to call *orang pintar* (see previous note). On the elusive character of ‘the traditional Balinese architect’, or *undagi*, see MacRae and Parker 2002.

tukang banten). The aim of the survey was to allow expert knowledge to emerge directly out of enquiry in the community, and thereby avoid the otherwise arbitrary privileging of one expert account over another. If the houseyard survey itself afforded a local perspective on script-related expertise, working subsequently with the priests and other specialists employed in Batan Nangka was meant to offer an expert perspective on local practice.

Doing Things with Letters

Enquiring into the uses of Balinese letters, or *aksara*, in Batan Nangka, I found there to be considerable variation in opinion – both among expert consultants, and between them and their clients. But there was also a great deal of regularity, which I would attribute – at least in part – to the sedimentation of these uses of script and writing in wider-reaching practices of social organization and collective labor. I had suggested that we approach the meaning of life through an account of what living things do, and that Balinese letters, or *aksara*, might offer an especially helpful way forward. So what is it that these *aksara* do? To summarize perhaps too briefly, in Batan Nangka Balinese letters are seen to (1) represent cultural identity; (2) embody and transmit knowledge (= efficacy); (3) purify; (4) animate and enable; (5) render things usable and so nameable; (6) protect; (7) attack; (8) turn on their user; and both (9) incur and pay debts. In many cases these forms of agency were explicitly attributed, as for instance in explanations proffered for the use of an inscribed amulet; other times the associations were left implicit, as with ornamental uses of Balinese script exemplifying the ‘traditional’ character of a wedding or cremation, and so the Hindu-Balinese (as opposed to Muslim-Javanese) ‘identity’ of its participants – on which more in a moment.

It must also be emphasized that these nine *uses* and *acts of aksara* do not hang together naturally as elements of a unified ‘scriptural culture’; nor do they individually comprise the collective representations of an organically integrated ‘literary community’. Rather, I found these *uses* and *acts* to be variously articulated, through practices that would at times incorporate incongruous ideals of agency, community and the common good. Accordingly, I would like to consider each of these uses and acts in turn, with special reference to the circumstances in which they took place, and the ways they were related one to another.

I *Transcending Letters*

We might start with the three uses of *aksara* most closely aligned with the state bureaucratic articulation of ‘Hindu Religion’ (I. *Agama Hindu*) as a universalizing monotheism grounded in ‘sacred scripture’ (I. *kitab suci*; see Fox 2011; and Hornbacher, this volume). Initially promulgated through programs for national development, this state-sponsored form of Hinduism has been subsequently redeployed in support of a particularist identity politics – the latter most conspicuously under the aegis of *Ajeng Bali* (see, e.g., Santikarma 2003, Picard 2008, Fox 2010), but also in more dispersed, and less deliberately organized efforts to ‘defend Balinese tradition’.

1 Aksara Represent Cultural Identity

On teeshirts, bumper stickers and storefronts, Balinese letters figure as a badge of authenticity and guarantor of continuity with an idealized vision of the island’s Hindu history. This graphic assertion of cultural identity is pitted against a perceived encroachment of Islamic sensibilities – thought to be led by the Javanese, but increasingly national in scope. Here *aksara* stand opposed to Arabic script in a series that pits pork against goat meat; Balinese *pakaian adat* against the *jilbab* and *kopiah*; both *pasantian* reading and the *Tri-Sandhya mantra* against the Call to Prayer (I. *azan*); and the neo-Sanskritic greeting, *Om Swastyastu*, against the traditional Arab greeting, *Assalamalaikum*. During wedding celebrations, for instance, it is not unusual to find *Om Swastyastu* emblazoned in Balinese script on a brightly colored styrofoam sign suspended over the front gates of the houseyard hosting the ceremony. Similar signs may be found at the entrance to gas stations, restaurants and shopping malls, as well as on banners displayed prominently during major temple festivals. It is in this way that *aksara* have come to exemplify the very idea of ‘tradition’ (I. *tradisi*).

As an exemplification of tradition the reading and writing of *aksara* are taught in school and cultivated through competitions (I. *lomba*), poetry clubs (B. *pasantian*), extra-curricular programs (B. *pasraman*) and art exhibitions (I. *paméran*). These events are often covered in both the print and electronic media as expressions of local genius, and as efforts toward the protection (I. *perlindungan*) and preservation (I. *pelestarian*) of cultural heritage.⁸ The

8 As Creese noted, ‘In the 1990s, specific legislative measures were introduced [at the regional level] to support the maintenance and development of Balinese language, most notably the establishment of the Language, Script and Literature Development Board (*Badan Pembina Bahasa, Aksara dan Sastra Bali*) in 1995 and the subsequent campaign to include Balinese names for all public signs on the island’ (2009b: 221; see, e.g., Perda 3/1992).

idea that ‘Balinese language, letters and literature’ (I. *bahasa, aksara dan sastra Bali*) are under threat of loss has gained a certain prominence of late in connection with the public debate over the 2013 National Curriculum, in which class hours for instruction in regional languages (I. *bahasa daérah*) – such as Balinese – were scheduled for reduction, in favor of expanding coursework in science, mathematics and the national language of Indonesian (see Fox 2012).⁹ From late 2012 through the early months of 2013, university students and professors came together with local politicians and community leaders to protest implementation of the new regulations. Here, as on the styrofoam signs and bumper stickers, the power of script was seen to lie in its ability to point beyond itself to an ideal of cultural identity (I. *identitas, jati diri*) commensurate with the state bureaucratic model of national Unity in Diversity (K. *Bhinnéka Tunggal Ika*). As we shall see, this articulation of Balinese letters – and their efficacy – entails a transformation of older ideals of script and writing, which linked *aksara* to particularities of matter, place and person.

2 Aksara Embody and Transmit Knowledge (= Efficacy)

Balinese letters are also seen to mediate the transfer of traditional knowledge through palm-leaf manuscripts (B. *lontar, ental*), inscriptions (B./I. *prasasti*) and printed books (I. *buku*). In so doing they appear to link two frames of reference that are not entirely commensurate – on the one hand, a generally modern understanding of representation and textual transmission; on the other, an older set of ideals and sensibilities centered on power and efficacy.

In the first instance, the written word is widely taken to comprise a form of documentation (I. *dokumentasi*), providing access to information (I. *informasi*) pertaining to religion (I. *agama*), culture (I. *budaya*) and history (I. *sejarah*). Efforts to preserve the textual record are channeled through initiatives such as the Cultural Documentation Centre (*Pusat Dokumentasi Kebudayaan*, or *Pusdok*), which has very generally aimed to pick up where earlier Dutch programs left off. But the documentary ideal is also evident at a more popular level in the use of printed books containing metrical compositions, such as *kakawin*, *gaguritan* and *kidung*.¹⁰ To be sure, the recitation of this traditional literature (I. *kesusastraan*) is procedurally important – that is, as one of the ‘five songs’ or

9 These concerns were not unprecedented, as evidenced, e.g., by a series of articles published in the Bali Post in 1986 under the name Nirta (see Sumarta 2001).

