
This lavishly illustrated coffee-table book edited by Natasha Reichle is intended as a catalogue accompanying the homonymous exhibition—reportedly the first major event on the arts of Bali presented in the United States—on view at San Francisco’s Asian Art Museum from February to September 2011. The exhibition focused on objects of ritual importance in the specific, as well as Balinese art, culture, and religion at large. Many of the 130 artworks on display were borrowed from Dutch collections, both public and private, and mostly originate from pre-World War II Bali. Besides the catalogue entries by Brinkgreve, Reichle, and Stuart-Fox (pp. 133–364), the book contains five essays (pp. 9–131) by Reichle, Stuart-Fox, Brinkgreve, Kam, and Brinkgreve respectively. These reflect the objects presented in the exhibition, but also aim at filling some gaps in material not covered by it.

The first introductory essay ‘Bali: Art, Ritual, Performance’ by Reichle outlines the scope, and main focus, of the exhibition-cum-book-project, namely ‘performance’ and its intersection with art and ritual—in Bali most forms of art and ritual are largely ‘performative’ indeed as they may include puppetry, gamelan performances, masked dances, processions, and so forth. Reichle (p. 11) rightly claims the impossibility of doing justice to such a culturally diverse place as Bali through a scholarly work of limited scope, let alone a museum exhibition. She further points out that the domain of the book is limited, and understandably so, to the art produced by the ‘Hindu’ Balinese, forming the majority on the island, and leaves out of the picture the ‘original’ animistic Balinese, the Bali Aga, as well as the Christian and Muslim communities. Reichle then introduces the reader to Balinese history, culture, and arts. She concludes her essay with a brief ‘story’ of the first resident Westerners in Bali, which amounts to ‘what they saw and what they took’. She relates the idyllic image of tropical paradise that Bali has evoked for nearly a century, the attraction and fascination it exerted on Western artists, performers, and scholars alike. In fact, the words ‘what they gave’ could have been added to the subtitle: as hinted at by Reichle, several forms of art and performance (both profane and sacred) that are marketed as ‘traditional’ in contemporary Bali actually originate from the 1930s, as a...
result of the interaction between local and foreign artists. Yet, Reichle (p. 9) affirms that ‘many of the objects displayed in this exhibition are still used today in much the same manner as they may have been one hundred years ago’, and that contemporary temple ceremonies or performances ‘match descriptions recorded by ethnologists in the 1930s’. I for one believe that this is still the case; however, I am also aware that such statements can be easily criticized, so it is a pity that Reichle does not provide any evidence in support of her statement.

Stuart-Fox’s essay ‘Ritual Arts and Implements of Balinese Priests’ sketches the main features of ‘Balinese Hinduism’, characterizes its priestly types, and explains some relevant ritual paraphernalia, such as the funerary sash *kajang*, magic drawings (*rerajahan*), implements, and offerings.

Brinkgreve’s essay ‘Palm Leaf and Silkscreen: Balinese Lamak in Transition’, stemming from the author’s doctoral research project, focuses on the ritual decorations in the form of rectangular-shaped hanging that are so peculiar to the Balinese (ritual) landscape. Brinkgreve describes the features of the several varieties of *lamak*, their symbolism, their historical development, and the contexts in which they are produced.

Kam’s essay ‘Offerings in Bali: Ritual Requests, Redemption, and Rewards’ explores the ephemeral aspect of Balinese ritual, that is the multifarious variety of its temporary offerings, from the simplest *canang* to the most grandiose—and beautiful—*sarad*.

The concluding essay by Brinkgreve ‘W.O.J. Nieuwenkamp and His Royal Lion Offering-Box’ traces the history of an outstanding object collected by a similarly outstanding collector—the Dutch painter or ‘artistic centipede’ who tied much of his life to Bali in the early twentieth century, and who in turn tied so much Balinese art to himself.

