

Henk Schulte Nordholt. *Bali; An Open Fortress 1995–2005: Regional Autonomy, Electoral Democracy and Entrenched Identities*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2007. 83 pages, with illustrations, map, photographs, glossary, and references.

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This concise and timely book by established Bali and Indonesia scholar, Henk Schulte Nordholt, will prove of broad interest to *Indonesia* readers.

Schulte Nordholt, who is head of research at the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, completed long-term fieldwork in Bali in the 1980s, and bases his latest book on a series of return visits over four consecutive years, from 2003 through 2006. In addition to these recent fieldwork visits, he draws on the assistance of Balinese colleagues and an extensive review of news articles to produce a book that details Bali's developments in the course of instituting decentralization and regional autonomy in post-Suharto Indonesia. He also discusses these processes in relation to the larger Indonesian context, a topic about which he has published extensively.¹

Bali; An Open Fortress takes its point of departure from the current emphasis in Bali by media, politicians, and intellectuals on *Ajeng Bali*, a movement focused on preserving and strengthening traditional Balinese religion and values. The "Open Fortress" of the book's title indicates the paradox resulting from the sense in Bali of being threatened by and wanting to protect the island from the outside world—in the form of powerful investment, tourism, materialism, environmental degradation, radical Islam, and an influx of Muslim migrant workers—while also being highly reliant on and wanting to stay open to, for instance, capital, tourist revenues, and cheap labor. For people to at once accept external influences while at the same time striving to shield themselves from them is perhaps not so unusual a dilemma. More unusual here, as outlined by Schulte Nordholt, is the fascinating and instrumental role played by Bali's media and the media mogul Satria Naradha, sometimes half-jokingly referred to as Bali's second governor (p. 60).²

Schulte Nordholt links this novel manifestation and contemporary discourse on *Ajeng Bali* to past efforts by outsiders to characterize Balinese identity as unique. He reviews the point that he and others have previously elaborated concerning the Dutch colonial administration's attempt to "preserve" Balinese culture and tourism's subsequent role in continuing such an endeavor while further emphasizing the

¹ See, for example, H. Schulte Nordholt and G. van Klinken, eds., *Renegotiating Boundaries: Local Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2007); H. Schulte Nordholt, ed., *Indonesian Transitions* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2006); H. Schulte Nordholt and H. Samuel, eds., *Indonesia in Transition: Rethinking "Civil Society," "Regio," and "Crisis"* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2004a); H. Schulte Nordholt, "'Decentralisation in Indonesia: Less State, More Democracy?'" in *Politicising Democracy: The New Local Politics of Democratization*, ed. J. Harriss, K. Stokke, and O. Tornquist (Basingstoke and New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), pp. 29–50; H. Schulte Nordholt, "Renegotiating Boundaries: Access, Agency and Identity in Post-Suharto Indonesia," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (BKI)* 159 (2003): 550–89; and H. Schulte Nordholt, "A Genealogy of Violence," in *Roots of Violence in Indonesia*, ed. F. Colombijn and Th. Lindblad (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002), pp. 33–61.

² See also see also G. MacRae and I. Ny. Darma, "A New Theatre-State in Bali? Aristocracies, the Media, and Cultural Revival in the 2005 Local Elections," *Asian Studies Review*, 31 2 (2007): 171–89.

implications of Bali's post-colonial status within Indonesia for local perceptions of Balinese culture. For Bali was established as a separate and hence remarkably homogenous province compared to others. Schulte Nordholt expands on how the current version of the urge to preserve Balinese culture, meanwhile, is happening in an atmosphere of crisis and insecurity among Balinese. In addition to the impact of outside investors, tourists, and migrant workers, the developments of and responses to which he outlines, two other factors are highlighted: The post-Suharto Indonesian decentralization laws and the October 2002 bomb attack in southern Bali. The former "promised more autonomy but also brought administrative fragmentation and confusion," while the latter "ruined the image of Bali as a peaceful resort isolated from international terrorism" (p. 3). In keeping with the scope of this book, Schulte Nordholt emphasizes the role played by urban intellectuals in defining Balinese identity within this context. He also provides a primarily critical assessment of decentralization, arguably giving short shrift to discussion of what local democracy may have to offer. A particularly exciting contribution is Schulte Nordholt's attention to the impact of Indonesia's decentralization on electoral politics and power relations from the provincial to the village levels as well as his attention to the local role of gangs, organized crime, and violent conflicts. Schulte Nordholt has published previously on the topic of political violence in broader historical and Indonesian perspective,³ and is well-positioned to track it in current developments in Bali.

Schulte Nordholt's claim that *reformasi* on Bali manifested as caste conflict also drew my attention (e.g. p. 20), but I am not convinced that caste conflicts outright "became the centrepiece of *reformasi*" (p. 26). Schulte Nordholt, himself, rightly identifies a series of reasons why those lower in the system may still participate in caste hierarchy—including the inconceivability of terminating longstanding priest-follower relationships and the inclination, even in post-reform democratic elections, to support high-caste leaders who combine "reasonable administrative performance and royal generosity," maintain "close ties with" and "[serve] the interests of the people," and engage in other strategies for "neutralising [the] feudal image" (pp. 26, 72, and 77, respectively). Indeed, in this vein, I see considerable complexity and accommodations in Bali concerning caste hierarchy. That said, there is no question that caste in Bali is under intensified discussion and ongoing adjustment.⁴

In all, *Bali; An Open Fortress* presents an excellent overview of and insight into recent developments in Indonesia as played out in Bali, breaking new ground not only as the first monograph on regional autonomy in Indonesia, but also with its attention to electoral process and the role of media and violence. Schulte Nordholt has presented a valuable resource for anyone with an interest in Indonesia, post-colonial politics, and the impact of decentralization.

³ H. Schulte Nordholt and I. Abdullah, eds., *Indonesia: In Search of Transition* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2002).

⁴ See also L. Howe, *The Changing World of Bali: Religion, Society, and Tourism* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2005); L. Pedersen, *Ritual and World Change in a Balinese Princedom* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2006).