10 Many of these books are photocopied locally, with their original Kawi text on the left page and a gloss in (comparatively) vernacular Balinese facing on the right. When they are brought out for reading, these books are stacked on a low table alongside microphones, the requisite offerings and a bookstand to support the text being sung.

'sounds' (B. *pancagita*) essential for the completion of major rites.¹¹ But, as cultural documents, these books and their contents are also understood to provide a window onto life in 'former times' (I. *jaman dulu*) – envisaged as a mélange of high Indic culture and Balinese bucolics.

In addition to these printed books, at least 11 of Batan Nangka's 71 houseyards possess one or more *lontar*, which are looked after with varying degrees of care. These are generally valued as a form of inheritance (B. *tetamaan*, *tetamian*; I. *warisan*), though – with but one or two notable exceptions – they are not known to be read.¹² Although the manuscripts are regularly presented with offerings on the holiday of *Odalan Saraswati*, their owners are often reticent to handle – let alone open – them, for fear of upsetting the forces that potentially reside in such 'powerful' (B. *tenget*; I. *keramat*) objects.

If the use of Balinese letters in ceremonial contexts appears nowadays to pull in the direction of heritage and cultural identity, the prevailing attitude of caution in handling manuscripts suggests there is also another, seemingly older force at play. Here knowledge (I. *ilmu*; B. *wruh*, *kaweruh*) is less a form of abstract 'information', and more a kind of power, or potency (B. *kasaktén*). But it is also – at least sometimes – a substance; and this substance is drawn to (B. *arad*), and may become concentrated in, the figure of Balinese letters, and so the objects on which they are inscribed. In both rites of passage and initiation, one inscribes the body – and especially the tongue – in order to effect a transfer of this efficacious substance (see Hunter and Acri, this volume).¹³ Healing and restoring the body and its faculties, then, may be similarly effected by inscribing the appropriate combination of letters and images – physically or otherwise – on the afflicted organ (see below). The crucial point is that – on this understanding – the 'knowledge' embodied in letters not only *is* power, but it is *primarily* a form of power. Put another way, letters transfer knowledge, but

11 The act of reading publicly – singing and then glossing in the vernacular – is also taken to be a 'traditional' activity, and so an expression of Balinese Hindu identity (as above). This is clearly evident on *Dharma Gita* and related programs on both radio and television (see, e.g., Creese, this volume; Darma Putra and Creese 2012; cp. Fox 2011).

12 For example, in one houseyard in Batan Nangka there is said to be a *lontar* inscribed in letters so tiny that it is impossible for most to read. Those who are able to do so are believed to gain special powers, such as the ability to fly.

13 Literary precedents for such writing on the tongue include the tale of Anak Ubuh (K 1759; "Selèpang lajah tjainé, nira radjaha men'. Sesoebanné soeod meradjah lantas I Oeboeh nikaanga moelih." On which, see J. Hooykaas 1959: 178–9; cp. Hooykaas-van Leeuwen Boomkamp No 38; also see Becker's oft-cited discussion of a Balinese drawing associated with the story of Ari Dharma (1995: 137–81).

this *transfer of knowledge* is itself a subset of a more fundamental, and inclusive, *transfer of efficacy*.

3 Aksara Purify, but...

The use of *aksara* is also frequently associated with the idea of purity. This comes most visibly by way of a series of procedures organized around the loosely Sanskritic trope of *suci*. In very general terms, this ideal is cultivated through the removal of – or counteraction against – those ostensibly ‘polluted’ states (B. *leteh*, *sebel*, *cuntaka*) that are seen to result from contact with death, disease and various forms of disintegration (e.g., corporeal, social, political).¹⁴

We find this ideal of purity linked, for instance, to the configurations of *aksara* inscribed on ritual instruments (B. *upakara*), such as the *belakas pangentas* – a heavy cleaver used to cut open the layers of cloth and palm-fiber matting that encase a corpse prior to its cremation.¹⁵ The link between writing and purity appears more explicit with the *banten suci*, a composite ‘offering’ that incorporates – among other things – the *jajan sara(s)wati*,¹⁶ a small rice-flour cake bearing the written *Ongkara* syllable (see Figure 1). Employed during cremations and temple anniversaries, this *banten suci* is commonly understood to assist in purifying (B. *nyuciang*; I. *menyucikan*) the location of the rite and those involved in performing it.

Aksara may also be linked less directly to the ideal of purity through their appearance on the *ulap-ulap* – the script-bearing cloth amulet affixed to new buildings and other structures during a sequence of rites often simply referred to as *mlaspas* (see Hinzler, this volume). When asked directly as to the purpose (B. *tetujon*) in performing these rites, those I consulted – both commoners and gentry, laypersons and priests – would usually begin by saying they are directed to purification, and that the script-bearing *ulap-ulap* is in some way implicated in this process. It was here, and in related contexts, that I most frequently

14 I have said ‘*ostensibly* polluted’ on account of my growing sense that the language of ‘pollution and purity’ (e.g., *sebel* and *suci*) overwrites a quite different set of sensibilities that, despite having been displaced, is still very much at work in shaping Balinese practices (Fox 2015: 46–50).

15 There appears to be a blurring of categories here. On the one hand, the knife must remain ‘pure’ (B. *sukla*), in the sense that it is not used to cut anything other than the materials encasing a corpse – this can be its only use (B. *guna*). On the other, it is considered a ‘pure’ (B./I. *suci*) knife, in a broader sense something like ‘sacred’ (I. *sakral*). I suspect the latter association is at least in part derived from the state bureaucratic conception of Hinduism.

16 I have placed the term *offering* in ‘inverted commas’ because, despite its being the most common English gloss for the Balinese term *banten*, not all *banten* are meant to be ‘offered’ (see Fox 2015).



FIGURE 2.1 *Banten Suci offering (left) with detail of a freshly made Ongkara-bearing Jajan Sara(s)wati (right).*

encountered the neologism, *hurup suci*, or ‘pure letters’. Yet a closer look at the rites of *mlaspas* themselves may give reason to question not only this specific example, but also the more general association of writing with purity. To appreciate the wider significance of this point requires a brief digression.

As a first step we may note the prevalence of synecdoche in Balinese habits of naming and reference. For instance, when men gather to prepare meat and spices for a coming ceremony, this is commonly called ‘chopping’, or *mébat* (I. *mencincang*), even though the act of chopping is but one of several tasks carried out at the time. (Here one might compare any number of English phrases, such as ‘having a barbecue’ or ‘going for a drink’.) In a similar fashion, the *mlaspas* comprises but one of several procedures carried out in the series of rites popularly known by that name. In Batan Nangka this series is understood to include, in addition to the *mlaspas* proper, at least two further rites or procedures called *makuh* and *ngambé*.¹⁷

If the term *makuh* suggests a strengthening of the structure (from *bakuh*, meaning ‘strong’ or ‘sturdy’), the *mlaspas* proper involves a separation (B. *malasang*, from *palas*) and rejoining (B. *masang*, from *pasang*) of various elements. This is often described as removing (B. *ngelus*) what is ‘bad’, or even

¹⁷ A more elaborate account of these rites is given in Howe’s previously cited essay (1983); although the general pattern he describes is familiar, things today are done somewhat differently in Batan Nangka.