I found one shortcoming of the book to be the treatment of ‘Balinese Hinduism’, and especially the work by Stuart-Fox. Although this experienced scholar provides the reader with a useful guide to the living ritual traditions and their socio-cultural contexts, his description of ‘Balinese Hinduism’ is quite superficial, and largely reflects the limited (and to my mind, stereotypical) views put forward by recent anthropological scholarship—above all, the perception of ‘Balinese Hinduism’ as a religion of orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. In accordance with this—mainly synchronic—approach, Stuart-Fox claims that ‘there is no word in Balinese for religion, and the concept of religion as being separate from traditions or culture is a foreign one’
On a similar note, on p. 52, he states that the distinction between religion and magic is purely Western, as in both Balinese Hinduism and Hinduism at large magical activities ‘such as overcoming one’s enemies, controlling weather, and defeating epidemics, are found together with speculations of a philosophical nature and directions for performing rituals’; furthermore, he claims that ‘Western distinctions are not always very useful in categorizing Balinese texts, and this is especially true regarding the so-called “magical” texts, which often combine aspects of mysticism, magic, and medicine’ (p. 203). I find these views problematic, as a high degree of specialization and compartmentalization is reflected in both the Balinese textual corpus and the living priestly tradition that Stuart-Fox describes. Distinct genres of texts (as reflected in their titles, and especially contents) focus on different, and distinct, domains of the religious discourse: tutur and tattva focus on yoga and speculation respectively, kalpa and other short manuals (entirely comparable to the Sanskrit genre of paddhati) on temple ritual, and sāsana on rules of conduct for priests; it is the vast category of manuals known as usada, mantra, rerajahan, kaviśeṣan, and more, that deal with incantations, practical yoga, and ‘magic’ proper. Traditionally, these texts have been the preserve of distinct classes of religious people: the most speculative in nature (including the ‘ritualistic’ Sūrya Sevana, which presupposes the entire edifice of Śaiva ontology) of the high tradition of the Pedanda Śiva; the more practical ones to the Pemangku and Rṣi Bhujāṅga/Seṅguhu; and those connected with magic and healing with the Balians. It seems to me that such a marked difference in contents, as well as distinction into genres and milieus of production, dissemination, and fruition, would not have been deemed necessary if a distinction between these aspects of what Western terminology broadly categorizes as ‘religious experience’ did not exist at all in the minds of the traditional composers of Balinese texts.

A problematic aspect of Stuart-Fox’s essay, and of the whole book, is that ‘Balinese Hinduism’ is essentialized and reified as an ahistorical category. Nowhere is mentioned that what is referred to as (Indian) ‘Hinduism’ itself is largely a (Indo-British) colonial construct; it is therefore anachronistic to

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1 As I have argued (Acri 2011a:18–20), these ‘genres’ may derive from the division of early Śaiva Saiddhāntika Sanskrit scriptures (or sections thereof) into jñānapāda (‘section on Knowledge), yogapāda (‘section on Yoga’), kriyāpāda (‘section on Ritual’, caryāpāda (‘section on conduct’).
apply this category to define pre-colonial Balinese religion (as much as it is to apply it to premodern ‘Indian Hinduism’). As shown by text-historical and comparative research, it is obvious that we should rather speak of (Balinese) ‘Śaivism’—in emic terms, Śaivamārga or Śivaśāsana. A text-historically informed perspective emerges uniquely from a single statement on p. 36, where Stuart-Fox chivalrously refers to my unpublished ‘Tesi di Laurea’, stating that the main tradition of Balinese Hinduism would be the Śaiva Siddhānta, ‘a predominantly South Indian school, with a dualistic philosophical system in which ritual and mantra play important roles’. Now, Stuart-Fox perpetuates the (old) erroneous view confusing South Indian Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta, a post-twelfth century non-dual system influenced by bhakti and Vedānta, with the pan-Indian, ‘medieval’ (circa sixth-thirteenth century) Sanskritic Śaiva Siddhānta, which was indeed (mainly) dualistic, and gave a great importance to rituals and especially initiation (dikṣā). However, as I have argued elsewhere (Acri 2011a:11–16), the predominant current of Śaivism in premodern Nusantara, and with no doubts the one transmitted to the Balinese pedanda Śiva, appears to have been a ‘pre-classic’, and pan-Indian, strand of non-dualistic, and mainly gnostic (that is, hyper-ritualistic) Śaiva Siddhānta.

