

Changing audiences

**representing development and religion in
Balinese theatre and television**

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Bali is reduced in most Western representations to a timeless paradise, where life comes easy and the natives indulge ceaselessly in dancing and theatre. Such an image is not confined to the tourist industry. The present government of Indonesia finds it convenient to stress cultural heritage. When academics invoke the same synecdoche, something is amiss. The most celebrated depiction of the 'traditional' Balinese polity identifies it as 'a theatre state' unchanging over the centuries (Geertz 1980: 134), 'in which the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience' (Geertz 1980: 13). Needless to say, Balinese views, diverse as they are, concur neither with Bali as unchanging, nor with theatre as its core institution or root metaphor. In many pre-conquest texts and contemporary accounts, it is religion which Balinese often represent as central to their social life and institutions. (To many Western academics, there is something faintly improper in taking religion, like sex seriously.) Cryogenizing Bali also ignores the fact that the island is a province of Indonesia, a country which lays great stress on its current economic and social development. And Bali is its most rapidly developing province.

In this paper, I wish to look therefore at some of the ways in which development and religion are represented publicly in Bali in theatre and television. In the last decade, television has come to play a vital part in such representations. The apparent potential importance of television as the means to changing social attitudes has not been lost on the central government. Given the ethnic and cultural diversity of Indonesia, there have been attempts to employ 'traditional' cultural forms in different regions to put various kinds of message across to a local, but mass, audience. At the same time regionally, certain organizations, either sponsored or supported by government, are increasingly abrogating an enunciative function (Foucault 1972: 86-106). In Bali, the Parisadha Hindu Dharma, the Administrative Council for Balinese Hinduism, is emerging as the hegemonic presence in matters of religion. There are government officials down to the level of sub-district whose task it is to promulgate Parisadha teachings. In dance and theatre, the Balinese Academy of Dance, S.T.S.I. is coming to occupy a somewhat different, but equally important, rôle. It is responsible *inter alia* for developing some of the new genres which are appearing, such as *Séndratari*, dance-drama. Television is one of the main media through which these two institutions work. The extent of government involvement in ostensibly 'cultural' programmes is not limited to this. Of the two most popular troupes which appear on television, one is Bhara Budaya, which is managed by the Armed Services and the other is run by Indonesian State Radio (Radio Republic Indonesia).

While this may outline something of the institutional framework within which state television broadcasting takes place, it does not tell us much about what actually goes on in the programmes broadcast, nor what Balinese audiences make of them. Government may set out, directly or indirectly, to change public attitudes by presenting information, advice, exhortation or authoritative statements. Such a model of how television works, however, presupposes an antiquated theory of communication. The agent is the sender of the message which is transmitted to a passive, uncritical recipient in whom the message is implanted, intact and unaltered. This account neither squares with Balinese ideas about how images or speech works, nor is it necessarily borne out by Balinese practice. Briefly, Balinese tend to evaluate a performance or utterance by the effect which it has on its intended target, who has to reflect critically on what was said or done. (According to this account it is hard to reach the determinedly stupid.)

Balinese audiences are changing in two senses, besides notionally being affected by the ostensible messages of television broadcasts. First, different audiences are emerging for different kinds of broadcast. The Indian versions of the Mahabharata and Ramayana have been shown (on state and commercial channels respectively). Contrary to what I had expected, older people (over about thirty-five) in the research village, who have been brought up on the Balinese versions of these epics, rarely watched. However, it has a devoted following, among younger males especially. (At S.T.S.I. incidentally, classes stop and the teachers range themselves in an arc round a giant television set.) Older people explained that, although it was interesting to see differences in the plots (*giing*) and the style of performing, the Indian versions were set in a remote country in a past which had no relevance to the present in Bali. They provided no *panglèmèk*, understanding or advice on Balinese situations and how to act towards them. This squared to some extent with younger peoples' responses that they just enjoyed the stories and the alien settings.

