

Introduction

to

The Prince of Nusa Penida redeems his vow

A Prèmbon

Pura Duur Bingin, Tengahpadang
12-13th. March 1989

On the night of 12-13th. March 1989, a theatre performance took place as part of the temple festival (*piodalan*) held every Javanese-Balinese year of 210 days in Pura Duur Bingin, Br. Tegal, Tengahpadang, Gianyar, South Bali. The performance was of particular interest because, although it had a small cast, three of the four actors were recognized island-wide as the leaders in the genre at the time. Also, when I asked a number of Balinese who were knowledgeable about theatre which play they would choose out of some fifty that we had watched as the best representative of Balinese theatre, almost unanimously they chose this one. The range they had available included shadow theatre (*Wayang Kulit*), popular drama (*Derama Gong*), dance opera (*Arja*), dance opera with masks (*Prèmbon* – literally ‘mixed styles’), masked theatre (*Topèng Pajegan* and *Topèng Panca*).¹

Each night during temple festivals, some kind of performance should be held. On the evening in question, the main play was preceded by a number of virtuoso dances (*tari lepas*) by local children. This was in imitation of the trend in the larger towns for amateur dances had become popular with parents who could photograph their children. Only after 11 pm, and to the great irritation of the professional actors who had been dressed up since early evening, did the play begin. It had been commissioned by a princeling and head of a small court in Pisangkaja, Tengahpadang. He had vowed to the deities in Pura Duur Bingin, famous island-wide for blessing supplicants with children, that if he and his wife had a male heir, he would pay for a *Prèmbon* performance.² The theme chosen by the actors therefore was the story of Sri Aji Palaka, who ruled over the small and arid island of Nusa Penida off South Bali, redeeming a similar vow.

Language and roles

Theatrical language in many societies is among the most difficult to translate because theatre is a medium in which people comment on their and others’ speech and actions. It is reflective and evaluative; and it presupposes an intimate acquaintance with how people engage with and talk about the society and world about them. Balinese theatre is complicated further by the plethora of registers, language levels or indeed languages. High castes must be addressed and spoken to in elevated (*singgih*) or refined (*alus*) registers comprising a quite different vocabulary and even syntax compared to the ordinary (*biasa*) low language used in much daily life. Granted the intricate hierarchies that constitute Balinese life, the scope for highlighting these through breaking and playing with boundaries is concomitantly rich – for

¹ Quite independently I had decided that this performance was my favourite, in part because of the sustained virtuoso performance of I Midep cross-dressing as the mad princess. For photographs of what the various characters look like, see <http://www.balinesedance.org/All%20about%20Arja.htm>. The Panasar and Wijil here were masked, but otherwise the costumes are similar.

² The princeling had in fact had a son who died in a motorcycle crash. He was requesting another son.

example in the use of coarse and vulgar (*kasar*) language and lewd behaviour. When Balinese articulate themselves as Balinese, and when as Indonesians and so use Indonesian, offers further scope for play. Because theatre is where Balinese talk about religion, philosophy and history *inter alia*, actors often use archipelago Sanskrit and *kawi* (sometimes called Old Javanese, but comprising a broad register which overlaps with elevated Balinese, especially among the more literary). There are also a distinctively theatrical register which actors use and with which theatre-going audiences are reasonably familiar. Nowadays in a society increasingly familiar with the outside world both through television and tourism, a few phrases in English tend to be *de rigueur*. The range open to actors is wide – and, as we shall see in the play, they make mistakes, which is inevitable granted such quick-fire repartee.

Theatrical roles are a complex topic. So I shall only outline those involved in this play. Briefly characters divide into the aristocracy and servants (occasionally with outsiders – Javanese, Chinese, Westerners – as the plot demands). The other great division is between the good and the bad, the sane and the mad. So there are good princes, princesses and servants; and bad/mad ones. The scope for the good characters is more circumscribed. They have to adumbrate what is proper, right and appropriate for people to do, and their behaviour is correspondingly restricted. By contrast, the mad and bad have great licence, not only to joke and be lewd, but to speak home truths that should not be mentioned in polite society or in public. In the play, the prince (*Mantri* – conventionally played by a woman, because they can generally dance and sing the refined roles better) sings of how good rulers should rule, while his two servants, the Panasar and his younger brother Wijil, set the scene, paraphrase and develop the lines of their master and mistress.

