

**Adrian Vickers, ed., *Being Modern in Bali: Image and Change*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Monograph 43, 1996. 256 pages.**

Danilyn Rutherford

In 1990, while conducting research on a rocky, windswept island in northern Irian Jaya, I listened more than once to a monologue on the government's plans to turn the coastal regency into a center for tourism. "Visit Indonesia Year" was right around the corner, and Biak-Numfor would not be left out. Conjuring up a world of five-star hotels and handicraft centers, golf courses and dance shows, the official or visiting businessman always ended his speech with a flourish. "Biak"—a place that one guidebook writer had christened "the Gary, Indiana of Indonesia"—was going to be "just like Bali." However misplaced this prediction might have seemed, it reflected the assumption underlying the national government's untiring campaign to stimulate tourism throughout the archipelago: paradises are not discovered, but made.

Turning one island's present into another island's future, the rhetoric of development that takes Bali as a model betrays an unmistakably modern logic. The abstract notion of "modernity" gives way to a determined notion of "modernization" as a comparison across space fills in the contents of an empty trajectory through time.<sup>1</sup> While none of the essays in this interesting volume explicitly accounts for Bali's place as a prototype for national development, like the editor's other writings, *Being Modern in Bali* does an admirable job of showing how this particular paradise was created. In essays on literature, the arts, religion, and language, the authors each present a glimpse of Bali as a historical society, "coeval," as Fabian might put it, with its "Western" and "non-Western" others.<sup>2</sup> Below, I will argue that the collection's editor might have done more to unpack the concept that unites the essays—that fashionable, if troublesome topic, "modernity." But before turning to the book's weaknesses, it is worth considering its considerable strengths.

The essays in *Being Modern in Bali* do much to reveal the novelty of Balinese "tradition." Traced to their late colonial origins, Bali's emblematic forms of music, dance, and ritual appear as the outcome of a history of liaisons between local and exogenous interests and imperatives. Exemplary in this regard, Tilman Seebass's chapter on the emergence of *kebiar* balances some bold speculations on the origins of the new style with a careful depiction of what set it apart from prior musical genres. Seebass situates the rise of *kebiar* in the context of the extension and intensification of Dutch colonial power, first in the north of Bali and later in the south. The defeat of the southern kingdoms in 1908 was followed by the imposition of taxation and corvée labor, and the displacement of many Balinese farmers from their land. It was also followed by a rapid rise in tourism. As Michel Picard points out in another chapter, in 1908, just as the Dutch military was completing the conquest of Bali, the colonial government opened a Bureau of Tourism in Batavia; in 1914, when Bali's

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter Osborne, "Modernity: A Different Time" in *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-garde* (New York and London: Verso, 1995), especially pp. 13–20.

<sup>2</sup> See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia Press, 1983), pp. 30–31.

“pacification” was deemed complete, the Bureau extended its services to the island. Thanks in large part to the publication of a glossy picture book by a German doctor, by the mid-1930s, Bali was “a must for world travelers.”<sup>3</sup> These changes were accompanied by a dramatic transformation of Bali’s music, as performers traded *gong gede*, an older genre using large metallophones, such as the *gangsra jongkok*, for a new form named *kebiar*, literally “a sudden outburst of flames,” which relied on the lighter, more flexible tones of the thinner keyed *gender*.

Seebass’s suggestion that the uncertainties of the period led to uncertainties in Bali’s music is interesting, if not entirely persuasive in the absence of a fuller picture of the paths that led from social context to musical style. One is left wondering why “uncertainty” did not lead to a longing for stability, instead of a desire for change. More convincing are the connections that Seebass draws between the tastes of tourists and long-time foreign residents and the rise of the extravagant, condensed form of musical expression. According to Seebass, for the German artist, Walter Spies, a late-colonial denizen of Bali, *kebiar* represented an “unconscious” reflection of “his own Expressionist and hedonist philosophy;” for the musical expert, Colin McPhee, as for other foreign visitors, the fascination “originated with a general Western affinity for dynamic processes and concepts of time.”<sup>4</sup> While one might object to the implication that the “non West” is necessarily “static,” the rewards available to those who internalized outsiders’ perspectives no doubt added to the incentives that prompted musicians to melt down the keys from their *gangsra*. Using the extra cash or bronze to buy or make *gender*, they still pocketed enough of a profit to help them through difficult times.