‘ugly’ (B. *jelé*), from what is ‘good’ (B. *luung*), and so correct (B. *patut*) and fitting (B./I. *cocok*) for the structure in question. As a removal of what is ‘bad’, one can see how this *mlaspas* might be construed as a ‘purification’. Yet it is crucial to note that the inscribed amulet – or *ulap-ulap* – is not actually part of the *mlaspas* rite itself, in the narrow sense. Rather, the script-bearing *ulap-ulap* is affixed during one of the other procedures within the series, known as *ngambé* – which might be glossed as ‘to summon’, or ‘welcome’. This lines up neatly with the name for the amulet itself, the *ulap-ulap*, a term which suggests a ‘calling in’ or ‘beckoning’ (B. *ngulapin*, also from *ulap*). And, indeed, there appears to be a sort of energy, or vitality, that is ‘called in’ (B. *ulapin*) to the building through the medium of the script-bearing *ulap-ulap*. It is my working conjecture that the written letters themselves channel that energy, and provide it with a seat (B. *palinggih*), or place of concentration – an issue to which I shall return in just a moment. But, if this were the case, why all the talk of purity?

In my conversations with Balinese – both in Batan Nangka and elsewhere – the invocation of purity was usually accompanied by a shift in language from Balinese into Indonesian. When I realized this was happening I asked one of my older, and better-educated consultants why he thought the shift in register was so common. He explained (in Indonesian) that, when speaking Indonesian, one is inclined to provide clear answers that are easily received (I. *diterima*) and understood (I. *dimengerti*). Such explanations (I. *pengertian*) are concise (I. *singkat*) and help to ‘close the discussion’ (I. *menutup diskusi*). Whereas, by contrast, conversation in Balinese tends to be more detailed (I. *mendetail*), and often somewhat ambiguous (I. *saru*), requiring further discussion and specification. Here it seems the Indonesian language facilitates a crucial substitution. One can speak specifically (e.g., about God, the remembrance of ancestors, purity, spiritual balance and harmony, personal salvation and the like), without having to refer with any specificity to the sort of ambivalently powerful beings and forces at play – such as those activated in the use of script and other forms of writing. This is not to suggest that the trope of *suci* is irrelevant to Balinese handling of *aksara*, but rather that the ideals and sensibilities it embodies may not always be quite what they appear (see Fox 2015).

II *Being Written: Materializing and Localizing Power*

Notwithstanding a degree of ambiguity in the ideals of ‘knowledge’ and ‘purity’, our first three acts and uses of Balinese script predominantly embody a representational ideal of writing. By contrast, the remaining six are directly oriented to bringing about change in the world, and to actualizing goods of a more imminent nature.

4 Aksara Animate and Enable

In the first of these latter uses we find *aksara* deployed to animate and so enable such things as bodily organs, ritual instruments, houseyard structures and shrines; but they also may be brought to life in their own right.¹⁸ At a most fundamental level, writing is animated (B. *idupang*) by affixing (B. *masang*) consonants and vowel elements together to form pronounceable syllables. Although the written characters themselves may be seen as inherently powerful, the life of letters is said to be closely – and even causally – tied to the breath (B. *angkih*) that passes through the mouth and nose to produce the spoken word (B. *raos*). In this regard writing is curiously analogous to both houses and human bodies – which are similarly construed as composite entities assembled by affixing (B. *masang*) elements together in a manner specific to their function (I. *fungsi*) or use (B./I. *guna*). The life of a bamboo hut (B. *kubu*), for example, is in part the product of rejoining elements that had previously been configured differently, and so enjoyed a different sort of life – namely, that of the bamboo plant from which its posts and beams were cut. (It is for this reason that, strictly speaking, the *mlaspas* complex is said to bring about a ‘re-animation’ {*ngidupang mawali*}; see above.) Along similar lines, the composite nature of human beings is perhaps most readily apparent in ideas about the body as being composed of disparate parts that are liable to disintegrate, and to go their own way, in the absence of trained attention. This may be found both in the disciplined movements associated with dance (cf. Hobart 2007:122), as well as in Balinese demonology, where body parts are seen to roam about on their own (see Hooykaas 1980, Lovric 1987; cp. Addams 1964).

In this respect both human bodies and buildings are construed as jointed (B. *mabuku*) structures whose life is generated and maintained by the fluid movement of wind (B./I. *angin*), water (B. *yéh*) and vitality (B. *bayu*) through their junctures, channels and apertures – which themselves must be kept clear and free of obstruction.¹⁹ Without wishing to draw the analogy too neatly, there appears to be a similar set of relations at play in the emergence of life through the purposeful and ordered linkage of consonants and vowels. Yet some of the most powerful arrangements of letters are those that, on the face

18 In my experience Balinese do not take it for granted that such rites of animation always work – as evidenced, e.g., by the rites of ‘testing’ (B. *ngeréh*) performed for newly constructed, or recently repaired, *rangda* and *barong* figures – themselves the material embodiment of beings said to rule (interestingly, also B. *ngeréh*) over a particular locale.

19 The term *embet* – ‘bunded up’ or ‘constipated’ – is used both in the case of bodies and architecture. Additional terms of interest in this connection include *bengke*, *seret*, *ngambet* and *seket*.

of it, appear unpronounceable. In Batan Nangka these are generally – and somewhat indiscriminately – called *tastra* or *sastra*, and sometimes *modré*.²⁰ These arrangements of script and related elements (such as extended lines and patterns) are in themselves said to be ‘dead’ (B./I. *mati*), but may be activated or animated (B. *idupang*) by those who know how to read (B. *maca*) and pronounce (B. *ngucap*) them. It is through this activation that they are deployed to specific ends – such as healing, protection and attack.

A respected local healer, for example, makes use of a wooden manuscript that describes the *sastra* located on various parts of the body (e.g., liver, heart, lungs; “(iki) *sastra ring ati*,” etc.).²¹ When one of his clients is afflicted, he reaffixes (B. *masang*) the appropriate *sastra* in order to recall – or make present – its ‘energy’ (I./E. *énérqi*), and thereby bring about his client’s reinvigoration, refortification and recovery. According to the healer, each bodily organ is possessed of its own ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’ (B./K. *atma*),²² which may flee when one is startled or attacked. He added that one might carry additional *sastra* – in the form of a *bekel*²³ – which afford their user enhanced capacities – for strength, agility, potency, confidence, protection, or heightened sense faculties. Put another way, the written syllables and related figures are means (B. *sarana*) of instilling task-specific energy and efficacy – such as hearing, sight and movement, but also invincibility and dominance over others (cp. Connor 1995, H. Geertz 2005).