To offset all this virtue and propriety, there must be an antithetical character. In this play it is the role of *Liku*. The *Liku* is conventionally the spoilt princess from the kingdom of the mad, a role which the male actor, I Midep, carried to new heights, making full use of the potentialities of cross-dressing. The Panasar has a particularly important role, as the etymology of his name (from *dasar*, base or basis) indicates. He anchors the performance, both by linking the audience to the play and by framing it from start to finish.³ This also allows the actor playing the younger brother, Wijil, to slip off stage and don a variety of masks (*Bondrès*) as happens here. Incidentally, the key genres like *Arja* and *Prèmbon* the refined hero and heroine only sing and never speak. Their songs are paraphrased and elaborated upon by their servants. Here only the prince, Sri Aji Palaka, plays a refined royal role and is sung by Bali's leading actress for such parts, Ni Murdi. Her songs are in metred verse and it is an index of skill and professionalism when singers can *ad lib* in different metres, which may very difficult as the actors are not always quite sure how the scene is going to unfold. Notes on the different metres employed during the play are discussed in the footnotes.

Extemporization

Balinese theatre is generally improvised. The storyline which the actors discuss beforehand may well be cursory. There are many reasons. These include the fact that the older members of the audience may well know the story and in order to fit the performance to local circumstances and preferences. Some villages are known to like and expect the plots to be as close to the known texts as possible and the dialogue serious and edifying. Other villages prefer slapstick and obscenity. Some, like Tengahpadang, are somewhere in between. They enjoy bawdiness provided the jokes are intelligent and have a political or satirical edge, and

³ In *Arja* this role is usually performed by the heroine's lady in waiting or servant, the *Condong*.

make a moral point. The performance in question scored high, which is one reason it was singled out. In this instance the plot was minimal. The prince in Nusa Penida redeems a vow to perform a large ceremony if his prayer for a male heir was granted. That is in effect it. Events are set in the court of the prince of Nusa Penida before the ceremony which the prince had ordered to redeem his vow on an heir being born. The rest is filling in the background about how the prince had despaired of having a son, had gone in vain to many temples in Bali before finally having his wish granted at a local temple. There was also anticipation of the proper completion of the ceremony. The rest was dialogue with very little action except for the on-stage antics of the prince's low caste wife. The play required only four actors and lasted some two hours, which is fairly short by standards at the time. The small cast was due to the fact that the prince's fee was somewhat meagre and only enough to pay for four actors – fortunately good ones. This in no way got in the way of the audience's enjoyment and the play was the subject of talk in food and coffee stalls for days afterwards. Several members of the audience – both male and female – confessed to me afterwards that they had laughed so hard that they had wet themselves during the performance.

Another important feature of extemporized theatre is ambiguousness. Scripted plays are tightly determined pieces, where ambiguity is carefully engineered. Actors work with words, phrases or sentences, which have been used before. However, as the dialogues are open, the actors themselves often do not know where they are going or always what the others are going to say.⁴ So plays may be full of uncompleted sentences and trains of thought, reminiscent of Bakhtin's writing (Bakhtin 1963) about openness and unfinalizability. As a result, there are interesting problems of interpretation and translation, because there is not necessarily a clear single worked out intention in a play as there is in a text by a playwright.

Problems of interpretation and translation

It is a challenge to represent something of the excitement and enthusiasm that the play engendered. In 1989 digital video did not exist. And, had it been recorded, the actors would probably have been inhibited by its presence. Extemporized theatre can become highly political and depends precisely on the fact that it is not recorded and so it is hard for the authorities, the Repressive State Apparatus in Althusser's terms, to take action against the players. Certainly Balinese theatre sometimes resembles guerrilla warfare, especially during the period of repression under the New Order régime of the late President Suharto. And, one of the actors, Ngakan Déwa Madé Sayang was celebrated as one of the most outspoken critics of the régime, the corruption of the government of Bali and by leading public figures on the island. In this play he is quite mild, because there were no relevant targets in the audience.

As it was, with the actors' permission, I recorded the play with a small professional cassette recorder which was effectively invisible in the decoration at the front of the stage. For the same reason I did not take photographs in order not to disturb the event.⁵ At the time the actors assumed I was some tourist off the beaten track and Déwa Madé Sayang actually made remarks to this effect. Later I went to discuss the performance in detail separately with Déwa Madé and with the woman who played the prince, Ni Murdi. They saw transcripts of the play and were quite happy for me to use it. I had planned to discuss the play with the comic character played by I Midep, but sadly, shortly after the performance, he fell seriously ill with diabetes and died subsequently.