Balinese audiences also change in that tastes change. Seeing highly skilled professional actors on television seems to have killed off almost all local theatre troupes. And fashion changes. When popular 'historical' dramas, known as *derama*, were first shown on television, the streets more or less literally emptied. Audiences have since become bored with them and either do not watch or have the set on in the background and do something else. (Even seats for live performances are now often half unoccupied.). Finally, new genres and emphases have started to emerge in the last months, as state television both responds to its critics and to competition from a commercial television station, S.C.T.V. (Surya Citra Televisi). For instance, a new genre, *deramatari*, developed by S.T.S.I. was first broadcast on the 7th. January this year, in which the dangers of AIDS was illuminated by a fictive character, I Nyoman Bawa, who liked foreign women and paid the price. Balinese audiences watch different kinds of programme in different ways. To those to which they pay attention they are not passive. And even state television is beginning to respond to complaints. To what extent, however, certain kinds of television which encourage passive, rather than active critical, viewing will lead to the passification of audiences is another matter.

I wish to turn today to a different subject: how development and religion are represented on television. It is a vast topic and I can only draw on samples from the materials recorded. I shall look at three broadcasts: one explicitly to do with development, the other two quite different kinds of religious programme. My choice has been affected by Balinese viewers. The first piece is from the only genre explicitly to do with development which Balinese actively tended to drop other things to watch. The second is one of a number of programmes in the *Hindu Religious Rostrum* series, which they mentioned when I asked which of these broadcasts they remembered. The last piece I chose because people were talking enthusiastically about it. It is Basur, one of the most dangerous plays which can ever be performed in Bali, put on as a religious broadcast to explain the significance of the New Year festival of Galungan.

Having decried Western representations of Bali as all about theatre and dance, I had better explain how come the three pieces involve theatre in some way. Mainly, it is that you would get bored by lengthy footage of Balinese sitting discussing religious and ethical concepts. My choice is also affected by the location and nature of the research village, and the interests of the people there. It is in Gianyar, the district in Bali which specializes in dance and theatre. Other parts of Bali, such as Tabanan, are known for their interest in explicitly religious discussion and commentary. Also there are no Brahmana in the village,

and it is Brahmana above all who are considered qualified to comment on religious matters. Finally the people with whom I work, and whose comments on the broadcasts I discuss later know more about theatre than religious texts and felt themselves ignorant about the latter. Balinese audiences are far from homogeneous and, at the moment, I can only talk about a number of people from one place. In fact, in due course, I plan with a number of other Balinese specialists to explore commentaries on a single broadcast by men and women from different castes, backgrounds and interests from different parts of the island. Without anticipating what the outcome of such research might be, I would be surprised if it did not suggest kinds of diversity, as well as overlap, I have yet to imagine.

To turn straight away to the issue of development, there are a number of programmes (apart from the regional news), which take economic and social development as a theme. These include *Banjar Kita*, roughly 'Our Village' and *Bunga Rampai Pedésaan*, 'Mixed Village Flowers', which are about local institutions of interest, including development. One occasional series of fifteen minute broadcasts (of which there have been eleven in the last two and a half years) began simply by being called *Bondrès*, the name of a genre of masked dance. Later it added the sub-title *I Midep and friends*. Different organizations sponsor broadcasts to promote particular government programmes. These have included piped water and agricultural projects, identity cards, health and family planning advice. The following extracts are from this last (Cassette 74).

What makes the series interesting is that it features two of the island's best known actors. One, Ngakan Déwa Madé Sayang, who plays the rôle of 'anchorman', *Panasar*, is a senior teacher at the S.T.S.I. training school and also provides the spoken text for *séndratari* performances. The other, I Midep, started out as one of the servants in a *Derama* troupe, then took to playing comic female rôles, which is how he features here. Both are far from being uncritical proponents of government policy. Déwa Madé Sayang is celebrated as one of its sternest critics, when the need arises; and I Midep's command of rhetoric enables him to hint at quite different sub-texts while ostensibly propounding official policy.

What makes the series popular is that the actors are *wayah*. Literally this is 'mature', but it suggests a mastery of style and a skill at unspoken implication. It is then up to the more *wayah* members of the audience to reflect on the significance of what is said. While the *Panasar* plays here the serious rôle, I Midep engages the audience's attention through humour. For example, in one programme on food hygiene, he played a village woman whose husband has constant stomach upsets. She thinks that if flies are attracted to her food, it must taste good. In the following broadcast, he plays a woman whose husband is constantly getting her pregnant. The piece starts with the *Panasar*, who plays a friend, and her husband expatiating on how much things have improved in Bali and how a healthy country depends on a healthy populace. From this, they turn to her ill health, which the friend diagnoses as lack of vitamin and too little blood, brought on by serial pregnancies. He counsels her to go to the local health clinic for dietary and birth control advice.