5 Aksara Render Things Usable, and so Nameable

The acts of both *writing* and *naming* appear to be linked to the very *being* of certain objects, perhaps especially human beings and newly constructed buildings. More specifically, it seems that to name something is to affirm its existence, which is equated with its efficacy or utility. It may be recalled that

20 When specifically configured as a ritual instrument (B. *upakara*), they may also be called *rarajahan* – as, for instance, on an inscribed sash (B. *sabuk*) worn for invigoration and protection (see below). Though recognized as technical terms (I. *istilah*), these words tend to be used interchangeably by many in Batan Nangka.

21 The text itself is written in ink letters on evenly cut pieces of wood that approximate the shape of *lontar* leaves, and are roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ cm thick.

22 This use of the term *atma* is neither entirely idiosyncratic, nor is it as common as its more conventional use as a ‘technical term’ (I. *istilah*) associated with state Hinduism. Rather it points to the fluid and highly situational use of such terminology in day-to-day practice.

23 The term *bekel* was decidedly ambiguous here. In very general terms it can mean something given, as a reserve, for use in the future – such as a little food or money taken on one’s travels. But it is also a ‘reserve’ of power, or protection. This may take the form of a small amulet or spoken formula; but it can also be an object buried and periodically presented with offerings.

the rites of animation performed for a new structure include affixing a small written amulet called an *ulap-ulap*. Although it is said that the inscription of a simple *Ongkara* will suffice for any building or shrine, some in Batan Nangka have been instructed – by their priestly patrons (see below) – to employ specific designs for particular kinds of buildings. One often hears that it is by virtue of the rite in which the *ulap-ulap* is affixed that an unnamed structure becomes, for example, a kitchen, a shrine or an office building – that is, as opposed to something else. Here, *naming* and *utility* are closely related. It is in a similar vein, I think, that Balinese often refer to these rites – when speaking Indonesian – as ‘inaugurating’ or ‘making official’ (I. *meresmikan*) the structure’s status as the sort of building it is meant to be. Prior to this rite the structure is not fit for its purpose – e.g., as an ancestral shrine – and so it cannot bear that name (B. *adan*).

The association of naming with being is more readily apparent with the use of writing in various of the life cycle rites – particularly those of name-giving and death. It is here that the body is respectively integrated and disintegrated – both within itself, and in relation to the broader collectivities in which it takes part. Rites of name-giving may include the inscription and burning of palm-leaf name cards to determine a fitting appellation for the child. Hinzler observed in her detailed study of these rites that, ‘[a]ccording to the texts on ritual and to the majority of the brahman priests, a personal name should be given to a child only on the occasion of a first birthday, when the child is 210 days old’, explaining that, ‘[i]t is believed that only after the first birthday does the child become a real human able to bear [a] name’ (1988: 142). Although things in Batan Nangka are not so clearly or consistently defined, ideas about naming appear to be organized around a similar set of sensibilities, linking acts of writing with ceremonial procedure (B. *upacara*), name-bearing (B. *maadan*) and the fact of being, or becoming, human (B. *dadi manusa*).

Special forms of writing also figure in rites of death and cremation. This may be seen most prominently in the *kajang*, or shroud(s), inscribed (B. *karéka*) with an arrangement of *aksara* and other figures specific to the descent group (B. *dadia*, *kawitan*) or ‘caste’ (I. *kasta*) of the deceased. This is often popularly analogized to the government-issue identity card (*KTP*, for I. *kartu tanda penduduk*), directed to ensuring that one’s soul or spirit (B. *atma*; I. *roh*) will end up in ‘the right place’ – whether construed as a heavenly hereafter (e.g., I. *swarga*; B. *kadituan*), or as reincarnation (e.g., B. *numitis*; I. *lahir kembali*, *réinkarnasi*) in a subsequent generation of the patrilineal family.²⁴

²⁴ As with so many of these practices, the use of a second cloth *kajang* is contested. One particularly prominent *padanda* stated emphatically that this was a novel development

During cremation rites the name of the deceased also appears in writing – often in Balinese script, and traditionally on a short piece of palm-leaf – affixed to the complex of ritual instruments that act as a physical support for the soul during the cremation of mortal remains. While still alive, one avoids using one's own personal name within the confines of the cemetery and its environs, for fear of rendering one's name (and thereby oneself) known, and so vulnerable, to Ida Batara – here an elliptical reference to the overlord of the cemetery, who holds command over (B. *ngamong*) the souls of those who are deceased but not yet cremated. By the same token, the name of the deceased *must* be used – preferably in written form – in order to specify the soul that Ida Batara is to release for the final rites that will allow it to be freed of any remaining material ties, and so to depart – and eventually return again.²⁵ It is in aid of ensuring bodily integrity on return, then, that the ashes are brought together and 'written' (B. *karéka*) into the form of a human body (see Fig. 3). Summing up, one might say that writing is instrumental to naming, which both affirms and helps to form a sort of being that is itself determined by its utility or efficacy.

6 Aksara Protect

Aksara are also employed in various procedures directed to the protection of the body.²⁶ This may involve either surrounding oneself with powerful beings and forces, or entreating them to reside on or within the bodily organs themselves. Common tropes encountered in this connection include the four – or sometimes six – 'spiritual siblings' (*kanda mpat*),²⁷ and the ten forces or capabilities (B. *dasabayu*), which are often associated with an efficacious

reflecting the desire among some descent groups to charge large fees for their production.

25 It is not altogether clear whether the use of the name in this context – whether written or otherwise – is taken to affirm a determinate relationship, or to fix one that is as yet unestablished.

26 The irreducibly embodied character of self is evident, among other places, in the use of language. Two of the more common terms for the body – *awak* and *raga* – are used in standard forms of both the first- and second-person Balinese pronouns, and sometimes in the third-person as well (see Hunter, this volume).

27 The name itself, *kanda mpat*, clearly suggests they are four (*mpat*) in number. However, at least in the Pateluan area, I have on more than one occasion heard reference to six siblings – often still retaining the phrase *kanda mpat*, as if it were a technical term (I. *istilah*) that implied something other than their number. It should be noted that this idea of 'spiritual siblings' is found elsewhere in Southeast Asia, and sometimes in other numbers (e.g., on the seven among the Ara in South Sulawesi, see Gibson [1994: 191]; compare Retsikas [2010: 152] on the four siblings in Java).



FIGURE 2.2 *Rewriting the human body from the ashes of a cremated corpse.*

configuration of ten syllables (B./K. *dasaksara*) – and their corresponding divinities, colors, weapons, etc.²⁸ It is by inviting (B. *nuur*), or drawing-in (B. *ngarad*), and surrounding oneself with their life-enhancing energy that one hopes to be protected from attack.