⁴ Instead they have all sorts of techniques for recuperating and closing off a sequence of dialogue, which disguises the openness.

⁵ Since then it has become routine for Balinese, quite apart from foreigners, to photograph and video performances. Back then it was very rare and changed the nature of the occasion.

The recording was transcribed initially by my research assistant, I Wayan Suardana. Then it was checked several times with local actors and theatre lovers. Finally certain difficult sections were played back to the actors. Working on the recording of a performance is not as easy as might seem. Plays are accompanied by full gamelan, Gong Kebyar, which produces a very large sound and at moments drowns the actors' singing and speech. Balinese theatrical events, if they are good, are not quiet, disciplined moments for aesthetic reflection. The audience crowds around everywhere, behind the seats, behind the stage, on stage, hanging from the rafters or even trees. And, if they are enjoying it, they contribute enthusiastically and noisily. As theatre is extemporized, the actors can lose the thread, interrupt one another or defer to one another to keep the narrative going. Also, it is considered arrogant to deliver long speeches. So, songs apart, some of which are set, most dialogue is one or two sentences long, the stress being on the quick-fire interaction between the actors. Such theatre requires close collaboration and mutual feeding of lines, if it is to work. In terms of agency, it is less four virtuoso actors than one complex agent comprising a number of interlocking parts.

While there are different interpretations of, say, Shakespeare's plays, at least there is a more or less agreed text. Extemporized popular theatre like *Prèmbon* or *Arja*, as we shall see, leaves many of the sentences incomplete; and the plot may, as in this case, be nugatory. So quite what was being said – or meant by what was said – is quite often unclear. And theatre which works through such a close dialogue with the audience as well as between actors inevitably invites a plethora of different interpretations. Not only different members of the audience have different ideas of what was going on and what was said, but the actors' ideas differed among themselves.

This might seem to pose yet more problems for the translator than is usually the case when translating between such different languages and cultural understandings. In part this is inevitably the case. And I have had to provide extensive footnotes both to the original Balinese and the translation, as well as long endnotes explicating what lies behind references that are obscure to those who are not experts on Balinese society. However matters become slightly less complicated if we pause and rethink what we mean by representation and by culture.

We usually take it that a good representation faithfully corresponds to the original. Such an argument is problematic here because what was the original is open to question. Instead of searching vainly for some originary and authentic 'text' to analyze, I take it that a performance like this is a relationship between the actors and members of the audience. In other words, the play may be represented by different people in different ways on different occasions. Indeed one actor may represent his or her role or the theme of the play differently depending on whom they are speaking to and the purposes of the discussion.

This raises questions about the nature of interpretation and the rôle of the interpreter, considerations which bear also on translation and the rôle of the translator. As I have argued elsewhere (Hobart 2000), in many circumstances interpretation seems to me an unnecessary and unwarranted exercise of power— certainly those that pertain in interpreting the cultural ideas and activities of people in other societies who have successfully been busy interpreting, arguing about and getting on with understanding themselves and one another for hundreds of years without the aid of an outside expert. Not only is there no single true interpretation,⁶ but the interpreter/translator brings all sorts of questionable presuppositions to bear, which are rarely discussed openly.

⁶ Denis Donogue: 'The single, true interpretation is an autocrat's dream of power.'

In any event, there is no need in most instances for the visiting scholar to engage in interpretation as their primary research activity. People in the society, who are for the most part far better qualified, spend a significant proportion of their time so doing. If a play or television programme is of much interest, Balinese will be busy discussing and commenting on it, quite apart from academics and the growing field of media commentators, whose task it is to analyze and comment, to write articles, previews and reviews of plays, broadcasts and other forms of cultural production. Arguably a play is not just some idealized 'text' (elusive as that would be to pin down in Bali), but the play as performed with the various commentaries made about it (see Hobart 2006). In that case, the task of the interpreter is to research the commentaries made to analyze the conditions under which the participants and audiences engage with diverse and divergent interpretations, and what emerges from such an analysis.