Bondrès: Women's health and family planning

Extract 1: The entry of Luh Sari

Wife: (She sings) Life consists is bearing dangers.
 Husband: Her energy's all gone.

Friend: So that's why you don't dance like you used to.
 Wife: Leave me alone, what do you expect?
 Husband: I've just remembered: we've got lots of children, which takes up a great deal of energy.
 Wife: And he's made me pregnant again.
 Husband: The first we knew is all of a sudden she was throwing up, all of a sudden she was dizzy. You know, she sleeps nine times a day!

Extract 2: On Dizziness

Friend: Is your head going round and round?
 Wife: I just sleep.
 Husband: Is your head going round and round?
 Wife: Going round how? No, my head stays still, it's the world that's whirling!
 Husband: You see the world going round and round?
 Wife: That's it.
 Husband: Of course, that the world goes round is in accordance with science. There is a theory that the world revolves.

Extract 3: Diet and Philoprogeniveness

The two men decide that her dizziness is due to lack of blood. They recommend her to eat food which will increase her blood supply. Luh Sari replies that she tried eating *lawar* (chopped food which contains raw blood). They tell her that you can't eat blood in that form...

Husband: You should eat leaves (he lists various leaf vegetables supposed to contain iron).
 Friend: They contain vitamins.
 Husband: When I gave her a food package, she threw away the food and ate the banana leaf!
 Wife: Don't be like that. I can look after myself now.
 Friend: Your diet should be properly thought out. If I'm not wrong, there's something causing this lack of blood.
 Husband: What?
 Friend: How many children have you got?
 Husband: How many is it, wife?
 Wife: I've forgotten, how many is it? More than five, I think.
 Friend: What? You can't remember how many children you've got?
 Wife: Yesterday the census people came back and asked me.
 Husband: What did they say?
 Wife: 'Mother, Mother. What's the name of your eldest child?' I couldn't remember its name, there are just too many.
 Friend: Good Lord!
 Wife: What *are* their names?
 Friend: Now we have been told not to have more than two children. As you've had five or more, that's a factor causing too little blood, because you've given birth too often - so that you know.
 Husband: How do you set a limit?
 Friend: You should restrict yourself to two and space them. You've had too many children.
 Husband: No. We had them one at a time...

(The Friend explains that they need to go to the local government clinic, to obtain birth control and to give Luh Sari vitamins and a regulated diet.)

The young people watching, whom I talked to, said they found the jokes and the people portrayed funny, but volunteered little more. Older people offered more commentary. It was *wayah*. The acting and jokes held one's attention. And, as everyone knew of couples like that, the play hit its target. One would remember it, if you or someone you knew were in that situation.

The second programme is also apparently didactic, but makes its point by drawing explicitly on readings from religious texts and discussion of their significance (Cassette 59). Its title is *Musuh Utama*, 'The Supreme Enemy', which Balinese instantly identified as *kanambetan I Manusa*, 'human stupidity', stemming from unreflectingly following one's desires. The programme starts with a playlet about a man with two wives and a son and daughter, one by each. When it begins, the father is out gambling on cockfights, while the daughter asks the mother whether she should go to university. The father enters with his fighting cock (having just lost Rp. 500,000, nearly α 200, on a bet) and in no mood to listen to requests for money. The son enters in a bad mood too, having run away from school, because his friends ride around on motorcycles, but he hasn't got one and feels ashamed. He demands money for a Honda. After some argument the father is left alone to reflect, as he begins to realize the consequences of his previous actions. This ends the first part.

Hindu Religious Rostrum: The Greatest Enemy.