I found for example that, in addition to his more straightforwardly curative work, the local healer mentioned above is also known for using *aksara* in aid of ‘opening *cakras*’ (I. *membuka cakra*), the subtle physiological points, or nodes, at which vitality (B. *bayu*) is thought to concentrate, and through which it may be caused to flow. According to the healer, this opening of *cakras* results in both an increase in the person’s general efficacy, as well as in the generation of a force field of sorts, surrounding the body and preventing the intrusion of malevolent beings. One of his clients, an educated man in his late 40s, described this as ‘walling up the body’ (B. *magehin awak*) – rendering one invulnerable to attack, which itself he construed in terms of being ‘penetrated’ (B. *tumbakin*). He recounted having expressed some incredulity when the healer declared his *cakras* open, to which the latter replied by grabbing two copper wires, which

28 As in other broadly Indic traditions of South and Southeast Asia, Balinese link various colors, directions, deities, syllables, weapons, days and numbers – among other things. So, for example, we have the series Red – South – Brahma – Baṃ (syllable) – Club (weapon) – Saturday – Nine (number). Although the scholarly literature reproduces any number of these lists, and their variations, it has offered comparatively little insight into the rationale for elaborating such complex systems of association. My approach has been to look at the procedures in which these series are employed, and the purposes they are meant to serve.

he then proceeded to thrust toward the body of his client. To the client's surprise, he said, the wires bent around his body as if compelled by some unseen force – which he interpreted as evidence of his newly acquired imperviousness to attack. This opening of the *cakras* was accomplished, he explained, with the aid of a *mantra*-infused glass of water (B. *yéh ané 'ba kamantrain*), which he was instructed to drink. As he understood it, this helped to affix (B. *masang*) the requisite *aksara* onto the pertinent organs of his body. Through their intensification of the body's capabilities, he said, the letters (I. *hurup*) themselves functioned as a wall or fortification (B. *sakadi bénténg*).

Whatever relationship it may bear to textual tradition,²⁹ the client's account of opening *cakras* brought together three sets of ideals which seem more generally characteristic of Balinese techniques for self-care and protection – namely fortification, fluidity and equanimity. Albeit ultimately directed to the same end, these ideals correspond to tactical, physiological and temperamental registers respectively – each of which is cultivated through its own complex of techniques. If 'walling up' is directed to preventing penetration, the opening of *cakras* was said to increase the fluid movement of one's life force, or vitality (B. *bayu*), as it courses through the channels of the body (B. *uat*; I. *urat*). As indicated above, the obstruction of these channels corresponds to illness, impotence and absent-mindedness – all of which are states associated with a loss of efficacy.

A generalized state of equanimity mediates this relationship between the fluidity of bodily energy and invulnerability to attack. It is impassiveness in the face of sudden, or what would otherwise be startling, events that prevents one from being opened up to malicious penetration. For instance, one will not be *makesiab-kesiab*, which is to be thrown off kilter by an unexpected or surprising event – a condition which, again, might leave one vulnerable to attack. Neither is one *anak geleh* – that is, one prone to outbursts of emotion in response to unexpected stimulus, be it pleasant or otherwise. It seems that ideally the relationship between invulnerability and equanimity is recursive: invulnerability gives rise to equanimity, from which one gains greater invulnerability, thereby developing still further one's capacity for equanimity, and so

29 In my view the healer's notion of 'opening *cakras*' owes at least as much to recent, and broadly western (e.g., New Age), precedents as it does to anything originating more directly from the South Asian or Javano-Balinese textual tradition. Although other of his techniques are clearly grounded in ideals associated with the latter, he also meets frequently with foreign yoga practitioners and those he refers to as 'paranormals'. He may also be drawing on what he has learned from reading the newspaper, watching television and/or speaking with members of new religious movements inspired by a growing – and transnational – network of 'emerging spiritualities'.

on. My sense is that practices of self-protection – such as the directional positioning of *aksara*, and the powers they embody – are often directed to starting this cycle and carrying it forward.

Here the analogy between houses and human bodies comes once again to the fore. When a house has been ‘brought to life’ – through the script-enabled calling-in (B. *ngarad*) of protective beings and forces – it can repel or turn away an opposed and potentially malevolent force (B. *nulak bala*; *nulak ané sing demen*). It seems that it is through a similar set of procedures that one both energizes one’s bodily organs, and surrounds oneself with a wall of power, in order to further the mutually fortifying relationship between invulnerability and equanimity. One might compare this to the *aksara*-bearing sash, or *sabuk*, worn around the waist for protection.³⁰ To be effective, these too must be brought to life (B. *idupang*) through a *pasupati* rite – after which, it is said, the sash will protect against all comers; it will give one confidence and strength in addressing others, who will in return admire the one who wears it.

7 Aksara Attack

Self-protection is no doubt important. But the best defense is often a good offense; and, rather like certain kinds of offerings (see Fox 2015), the deployment of *aksara* can be an expedient means to this end. Certain configurations of script and image are said to serve as weapons of attack that, once ‘brought to life’, can travel afar under their own direction in search of their victim.³¹ The examples I was shown in Pateluan were inscribed in palm-leaf manuscripts, and copied onto either paper or small copper plates – though I was also told that, for those with the requisite skill and experience, the support of such coarsely material form was usually unnecessary. It is often said the *aksara* themselves may be inverted – literally ‘stood on their head’ (B. *sungsang*) – for the purpose of attack. Script bearing objects may also be used as weapons, as in the case of those beings that embody the entrail-devouring demonic form of *rangda*, with her *tastra*-bearing cloth – the *rurub* or *kekereb* (‘closure’) – with which she strikes those who dare to attack her, sending them into fits of self-stabbing (B. *ngurek*). The latter may be similar to the cloth wielded by the

30 Given both the use of such powerful sashes (B. *sabuk*) in Bali, and the importance of guarding the navel and mid-section of the body – as the locus of vital energy – in other parts of Indonesia (see, e.g., Errington 1983), it may be worth querying the popular association of temple sashes (I. *selendang*) with ideals of purity (B. *suci*).

31 See Wiener’s (1995) discussion of I Seliksik as a similarly self-mobile weapon, and the description of Panji Sakti’s *keris* in the *Babad Buléléng* (Worsley 1972), which is possessed of its own will and capacity to act independently.

sorcerer's students (B. *sisya*) in performing the *Calonarang*, the dramatic enactment of which reaches its climax at midnight in the cemetery. Here *lontar* manuscripts themselves may appear as the weapon employed by the fearsome widow of Dirah.³² Given such popular associations with sorcery, I was told many Balinese conceal their possession of palm-leaf manuscripts – which others, not knowing their contents, might construe as means to malevolent ends.³³

As with skill in the use of other weapons (B. *sanjata*), many of those adept in the handling of *aksara* are also known for having an aggressive, and even pugilistic, temperament – whether presently, or in the past.³⁴ This seems to play on the more general association of knowledge with efficacy, and of efficacy with the domination of weaker wills. More specifically, I think we are dealing with a variation on a certain character type – recognized by Balinese – that often, if not always, brings together prowess in the use of physical force with sexual conquest, success in gambling and eloquence in oratory. This may be seen quite clearly among some of the healers and others from whom those in Pateluan would request assistance in defending against attack, or mounting retaliation. However, these associations are not limited to those recognized for their skill in the black arts. Many of those now known for their bookish learning and 'spiritual' accomplishment as high priests (B. *sulinggih*) – i.e., *padanda*, *rsi bhujangga* and others – were in their youth known as street toughs, gamblers and thugs. For them, if *aksara* are seen to channel vitality, and this vitality is a means to the mastery of oneself and of others, then the manipulation of *aksara* is at once a form of spiritual exercise and a martial art.