For this reason therefore I prefer to work not by interpreting myself what is happening, but eliciting a range of commentaries from different groups of participants, divided by criteria of possibly relevant differences in understandings, for example actors, male and female members of the audience and so on. Here I have worked so far with four separate groups. The first were four elderly men. They were Anak Agung Pekak, a distinguished and high cast old *Arja* actor, then in his late eighties; Ketut Sutatemala, a part-time actor and well known orator; Déwa Pekak Balung, a poor high caste villager with an unparalleled aptitude for words and word play; and Déwa Pekak Geriya, a fairly affluent high caste villager with an unparalleled knowledge of shadow theatre and its plots. In the footnotes I refer to them as 'the commentators', because they had the most time available to go through the recordings and transcripts in detail and so their commentary was the most detailed. The second group were women of three generations, a grandmother, her daughter and her grand-daughter, who was studying at the National Academy of Performing Arts. The other two groups were Ni Murdi and her family members; and Déwa Madé Sayang and members of his household. Before I publish the book, I plan to obtain at least two further sets of commentaries. One is from Ni Madé Pujawati, a well known *Arja Condong* who is highly experienced in the contemporary world of performance. The other is Wayan Dibia, the Professor of Dance at the Institute of Arts and a celebrated Panasar from a family of *Arja* performers. I take it that no one commentary is necessarily correct. They reflect different understandings by people differently placed in Balinese society.

A more general problem arises, namely of what is the play illustrative? What does it tell us about? Some may choose to read the play as evidence either for the universality or for the diversity of human creativity. What is, I think, fairly indisputable is that the references, the relationships between actors and audience which presuppose a degree of implicit, if variable, understanding, and what works and does not for any audience is culturally inflected. A problem arises though as to how culture is supposed to work. The problem is more serious still if somehow the play is imagined to exemplify 'Balinese culture'. This presupposes the idea of culture as some kind of underlying system or agreed set of rules which govern how people think and act. To assume this is to impose a false uniformity and agreement and fails to appreciate the extent to which culture is a site of contestation between rival articulations of what is the case. This is where the importance of theatre in a society like Bali becomes apparent. The play itself is an argument. Or rather it is a series of arguments. There are arguments both within the play between different roles and visions of what Bali is and how it is positioned relative to Indonesia. There are also arguments between the actors and various unnamed interlocutors in the actual or imagined audience. Similarly the commentaries are arguments with the actors, the play and with other commentaries. In short, it may be useful to treat culture as being a whole barrage of arguments, disputes and moments of partial

agreement.⁷ Then it becomes obvious that there can be no single true interpretation or translation of the play. So the play and the commentaries offer a selection of accounts, of understandings of what it is to be Balinese in different ways.

Summary of the play

The Prince of Nusa Penida redeems his vow may be understood depending on your interest in different ways ranging from an example of theatre from another part of the world to a fascinating commentary on the changing nature of Balinese society within Indonesia in the late 1980s and early 1990s as portrayed by leading intellectuals. (And in Bali the task of intellectuals falls overwhelmingly to performers.) I have already sketched out the basic range of characters in *Arja* and *Prèmbon*. It may be helpful though if I offer a résumé of the story. Granted my previous strictures, this is not as easy as it might seem, because Balinese would not necessarily recognize the play as they would understand it. My summary is aimed at providing a way into the translation for English-speaking readers largely unfamiliar with Balinese theatre.

By way of background, Sri Aji Palaka is a figure found occasionally in Balinese literature. On one account he was the grandchild of a famous figure, Maya Denawa, whose son fled to Nusa Penida after his father's murder and was ordered by the God of the Sea to marry Luh Wedani, the daughter of the local head, Pasek Nusa, and to build a temple, Pura Pucak Wedi. The son however tried to evade his relationship with Luh Wedani, until the God in the form of Naga Basuki, the Great Snake, gave the couple a child, Sri Aji Palaka. On this account therefore, Luh Wedani is Sri Aji Palaka's mother not his wife. This kind of variation is not unusual in Balinese accounts of the past.

The play begins, as does almost all *Arja* and *Prèmbon* with a servant coming on stage to set the scene with an introductory dance, a *Panglembar*, and song. The Panasar introduces himself to the audience and sets about framing the purpose of theatre and religious rites. After a humorous song to warm up the audience (line 35 of the transcription) he describes the present state of affairs in the island of Nusa Penida, praising the prince, Sri Aji Palaka, while simultaneously referring to Bali as a whole and indirectly commenting on government development policy.