Extract 1: Study Plans

Mother: If you are clever, if you have ability, you can do anything.
 Daughter: Is it O.K. for me to enroll (for university) then?
 Co-wife: Yes, of course, my dear.
 Mother: I am very much in favour. Both your mothers agree.
 Co-wife: You can't steal knowledge. Whereas if you have a lot of money, people can steal it.
 Daughter: I shall ask father for the money.
 Mother: He's gone out, but he's due back any second.
 Daughter: The trouble is he's only interested in cockfighting.

Enter the husband carrying his fighting cock.

Father: Huh. So here are my two wives ganged up. If I married another one, the house would be completely full of the lot of you.

Extract 2: I Gedé Ngambul

Co-wife: Hey, Here's I Gedé (*her son*).
 I Gedé: Huh.
 Co-wife: How come you're back so soon? Did they let you (off school)?
 I Gedé: Off from what?
 Co-wife: How come you're early? Why don't you give a clear reply?
 I Gedé: I left the teacher (the teacher left me). (*His reply is ambiguous in Balinese as to who left whom.*)

Co-wife: Are you playing truant?
 I Gedé: Yes.
 Co-wife: How come?
 I Gedé: I couldn't remember the lessons. I've finished with going to school.
 Co-wife: But I've paid the fees, and all the books are paid for.
 I Gedé: Forget them.
 Co-wife: What do you mean you've finished?
 I Gedé: I want to go out. People go out sometimes, you know.

Extract 3: Reflecting on One's Stupidity

Father: This is the splendid state you get into if you have two wives. Fortunately they've only got one child each. If they had three each, I'd be in my grave with all the nagging. One wants a motorcycle, one wants this, the other wants that. You know, the government was correct in issuing instructions only to have a few children. That's why there's a regulation PP10 not to have more than one wife. This is the sort of mess you get into otherwise. Oh hell.

The scene then shifts abruptly to a small literature-reading group of men of different ages and a (token) woman, who are sitting in a semi-circle. One of them mentions a neighbour of his, who has two wives and wastes his money on cockfighting... A middle-aged man in the centre of the group, who turns out to be the teacher, starts to explain that the man is stupid (*belog*) and that this is the greatest enemy. Another member suggests that, in the past, the great enemy was the Dutch and then the Japanese, but perhaps it is now stupidity. The teacher agrees. [The first extract which follows.] He then goes on to say that the theme has been written about in the *Sarasamuscaya*, Section 399. (The *Sarasamuscaya* is a religious and ethical work on all sorts of themes.)

The version I know of is in Sanskrit, the version they read is in *kawi*, or Old Javanese.) One young man then reads (*ngawirama*) the passage from the original in short sections, while a second glosses it (*ngartiang*) in high Balinese. They discuss it briefly, before the teacher says that the subject is also touched upon in the *Nitisastra*. I am not familiar with the *Nitisastra* texts, but Zoetmulder describes it as 'a special genre of literature' on political ethics (1974: 166; cf. 1983: 1200). Anyway the section two others read describes the condition of being born a human, stupidity as the supreme enemy, the devotion to a child as the supreme feeling and Divinity as the supreme power. [The second extract.] They discuss the relevance of this and then the woman sums up the proceedings, significantly in Indonesian.

While we were watching, the viewers set about deciding where the actors came from and concluded it was from Mengwi, near Tabanan. They was how they did things there. Afterwards, the viewers said that they endorsed the theme: plenty of people behaved that way. However it had not engaged their attention particularly. The readings had been stiff (*kekeh*), as had the performances of everyone in the playlet, except the mother of the girl and above all the young man, who had portrayed nicely a boy in a sulk (*ngambul*). They were also put off by the teacher. *Mabasaan* (or *pepaosan*) groups didn't usually have people who behaved like that. It was arrogant (*sombong*) and inappropriate. The moral point, *panglèmèk*, was good, but it was far less *wayah* than the previous example. It was less likely to come to mind if the occasion arose.

One feature of the older peoples' commentary I found interesting. A distinctive style of rôle as teacher is much favoured by certain characters in the more didactic television

programmes and by Indonesian officials when addressing the ignorant masses. I have been struck by a dissonance between what I imagine those adopting the rôle assume it achieves and from what I know members of the audiences have said afterwards. Playing *Bapak*, father, rarely goes down well. It meets with polite silence and little else. Likewise, the more explicit attempts to instruct a television audience do not seem particularly effective. Some of the younger viewers though said they were less put off by the paternalist style: they have encountered it far more often at school and in dealings with members of the bureaucracy.