8 Aksara Turn on Their User

The power embodied in *aksara* is not only morally neutral, but it is also liable to turn on its user. Like other forms of efficacy, the power of letters is as likely to *possess* the one who wields it as it is to remain under their control. It is for this reason that one must undergo certain forms of preparation, most commonly centered on the rite of *mawinten*. This is often described as a rite of

32 A sort of fake *lontar* (B. *lontar-lontaran*) prepared from young palm leaves (B. *busung*) is usually employed in performance.

33 This obviously has implications for what one might conclude from the houseyard survey (see above).

34 In the Pateluan area, for example, there are at least two *padanda*, one *rsi bhujangga* and a *balian* known for precisely these character traits – which, in my conversations with their clients, were consistently thought to be connected in some substantive fashion to their high level of accomplishment as ritual officiants, healers and sorcerers. On which, the latter three categories quite commonly overlap.

'purification' (see above). But, again, purification is but one aspect of a broader series of procedures directed to empowerment and self-protection in the face of those beings and forces – embodied, e.g., in writing – that one wishes to handle and potentially deploy. Those trying to read or otherwise work with written materials for which they are ill prepared report feeling confused (I. *bingung*; B. *paling*), sick (I./B. *sakit*) or disoriented (B. *punyah*, 'drunk'). In extreme cases this may result in prolonged illness, and even death. I was told by a local actor, for example, of the dizziness and headaches he experienced when trying to read a palm-leaf manuscript containing instructions for achieving release (K./B. *moksa*) from the cycle of death and rebirth. He took his symptoms to be a sign (B. *cihna*) of his unreadiness for the text, and decided to stop reading for fear of the possible consequences. A more serious case was reported by a local priest, who told of a young man – quite likely his own nephew – who had been studying, with a teacher, the methods for affixing *aksara* on various parts of the body. When the young man's teacher (B./I. *guru*) died unexpectedly, he nonetheless carried on independently with his studies – that is, without anyone to guide him. But, in the absence of supervision, he began placing the *aksara* on the wrong parts of his body; and it was not long, said the priest, before he fell gravely ill and died.

As living things, but also as weapons, it seems *aksara* have a dangerously ambivalent power of their own. This may help to explain why Balinese children in previous generations were warned to be careful when they wrote. They were told not to study haphazardly (B. *Eda ngawag-awag malajah!*). For to read and write Balinese characters without the requisite preparation might render you emotionally unstable, or make you stupid (B. *bisa belog*). They could even drive you crazy (B. *buduh ing sastra*). It is perhaps not unlike giving a small child a set of sharpened knives as a plaything. A good knife is no doubt a helpful instrument (B. *prabot*) in the kitchen if one knows how to use it. But, when mishandled, Balinese characters – much like the knives – can cause serious damage. This is why only certain types of people are thought capable of safely and effectively handling the potent configurations of script that can animate buildings and confer energy on human bodies during rites of healing and self-protection.

9 Aksara Incur and Pay Debts

As ritual instruments (B. *upakara*) *aksara* have traditionally circulated through networks of patronage. These networks are grounded in hierarchically ordered relations of giving and receiving, through which clients offer up (B. *ngaturang*) their fealty and material support to powerful patrons who, in exchange, bestow (B. *mapica*) gifts of spiritual sustenance and protection. The latter include

various kinds of holy water (B. *tirtha*) and ‘offerings’ (B. *banten*). But of equal importance is the bestowal of speech (B. *baos*), in the form both of *mantra* and other formulae used to complete important ceremonial rites, and expert advice (B. *pitutur*) regarding such things as the organization of domestic space and the maintenance of bodily well-being.

Perhaps the most visible of these relationships is that which obtains between high priests (B. *sulinggih*) and their constituents, or ‘pupils’ (B. *sisya*), for whom the former complete (B. *muput*) ceremonies requiring the safe and effective handling of ambivalently potent forces – such as those that are channeled through *aksara*. It is often from a priestly patron that one requests (B. *nunas*) the script-bearing instruments employed in the inauguration of new houseyard structures and shrines. In return, when ceremonial work (B. *karya*) is performed at the home of one’s priestly Lord (B. *Siwa*), it is expected that his constituents will present themselves (B. *nangkil*) and render service (B. *ngayah*) in the form of labor and material contribution.³⁵ In my experience, Balinese tend to resist characterizing this exchange as one of debt (B. *utang*) and repayment (B. *panauran*). Yet, when relations between Lord and Pupil go sour, the reciprocal give-and-take at the center of their relationship can become quite pronounced.

This may be illustrated by way of a brief anecdote, in which a certain well-established priestly house (B. *griya*) lost numerous of its ‘pupils’ to one of its younger, subsidiary branches. The occasion for this transfer of allegiance came when the sitting priest in the former house was said to have refused to complete ceremonies for those of his constituents planning to vote for the ‘wrong’ candidate in the coming gubernatorial elections. The priest’s behavior was widely condemned as an inappropriate mixing of religion (I. *agama*) and politics (I. *politik*). Yet the most damning criticism centered not so much on this, but rather on his failure to honor a standing obligation to act with generosity (B. *pasuécan*) toward his clients. Without referring specifically to the case at hand, his own brother pointedly characterized this sort of behavior as that of one who only enjoyed receiving (B. *demen ngidih*), while others referred to his actions more directly as miserly (B. *cupar*), greedy (B. *demit*) and overly proud, or arrogant (B. *angkuh*) – all terms frequently used in reference to other, more readily acknowledged relations of reciprocity, such as those that obtain between neighbors (B. *pisaga*), members of the ward assembly (B. *banjar*) and other collectivities.

35 In Pateluan and the surrounding area it is not unusual for the term *panjak* (‘subject’) to be used in reference to the clients of a *padanda*.

Significantly, the first act performed by those switching priestly patron was the dedication of an offering of sincerity (B. *ngaturang banten pajati*). The presentation of this offering comprises, more generally, the initial step in opening up a relation of exchange. The exchange may be, as here, carried out with a priestly patron. But the *pajati* offering also figures as an expression of sincerity at the opening of bride negotiations, when one visits the home of another family to request a woman (B. *ngidih anak luh*) for marriage. Similarly, relations of exchange may also be contracted with non-human agents, such as the banyan tree (B. *punyan bingin*) from which one requests freshly picked leaves for use in post-cremation rites (B. *nyekah, maligya*).³⁶ An exchange of sorts may analogously figure in one's relationship to the written word itself. Just as an offering of sincerity works toward establishing a tie of reciprocity with a priestly patron, a *pajati* may also be dedicated before opening up a palm-leaf manuscript, or setting out on a new course of study. This offering may be dedicated explicitly to Déwi Saraswati, as the Goddess of Learning and the divine embodiment of letters (cp. *malukat* and *mawinten* as *nunas panugrahan saking Ida Sang Hyang Saraswati*); but, in the case of reading, the expression of sincerity may also be directed to the text itself – as an entity that is both named and alive, and so potentially capable of entering into a relationship of reciprocal obligation.