The Panasar's younger brother Wijil then enters, performs his *Panglembar* (line 55) and they set about elaborating on what is happening in Nusa Penida punctuated by comments about the circumstances of the performance, which the actors had found lacking. They made play on the failure of the electricity briefly, then criticized their shoddy treatment by the organizers before returning to the prince's desperation for an heir which led him to pray in many of the main temples in Bali and to make a vow should his wish be granted. The servants then move to discuss the preparations for the ceremony to fulfil the prince's promise (100-150) which involves the discussion of religious obligations and their relationship to key ideas in Balinese religion as promulgated by the Parisada Hindu Dharma, the Supreme Council for Balinese Hinduism (150-200+).

At that point, the prince Sri Aji Palaka enters performing his *Panglembar*. In song he explains which are the key rites, to whom they must be performed and who is responsible for

⁷ I am not saying that culture is an argument *tout court*. Culture is not a ahistorical contextless substance which is essentially one thing or another. I am simply saying that it may be more useful for present purposes to imagine Bali as comprising an endless plethora of arguments, claims, enunciations, denials, conflicts and momentary agreements than as some timeless underlying essence. After all, who gets to determine what the real essential Bali is?

carrying them out (300-400). Meanwhile his servants paraphrase and elaborate on the song. As is conventional, the play is set in pre-colonial Bali, but the references are intended simultaneously to be treated as contemporary. The prince then turns (400) to the impending arrival of his wife, the *Liku*, Luh Wedani, who is making a terrible noise from off stage, calling out a diminutive of 'husband' repeatedly.

There is a long scene with the *Liku* still behind the curtain at the back of the stage, ordering her servants to get ready. It consists largely of dialogue, banter and word play. Luh Wedani is angry with the servants because they are disrespectful and rude about her. They are so because she behaves in a fashion unbecoming to the wife of a prince. Finally she enters (600) and performs a madcap dance (her *Panglembar*) round the stage. She promptly proceeds to make fun of a whole series of government development ordinances, at once informing the audience of what they are and sending them up. She starts with the risk of high cholesterol from eating food prepared with too much coconut oil, then moves onto instructing children to work hard at school – each with comical results.

The *Liku* then turns to a play on the function of each of the five fingers in turn (800), neatly mixing philosophical categories and absurdity. She then moves (950+) to a series of development programmes designed to promote healthy lifestyles among peasant villagers, making fun of the possible implications (to 1150).

Thereafter the prince enters again, which is the excuse for the *Liku* to engage in coarse slapstick, while the prince sings of her rare beauty (1200+). The *Liku* then switches to start giving advice to the women in the audience (the collusion of a man dressed as a woman talking over women's matters went down very well) on how to keep straying husbands, which the *Liku* turned into a send-up of Indonesian government bureaucracy (1300+).

The light-hearted mood is interrupted by the arrival of the *Bendésa*, the village head of Nusa Penida, Luh Wedani's father (all the minor masked characters (*Bondrès*) are played by the same actor as Wijil, who went off stage, 1350). The village head reminds the prince that he has to redeem his promise and now is not the time to be relaxing with his wife (1400) to which the prince explains that everything is organized, after which the prince, Luh Wedani and the village head go off stage to perform the rite (1450). Immediately afterwards a very old villager enters who seems on his last legs, but has come to perform service for his master. He exits and a white haired village elder enters (1500) and discusses how, despite the hard life in Nusa Penida because of its barrenness, they ate well in the past by knowing which vegetation was nutritious, unlike nowadays. He announced he is from a clan (*Dukuh*) whose task it is to organize the practicalities of big ceremonies like this and discusses details of the main temples and the proprieties of big rites. The Panasar and he discuss the background and purposes of such ceremonies in Balinese religion (1600) before the Panasar concludes with an apology (*pangaksama*) for anything that has been said or done, which was excessive or fell short.

The layout of this work

This Introduction, together with the transcription and translation of *The Prince of Nusa Penida redeems his vow* are intended to be part of a full monograph. This monograph will have detailed introduction, followed by chapters on character, narrative, sources and changes in Balinese performance. After the translation, there will be chapters analyzing the different commentaries made by the group of elderly males, the females from one family, the actors and expert commentators. The conclusion will address the changing nature of *Prèmbon* and *Arja* in Bali.