Television may achieve its effect less by communicating a message than by being more or less persuasively simply part of the world as people come to know it. Does it then follow that, to the extent younger people know the world as consisting of endless lectures by self-appointed father-figures, they accept this? I think not. The world as they know it is full of contradictory practices, and among the practices are ones of critical reflection on what people say and do. I have heard much recently, usually from their political overlords, about how Asian peoples do not have a tradition of democracy, independent critical thinking etc., but wish - more often need - to be ordered what to do. I can only say that the Balinese I know seem to me, if anything, more given to independent critical thought than do my neighbours and colleagues in this country. For all sorts of reasons, they may not voice their thoughts publicly or act upon them. But that is another matter.

The final piece I wish to discuss is a slightly unusual performance of *Basur*. However, it seems most are unusual in some way. The play is an oddity. Although the orchestra is often that used for *Arja*, sometimes called 'musical comedy', as may be some of the characters, comedy is far from its main theme. It is about low caste characters, not royalty. Its music and the *tembang*, song forms, are quite distinct.

The plot, briefly, is about a villager, Nyoman Karang, who has two beautiful daughters. The elder, Ni Suka(a)sti, is attracted to her cousin, Madé Tirta. Another relative of hers, Wayan Tigarón, desires her, a feeling she does not reciprocate. Tigarón's father however is the terrifying figure of I Gedé Basur, who possesses enormous power, *sakti*, and of whom Ni Sukasti's father is frightened. Basur and his servant, I Bèndot, come to visit Ny. Karang to ask for his daughter's hand in marriage to Basur's son. Despite his fear, Ny. Karang says that he must listen to his daughter's wishes. She requests time to consider, at which point her cousin's father turns up to press the suit on behalf of *his* son. Basur, realizing how things stand, takes it badly and determines on vengeance against the girl. Basur privately then summons up his followers, *sisiya*, and they transform, *ngalekas*, he usually into the witch, Rangda. In this form he *ngarisebin*, inflicts illness upon, Ni Sukasti, who comes close to death before her father succeeds in finding a healer, I Kaki Balian (Grandfather Healer), who diagnoses the cause of her plight. He engages in a confrontation of power with Basur and his followers and wins.

In the version reported by de Zoete and Spies, men rushed forward with swords - it is not clear whether actors or audience - and attempted to kill Basur. In one instance, they report, the actor playing Basur died after the performance from wounds received (1938: 209-10). So much for the disjuncture between representation and the real. the relevance of which I question for Bali anyway. According to village commentators however, one of whom had danced Basur on several occasions, Basur usually submits to his victor and begs forgiveness for being led astray by his unbounded desires.

Whatever the version, and they differ, Balinese consider Basur an extremely dangerous play to perform. They speak of it as more dangerous than Calon Arang, a play about a famous witch of that name and set in eleventh-century Java, under the then Balinese king Erlangga. There are many stories of actors who have played Calon Arang going mad or dying after the performance. Basur's songs are so dangerous that no one dared sing them at night. While I was researching the television performance, there was a small baby in the compound and no one would sing Basur's part during the day, for fear of killing the child. Playing the video tape in the compound was judged to be safe, because it was only a *lawat*, an image. In rather different words, de Zoete and Spies echoed Balinese when they wrote that the play 'seems to possess some peculiar and moving quality which is not quite to be accounted for by any analyzable elements' (1938: 207).

The hour-long televised version was cut to about a quarter of its usual length and to the bare bones of the plot given above, with only brief sections of the songs. Instead of an *Arja gamelan*, it used a chorus, borrowed from Kècak, the so-called 'Monkey Dance', which was adapted by Walter Spies with a number of Balinese in the early 1930s from the chorus for the 'trance-dance', *Sanghyang Dedari*. The style of performance was also not *Arja*, but closer to *Deramatari*, while the use of television cameras allowed some interesting effects not seen in staged versions.

To illustrate the play, I have taken six short extracts.