The link between life and reciprocity is an issue to which I shall return in just a moment. But first, recalling the earlier anecdote, if the prospective pupil's offering of sincerity is directed to initiating a relationship of patronage, it is the priest's bestowal of a shroud (B. *kajang*), in the event of his or her pupil's death that marks the end, or closure, of their relationship. It may be recalled that many in Pateluan understood the *kajang* to comprise an 'identity card' of sorts, ensuring the safe passage of one's soul to the hereafter, and/or so that it might be reborn within the correct family line. But this inscribed length of white cloth is also seen, at least by some, to embody a final gift (B. *paica*) of knowledge that ensures the priestly Lord remains in no way indebted (B. *mautang*) to his or her dead pupil.

Taken together, these examples trace the contours of a network of circulation, through which *aksara* and *aksara*-bearing instruments move in relations of hierarchically ordered giving and receiving. When juxtaposed with the initial sections – on cultural identity, but also transmission and purity – it would appear these traditional forms of reciprocity are increasingly butting up against, and being transformed by, the emergence of new networks – such as

³⁶ In this case a complex of offerings, including the *banten pajati*, is dedicated at the foot of the tree prior to the cutting of its branches.

those associated with mass tourism and compulsory state education – which may be characterized by quite different forms of both solidarity and exchange.

The Meaning of Life

Well, that's the end of the film, now here's the meaning of life....

– LADY PRESENTER, *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*

Traditionally Balinese have attributed 'life' – in the sense of *urip* or *idup* – to things that in a broadly modern idiom are thought to consist of 'dead matter'. My question was how it could make sense to say that things such as kitchens, cars and consonants are alive. Working on the assumption that 'life' is what 'living things' do, I proposed that we look to contemporary uses of Balinese script, as these letters seemed to comprise a particularly dense point of transfer for ideas about agency, life and matter. In a word, the ensuing study was meant to answer the question as to what Balinese letters *do*.

The results of enquiry in Batan Nangka would suggest that, when it comes to script and writing, there are at least two very general and opposed forces in play. On the one hand, we have the idealizing articulation of letters as a medium of representation and transmission. Here power is dematerialized; it resides in the ability of the written word to point beyond itself – to sounds and information, but also to cultural identity and heritage. Of letters we might say, in this first case, that *life is elsewhere*. On the other hand, there is another set of script-related ideals and sensibilities that materialize the power of writing in particular localities. Here *aksara* mediate the transfer of efficacy and vitality between people, places and things.

It is in following this latter line of reasoning, and extrapolating from the ethnography, that I would like to suggest we find 'life' (B. *urip*) – as attributed to bodies, buildings etc. – where there is (a) an ordered yet contingent linkage of constituent parts (b) resulting in a complex and potentially tenuous entity; (c) that can bear a name; (d) has the ability to transform both itself and others; and (e) with which, or whom, one might enter into a relation of ongoing reciprocal obligation, as embodied in a form of solidarity-through-exchange. By way of conclusion I would like to consider briefly each of these aspects in turn. My argument is that, from the vantage of many traditional practices, these attributes of 'life' are as fitting of funeral biers, agricultural knives and ward regulations as they are of farmers, buffalos and jackfruit trees.³⁷

37 These 'Latourian litanies' are meant as a nod in the direction of work inspired by Bruno Latour (e.g., 2005), more recently carried out under the rubric of 'object oriented

a *An Ordered Yet Contingent Linkage of Constituent Parts...*

Both written syllables and buildings are formed by ‘affixing’ (B. *masang*) their constituent parts one to another in a manner conducive to a specific use (B. *guna*). We have seen that, in a similar fashion, one ‘affixes’ (B. *masang*) the configurations of *aksara* (B. *sastra* etc) proper to the movement or capability associated with the joints and organs of the body.³⁸ This ordered linking-up of constituent parts may be altered in various ways, but not without consequence. Much as there are rules (B. *uger-uger*) for the combination of *aksara*, so too are there guidelines for the layout of living space and the construction of buildings. Posture and bodily movement are analogously ordered with an eye to health, but also to etiquette (B./I. *tatakrama*) and so one’s relation with others.

b *Resulting in a Complex and Potentially Tenuous Entity*

The resulting entity is both internally complex and prone to disintegration. Put another way, unity and stability – whether orthographic, corporeal, architectural or political – is a tenuous achievement that must be articulated and rearticulated through the calling-in and binding of disparate forces that would otherwise tend toward dissipation (H. Geertz 1994: 95). It is perhaps for this reason that so many Balinese life-cycle rites – coming at moments of integration, and so potential disintegration – entail an intensification of the body and its faculties. This is accomplished through contact with, and ingestion of, various substances; but it is also manifest gesturally in the wafting-in (B. *natab*), drawing-in (B. *ngarad*) and calling-in (B. *ngulapin*) central to the restorative *upacara ngulapan* and the *mlaspas* complex (see above) – but also, possibly, the dedication of those ‘chthonic offerings’ (B. *caru*) often explained in terms of ‘purification’ (I. *menyucikan*) and/or the ‘making-benevolent’ (B. *nyomi-yang*) or ‘neutralization’ (I. *menetralisir*) of demonic forces (B. *butakala*).³⁹

ontology’ (see, e.g., Harman 2009; Meillassoux 2008). Although I am a little uncertain as to the coherence of its ‘happy positivism’ – and, more specifically, its seeming disregard for problems of language and representation (which, I believe, it claims to have transcended) – I find the broadening of agency an important corrective to the at times naive valorization of intentional, or ‘expressive’, agency in the human sciences.

38 It is interesting to note that the same terminology is often employed by women, in casual conversation, to refer to the ‘affixing’ (B. *masang*) of birth control devices, such as the IUD – but also injections (I. *suntik*) and other forms of ‘family planning’.

39 It is on these grounds that I believe we may wish to question the simple equivalence of terms like *leteh* and *sebel* with impurity. It will require a separate essay to make the argument in a convincing fashion. But, for various reasons – both etymological and ethnographic – I suspect these terms may historically have had more to do with a dissipation of

Here the inscription of *aksara* would work to fix this dynamic potential on, or in, the body or building where it might be put to a specific use.

c *That Can Bear a Name*

If living things are brought into being through an ordered joining of parts, the act of naming is itself an affirmation of their existence, and quite often their utility – a point that may be related to the prevalence of agentive nouns (e.g., ‘refuser’, ‘closer’, ‘hardener’, ‘life helper’) as designations for those powerful – and ‘living’ – formulae and instruments employed in healing, sorcery and the performance of ceremonial rites. An analogous sensibility may be seen in the colloquial understanding of the *mlaspas* rites as ‘making official’ (I. *meresmi-kan*) a given structure’s status as the kind of building it is meant to be. Prior to these rites, the building is neither alive nor fit for its intended use, by virtue of which it would bear its proper name. In this regard it appears that *to be* is *to be nameable*. As Hobart noted in a related connection, ‘the [Balinese] word for proper name, and class name, is *adan*’, explaining that ‘Balinese sometimes argued that the etymology was from *ada*, to exist, the genitive suffix ‘-n’ ... making it ‘the existing/existence of’. In that case to name something would be to affirm its existence’ (2014: 8).