Michel Picard and Fredrik E. de Boer’s chapters on dance and drama track the processes depicted by Seebass into the present. Like Seebass, Picard begins with the uncertainties of the late colonial period, but follows their effects in a somewhat different direction. As “alien” powers encroached on the prerogatives of the customary order, the Balinese took refuge in a new conception of culture. “(I)n order to confront the irruption of the outside world into their traditional universe, the Balinese authorities strove to circumscribe that which they deemed should remain solely the preserve of the Balinese. In order to do so, the authorities cut through the living fabric of their culture, drawing boundaries where most Balinese perceived only a continuum.”<sup>5</sup> Yet the intelligentsia to whom Picard refers scarcely worked alone in carving out protected domains of religion and art; outsiders played a critical role in distinguishing between what the Balinese did to “please their gods” and what they did “to amuse themselves.”<sup>6</sup> From the dawn of “peace and order” in the island’s south, foreign tourists and travelers, artists and anthropologists were prominent features of Bali’s colonial landscape. The rise of this new audience for Balinese performance led to changes in local practices and perspectives that had dramatic and lasting effects.

<sup>3</sup> Tilman Seebass, “Change in Balinese Musical Life: *Kebiar* in the 1920s and 1930s,” in *Being Modern in Bali*, p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Picard, “Dance and Drama in Bali: The Making of an Indonesian Art Form” in *Being Modern in Bali*, p. 120.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Tracing these effects forward into the postcolonial period, Picard sketches a logic not unlike that outlined by scholars who have analyzed the late colonial emergence of new forms of consciousness on Java and elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> In seeing themselves through the eyes of powerful others, the Balinese elite gradually assumed their position as the guardians of the “authentically” Balinese. Picard’s description of the seductive effects of this dynamic call to mind other depictions of the birth of “modern” cultural subjects. The allure of the idea of Bali to outsiders—and to the Balinese themselves—has depended in part on the identification of certain genres with the abstract, empty category of the “Sacred,” a secret inner core, beckoning behind those practices deemed “Profane.” De Boer may be correct in suggesting, with Picard, that the aesthetics of the contemporary genres assigned to the typology Picard describes do not adhere to recognizably Western conventions. But the discourse that defines and valorizes authentic traditions clearly did not emerge in a vacuum. By paying heed to the specificities of modern structures of recognition, one can discern the colonial origins of New Order ideology in Picard’s depiction of the officially sanctioned rise of *sendratari*, “dramatic dance,” a universal genre that allows the “peaks” of each “regional culture” (*kesenian daerah*) to be arrayed on a homogeneous national grid.

In privileging the perspectives of “academics, journalists, bureaucrats, technocrats, entrepreneurs, and professionals”—those who “monopolize legitimate discourse on Bali”—Picard assumes a trickle-down model for the spread of national culture and ideology. While, “in the end,” the island’s rural population recognizes government-sponsored art forms as Balinese, regional culture begins in the city. Picard concludes,

Indeed, only those Balinese who are already cut off from their rural roots can recognize themselves in an idealized image, projecting the authorized Balinese cultural identity on the national stage. In the sense of *kesenian daerah*, Balinese dance is therefore less the product of an ethnic group than that of a social group, namely, the new Indonesian middle class of Bali.<sup>8</sup>

I Gusti Ngurah Bagus, in his discussion of “Woman’s Fidelity,” a play produced by late-colonial critics of “caste,” and Linda H. Connor, in her history of efforts to reform Balinese cremation practices, sketch the developing force of this new social group on different terrain. Bagus recounts an Indonesian-language drama in which a daughter rebels against her family by marrying a man prohibited to her by the law of caste endogamy. Reflecting on the play’s pertinence to the broader objectives of the sponsoring organization, Surya Kanta, Bagus suggests that the heroine’s sacrifice of her beloved father’s approval marks the emergence of new measures of personal worth. While Bagus’s analysis is suggestive, much more could be said about the ubiquity of

<sup>7</sup> See, among others, Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, “A Time of Darkness and a Time of Light: Transposition in Early Indonesian Nationalist Thought” in *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990 [1979]); Takashi Shiraiishi, ed., *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912-1926* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); John Pemberton, *On the Subject of “Java”* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Vicente L. Rafael, “Paradise and the Reinvention of Death” in *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993); Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (London: Zed Books, 1986); and Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Picard, “Dance and Drama in Bali,” p. 151.

women in the modern novels and plays penned by male reformers during this period in the Indies; among the many “native” activists who combined politics and art, the members of Surya Kanta were scarcely alone in dramatizing the birth of a new order in the domestic domain.