- The first is the entry of Basur, singing of his intention of asking on his son's behalf for the hand in marriage of Nyoman Karang's daughter, Ni Sukasti. His servant, I Bèndot, calls out for all the followers of I Gedé Basur to stir themselves to pay homage to their master. When they do, he calls them faithful slaves.
- In the second, Ny. Karang in fear and with a show of great deference responds to Basur's request for his daughter, by saying that they should not be hasty, but should ask her together and jointly accept the result. Ni Sukasti enters and her father bids her approach. Nyoman Karang says he thinks she has heard what they have been talking about from her pavillion. She sings that she is not yet in a position to be able to say. Her sister says that all the dogs are barking, someone is coming. It is Madé Tanu, the father of Md. Tirtha, who has come to ask for Ni Sukasti as wife for *his* son.
- In the third extract, Basur's servant, Bèndot, carries on the little shrine, *sampian mas*, which Basur will use to transform himself and his acolytes. The chorus enact a great wind which accompanies Basur's power. He transforms himself, as do several of his followers. In this version, Basur appears to be unchanged. He becomes, though, invisible to non-initiates - but, fortunately, not the television audience. He orders illness to afflict Ni Sukasti, then disappears.
- Next there is a brief extract of Ni Sukasti collapsing as his words take full effect. Basur looks on, invisible to those present. In this performance, he holds the *sampian mas* up in front of him, which appears like a strange mask.
- The last two extracts deal with the battle of Basur and the healer. The first is of the battle itself in which the healer confronts Basur's acolytes who are manifestations of his power. The healer remains absolutely still and unmoved by everything Basur can summon forth to disturb him. The acolytes fall prostrate, defeated.
- Finally, Basur comes to beg forgiveness of the healer. Kaki Balian orders him to desist from making others ill. Basur replies that he is now afraid to do so. The healer tells him to adhere to the *Trikaya parisuda*, the three actions through which one purifies the body and attains the practice of *dharma*, duty, goodness. According the Parisadha Hindu Dharma, the three which require purification are *manacika*, desires and thoughts; *wacika*, speech and words; and *kayika*, parts of the body, Kamenuh 1974: 9-10.) For *adharna*,

wrongdoing has never triumphed over *dharma*, good action. That is the reason that there is Galungan as a *cihna*, an indication or proof, of the victory of *dharma*. Basur assents to this, which, in a sense, is the key moment of the whole piece, as the caption comes up in Indonesian: *Hari Raya Galungan dan Kuningan adalah hari kesucian lahir dan batin*, ‘The public holidays of Galungan and Kuningan are the days for the purity/purification of the inner and outer self’.

I think that I understand why Balinese of all ages, men and women, enjoyed it. I am interested to know how far it touches a non-Balinese audience. Several features are worth noting. Although they liked it, the people I watched it with were highly critical of the dancing and acting. Only Basur and slightly less so, Ny. Karang, were considered adequate. The woman playing Ni Sukasti moved all right and her face was better than her sister’s, but her voice was poor and she was too old. The rest were all *kekeh*, stiff. What they were all clear about is that it was not primarily theatre, *sesolahan*, but *pitutur*, advice, instruction. This seemed to detract from no one’s enjoyment of it. Basur is, after all, about the unleashing of horrific destructive power and the capacity of concentrated understanding to encompass it.

To these comments I would add my own. Only right at the end did I notice explicitly ‘religious’ elements being introduced in the clear reference to the *trikaya parisuda*, *adharma* against *dharma* and the distinctly un-Balinese, indeed Geertzian, reference to *lahir* and *batin*. The audience spotted the style immediately: but then they understood their own cultural nuances infinitely better than I do. Unlike the heavy-handed paternalism so beloved of Indonesian officialdom, Basur, and to a lesser degree the tale of the pregnant wife, work because they require the audience to think and work upon what happens. To Balinese, it is about real powers in the world, the motivation behind which, and ways of coping with which, one needs to reflect about. It is not some trivial domestic drama concocted for television to *belabour a point*. The moral of Basur is integral, as it were, to the story and its telling whereas, in *The Supreme Enemy*, the story merely serves as a prop to the moral, an approach deeply offensive, I have learnt, to Balinese realist sensibilities. Balinese like the moral point to be true of the world or, failing that, to be narratively convincing, but preferably both.

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