d *Has the Ability to Transform both Itself and Others*

Essential to the concept of vitality is that of efficacy. To be alive is to have an effect both on oneself and the surrounding world. Balinese differentiate between the various forms of life with reference to their relative capacity for movement or force (B. *bayu*),⁴⁰ speech (B. *sabda*) and thought (B. *idep*) – a series known collectively as ‘the three faculties’ (B. *tri-pramana*).⁴¹ It is often said that plants, animals and human beings have one, two and three of these faculties respectively. Although less commonly discussed in these terms, the life of such things as weapons and houseyard structures may also be characterized, on reflection, as possessing a certain capacity for movement or the exertion of force. Some heirloom daggers (B. *keris*), for example, are thought capable of moving under their own direction. At the same time, in almost Newtonian fashion, architectural features such as supporting beams (B.

vitality. If this were so, they would only have subsequently been opposed to purity under the sway of the strong language of *suci* (‘purity’).

40 *Bayu* is often glossed in English as ‘action’, which is not exactly incorrect. But it is somewhat imprecise. As I have tried to indicate above, *bayu* in this context at once covers the ideas of self-driven *movement* and *the exertion of force* on other objects.

41 Less commonly the series may be referred to as *tri-jñāna* or *tri-tattwa*.

adegan) and walls (*B. pageh*) are seen to exert a force equal and opposite to the weight they carry – or, when under attack, the powers they repel. In this regard, potency and dynamism are the very stuff of life.

e *And with Which, or Whom, One Might Enter into a Relation of
Ongoing Reciprocal Obligation, as Embodied in a Form of
Solidarity-Through-Exchange*

Ideally, the relationship that obtains between living things should be one of reciprocity through exchange. The ordering of this exchange may be hierarchical, instrumental and even exploitative – and it may appear differently to all those involved. But there is as much give-and-take at play in the use of a broom, or the herding of ducks, as there is in the expression of one's fealty to a king or high priest. Much of Balinese 'ritual' life is devoted to maintaining these relationships of but loosely calculated giving and receiving, through such things as the *jotan* or *saiban* offerings dedicated each morning to the instruments (*B. prabot*) employed in cooking and household chores (e.g., sink, stove, chopping block, water container, mortar and pestle).⁴² Meanwhile, the solidarity established with things such as plants, draught animals and buildings is evident in the idea that the traditional polity, or *gumi*, includes not only its human subjects (*B. panjak*), but also the plants, animals and living objects (e.g., books, *wayang* puppets, gamelan instruments) that are provided periodically – that is, e.g., at the various *odalan* and *tumpek* holidays – with offerings and entertainment. We see, for example, that many a masked dance-drama performance (*B. topéng*) turns on a ruler's loss and re-appropriation of power, as embodied in the well-being of his realm. When the performance of ceremonial rites breaks down, the land and its resources dry up (*B. sangar*) and the realm itself descends into a mêlée of disorder and chaos (*B. uug gumi-é*). Maintaining the life of the realm is a collective endeavor, which – like assembling letters, buildings and bodies – entails a purposeful linking-together of parts that might otherwise be inclined to disintegration. It is through reciprocal exchange and obligation that these elements are tied (*B. kaiket*), one to another, thereby ensuring their collective well-being (*B. rahayu*).

42 It is instructive to note that the term *jotan* is also used in reference to the food parcel one gives to relatives, friends and neighbors when performing a major ceremony.

Questions

These reflections on the meaning of 'life' raise a number of issues warranting further consideration. There is first the question of competing accounts. While the five-part description of where we find life in Bali may help us to make sense of 'living' buildings, texts and ritual implements, it is also sharply at odds with the ideals and sensibilities that have driven national development and the commodification of Balinese culture – most notably in the interest of tourism. The latter center not on relations of solidarity-through-exchange, but rather on the management of culture as 'capital' (I. *modal*), and both human beings and nature as 'resources' (I. *sumber daya manusia/alam*) for exploitation in aid of 'progress' (I. *kemajuan*). It is difficult to imagine a starker example of Heidegger's 'standing reserve'. In my experience, the problem is not lost on Balinese. As many have recognized, the island is beset by an environmental crisis that may be irreversible. In an attempt to address the issue some have looked to the past, arguing for a return to 'traditional ideals' rearticulated in terms of *Tri Hita Karana*, a neo-Sanskritic formulation of humanity's various dependencies (*viz.*, with itself, with God, with nature). But it seems unlikely that such (often well-intended) moralizing will produce its desired result (B. *mapikolih*) without a fundamental transformation of the institutions and practices through which these virtues are cultivated, embodied and contested.

There is also the related question of cultural complexity. Students of Southeast Asia have long recognized that unifying terms such as 'Hinduism', 'Buddhism', 'Tantrism' and 'animism' do not adequately reflect the heterogeneity of the region's history and culture. Yet prevailing attempts to account for this complexity – in terms of 'great and little traditions', 'syncretism', 'hybridity' *etc.* – often do little more than to defer the moment of essentialization; and, as a result, their approaches often appear as uncritical as the oversimplified terminology they wish to call into question. Extrapolating from the later work of Alasdair MacIntyre and his commentators, I am interested in developing an approach to complexity centered on the analysis of what I would describe as *rival styles of practical reasoning* – with an emphasis on competing articulations of agency, community and the common good. In lieu of hybridity and the like, I would argue for a sort of overdetermination (Fox 2015).

Finally, the foregoing reflections on 'life' suggest a couple of potentially important questions relating to the nature of 'the text' as a topic of scholarly enquiry. Clearly, philological analysis is well-suited to answering certain kinds of questions. Its findings are historical in their own way; and, when it comes to accounting for events on the contemporary scene, the textual record may have much to contribute to our understanding of the emergence and relative

stability of certain institutions and practices. As we will see in subsequent chapters (especially Hunter and Aciri), there are important literary parallels for many of the ‘uses and acts of *aksara*’ that I encountered in Batan Nangka. But the question as to how contemporary practices are related to accounts found in palm-leaf manuscripts is just that – a question. There is also the related question as to how philological enquiry is related to the practices – e.g., of composition, copying, performing – that ostensibly generated its object of study. For now it should suffice to recall that Balinese have traditionally made rather different presuppositions regarding the nature of agency, life and matter – things that are, as we have seen, of direct pertinence to the handling of letters. So how, if at all, should this apparent disjuncture inform our approach to ‘the text’? There are both ontological and epistemological issues in play. But there may also be an ethical question as well. Rubinstein argued that ‘*kekawin* philology as practised to date undermines the religious beliefs and values upon which *kekawin* composition has been based’ (2000: 225). If this were really so, it may be worth reflecting a little more carefully on the foundations of our work, and its consequences – both intended and otherwise.

Manuscript Cited

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Situating Scriptural Practices

Edited by

Richard Fox
Annette Hornbacher



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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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