Mirroring the sacrificial “leap of faith” taken elsewhere with the birth of new identities,<sup>9</sup> “Woman’s Fidelity” exemplifies the colonial dynamic that Chatterjee has located in the emergence of Bengali nationalism.<sup>10</sup> Focused on the postcolonial period, Connor’s contribution speaks even more directly to Chatterjee’s argument that what would become a struggle for “Western” forms of power began with debates over seemingly “non-Western” matters. Connor shows how the effort to extend the practice of cremation to all sectors of society became the grounds for a struggle between older and emergent religious authorities. The emergence of reformist institutions in the 1950s turned a broader campaign for social justice into a contest against local Brahman priests, whose personal livelihoods depended on the maintenance of costly mortuary practices. Drawing on a plethora of written traditions and local customs, these priests kept the cost of cremations well beyond the reach of all but the most well-off villagers!

If early efforts to institute the option of “budget” cremations failed, Connor argues, in New Order Bali the reformers’ fortunes have brightened. Devoted to what John Pemberton has called the “metaspook” of tradition,<sup>11</sup> associations like the Parisada Hindu Dharma have propagated the formerly subversive belief that cremation is the duty of every Hindu. Allowing for elaborate displays of wealth among the newly affluent, the ascendance of a more “efficient” religious order has coincided with the erosion of the local level ties on which the elite formerly had to depend. But, as Connor points out, the new inequities are masked by a modern ideology of equality: just as all citizens are supposedly equal before the state, all Hindus are equal before the gods.

Shaped by a distinctive local history and clothed in a distinctive local garb, the processes described by these five chapters have parallels elsewhere: not only in other parts of Indonesia, but in very different parts of the world.<sup>12</sup> By taking a regional approach to the problematic concept of modernity—one that does not confuse discursive dynamics with their trappings—one might begin to chart connections between particular histories of colonial violence and postcolonial apprehensions of identity, space, and time. In such a charting, the second and final chapters in this volume could play a pivotal role. Focusing on what could be taken as the birth of modern colonial authority on Bali, Raechelle Rubinstein’s analysis of a courtly account, or *geguritan*, of the Banjar War brings to light a relation to authority different from that

<sup>9</sup> Brenner describes narratives of sacrifice told by young Javanese women who, against their families’ wishes, have taken up the veil. See Suzanne A. Brenner, “Reconstructing Self and Society: Indonesian Muslim Women and the Veil,” *American Ethnologist* (forthcoming). On the leap of faith in Kierkegaard and its relation to the emergence of modern identity, see Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> See “The Nationalist Elite” and “The Nation and Its Women” in Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, pp. 35–75, 116–134.

<sup>11</sup> See Pemberton, *On the Subject of “Java,”* p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> In addition to the references listed, see Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1993).

described by Picard or Connor. While Rubinstein stresses the poet's "modern" intentions and proclivities, one could read this celebration of Holland's unpredictable power as an attempt to deal with dangerous outsiders by forming a relationship not unlike that which prevailed between "traditional" courtiers and their rulers. I Gusti Made Sutjaja offers glimpses of a contemporary discourse that could well be working at odds with dominant accounts of Balinese modernity. For Balinese transmigrants, separated by many miles and generations from their supposed home, the preservation of *keBalian*, "Balineseness," rests less on the promotion of an essentialized cultural self than on claims to a mythologized link to the land, a frontier refigured as an original ancestral home. While it would take a different analysis than is found in either of these chapters, one can imagine ways of conceiving of Bali's modernity by contrasting dominant narratives to those discernible on the fringes of colonial and postcolonial power.

Clearly, there is much food for thought in *Being Modern in Bali*. And yet, anyone with an appetite for a sustained reflection on modernity and its limits may be left hungering for more. In his introductory chapter, Adrian Vickers sets the materials presented by the authors in the context of broader issues of epistemology and power. But despite his effort to tease out the implications of his terms, Vickers poses the problem of Bali's modernity in a relativistic fashion that obscures the complicated connections between modern forms of authority and identity. His historical overview never calls into question the subject whose progress it tracks: Bali has always been Bali. Finding today's modernity prefigured in the precolonial era, Vickers exchanges a myth of unchanging tradition for a myth of unchanging modernity. If today's Balinese Indonesians want to be modern—*maju*, "progressive," not *kolot* or *bodoh*, "old-fashioned" or "ignorant"—on another level, they always have been. Vickers notes:

In Bali, as in most of Southeast Asia, the desire to embrace the new was not new. More importantly, Balinese were actively participating in the process which involved their neighboring islands. The Dutch conquest of Bali between 1849 and 1908 and the subsequent Balinese participation in Indonesian nationalism and revolution continued patterns of interaction already well established.<sup>13</sup>

But to be modern is not simply "to embrace the new,"<sup>14</sup> nor is its opposite necessarily "tradition," that notion of a "timeless, unchanging" state of isolation which careful writers have portrayed as the correlate, not the predecessor, of modernity.<sup>15</sup> While he uses the word, "modernity," in his discussion, Oliver Wolters adopts a different way of conceptualizing the "openness to the present" that characterized

<sup>13</sup> See Adrian Vickers, "Modernity and Being Modern: An Introduction" in *Being Modern in Bali*, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> For a critique of this loose definition of modernity, which Vickers draws from Marshall Berman, see Perry Anderson, "Modernity and Revolution" in *A Zone of Engagement* (London and New York: Verso, 1992). See also Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> Pemberton and Osborne both make the point that there is nothing as modern as the notion of tradition. See *On the Subject of "Java"* and "Modernity: A Different Time." See also Henri Meschonnic, "Modernity, Modernity," *New Literary History* 23 (1992) and Naoki Sakai, "Modernity and its Critique: The Problem of Universalism and Particularism," in *Postmodernism and Japan*, eds. Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989).

Southeast Asia's precolonial elites.<sup>16</sup> He stresses that this openness did not lead to the global perspective associated with modern forms of authority—that emptying of space and time associated with the emergence of newly imagined communities. Rather, the localization of foreign texts resulted in the paradox of a landscape of “universal” centers, each of which appeared to its inhabitants as the “navel” of the world. While I have no objection to the effort to locate unexpected continuities in local responses to alien power—to rub the narrative of modernization against the grain, as it were—in doing so, one must pay heed to the ruptures that accompanied the consolidation of modern forms of colonial hegemony. Chatterjee has described the pitfalls met by those who have attempted to trace the development of an autonomously “Indian” capitalism: the disjunctive effects of imperialism disappear.<sup>17</sup>

What enables Vickers to present modernity as a continuous condition on Bali is his refusal to have recourse to a monolithic notion of the modern. “Modernity is an important preoccupation, but it is not really a universal phenomenon; it is rather a set of interrelated phenomena, modernities.”<sup>18</sup> The Indonesian concept is not a derivation; the *moderen* must be treated in its own terms. While Vickers's strategy is laudable, it is not without its hazards. Just as Vickers's insistence on a continuously modern Bali assumes a modern notion of identity, his insistence on the equivalence of parallel ways of “being modern” assumes a modern notion of difference. To deny a people their own unique modernity would seem a crime, by this logic, that defines all modernities as separate but equal. While one might not want to deny any society its distinctive place in an interconnected world, the pluralization of modernity not only blurs historical entanglements, but also obscures forms of difference that do not fit into the scheme. Like *sendratari*, the modern becomes a modular category, an empty block in a domesticating grid. “Diversity” is permitted, but only within the parameters of a dominant “unity,” the order that presents itself to a transcendent gaze.

Vickers is only partially right when he ends his introduction by asserting that “there are as many modernities as there are positions of power and contestation.”<sup>19</sup> For in viewing the contest as a confrontation between modernities, he risks overlooking political responses that do not fit a familiar mold. While I cannot begin to guess what modernity's limits might look like in Bali, I can offer a glimpse of them in Biak. Another of the local authorities who told me that Biak would be the next “paradise” was a prophet. God had told him that in 1999, all of Bali's tourists would come to Biak instead. In the following year, Jesus would erect his throne on the island and people of every nation would gather to be judged. Global acknowledgment of Biak's place at the center of the universe would be followed by the extinction of the world. Here is an embrace of the future and the gaze of outsiders that does not follow the trajectory of “modern” development. No pluralized conception of modernity can exhaust this contemporary form of consciousness—which is no less “coeval” than today's Bali, yet

<sup>16</sup> Wolters suggests that the elite “always took modernity urbanely in its stride.” See O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982), p. 41-46.

<sup>17</sup> See Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, pp. 27–32.

<sup>18</sup> Vickers, “Modernity and Being Modern,” p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

corrosive of the structures of modern power. Only by carefully theorizing the problematic concept of modernity can we begin to imagine what “being modern” is not.