A lack of historical perspective results from the mention of the five groups into which the rituals of Balinese Hinduism are ‘traditionally divided’, which fails to acknowledge that these indeed represent a twentieth-century systematization, if not outright ‘creation’, which is not reflected in the premodern texts. Another essentializing tendency is detectable in Stuart-Fox’s frequent references to ‘Tantric Hinduism’, ‘Tantric thought’, and so on, which are never accompanied by an attempt at defining what Tantrism actually is, let alone at pointing at specific (textual) traditions of Sanskritic origin. Beyond a superficial level, in fact, there is no investigation of the

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2 Recent surveys may be found in Acri (2006, 2011b).
3 The relevant entry in the bibliography—its very first item—incorrectly refers to The Drama Review 45, no. 3 (Autumn 2001), pp. 51–77 (this is indeed an article by Nicola Savarrese, ‘1931: Antonin Artaud Sees Balinese Theatre at the Paris Colonial Exposition’); the correct reference should be as per side-note on p. 36. More useful to the readers would have been to refer to my published survey of Tutur literature (Acri 2006).
5 Contrarily to Stephen (2005), which attempts at linking several key features of ‘Balinese Hinduism’ to similar features of Indic Tantrism. Regrettably, Stephen’s useful study, albeit
connections with Sanskritic traditions. Notwithstanding Reichle’s claim to the contrary, Stuart-Fox makes no attempt to compare, in a meaningful and useful manner, Balinese rerajahan with similar Indic manuscripts traditions of magic drawings; similarly, having noted that his comments ‘must be taken as preliminary’ due to the lack of previous comparative studies (p. 49), he points out that the kajang has ‘remarkably similar Indian parallels’, yet does not go beyond referring to ‘numerous examples of cakras’ and drawings of ‘cosmic man’ ‘scattered through numerous books on Indian art’ (p. 59).

Although I realize that succinctness seems to constitute the norm in the entries of exhibition catalogues, a more in-depth analysis of the most relevant objects would have been desirable. A telling example is the highly interesting, and in many respects unique, ‘ritual cloth for use at a cremation (kajang)’ documented on pp. 213–15 by Stuart-Fox. Given its elaborate design, the copious inscriptions it bears, and especially its difficult accessibility (it belongs to a private collection), it deserved a larger reproduction as well as a more detailed description—that is, one that attempted to identify its meaning and Indic prototypes, if any, rather than just characterizing its context of production. Unfortunately, Stuart-Fox only makes cursory references to the high number of symbols that ‘might seem to be related to the cakra system of yoga doctrines’, which, being ‘greater than the seven cakras of the classic cakra system, indicates that other doctrines are playing a role’; and simply mentions the copious ‘small texts in Sanskrit and Old Javanese’ the object bears, without providing a transliteration or a translation, let alone an interpretation.

I cannot avoid pointing out that the section ‘A Note About Spelling’ on p. 6 contains a fundamental misunderstanding of basic matters of Balinese and Sanskrit spelling (which are often mixed up throughout the book, even when the ‘original’ Sanskrit is provided: for example, resi instead of rṣi). This is the claim that ‘when Sanskrit names for deities were adopted in appearing in the bibliography, does not seem to have been fully used by the authors of the book under review.

6 See p. 33: ‘In his exploration of these [rerajahan] drawings, Stuart-Fox suggests intriguing connections between their symbolism and Tantric traditions elsewhere’.

7 It would have been interesting to compare both kajang and rerajahan traditions with the tradition of ‘Tantric drawings’ found on Nepalese palm-leaf manuscripts, as documented by Blom (1989).
Bali, certain changes in spelling and pronunciation occurred. The letter V is most often replaced by a W; but occasionally by a B’. Now, the ‘replacement of V by W’ occurred only during the colonial period, after the shift to Latin script—and it could not have been otherwise, as both W and V, representing the semivocalic phoneme /w/, were indicated by one and the same grapheme in all the Indic scripts used to write Sanskrit, including Pālava-Grantha and Pālava-derived Old Javanese and Balinese scripts. On the other hand, the shift from V (or W) to B may, at least in part, reflect an Indic usage (such as the Nepalese one) and a well-established convention attested in many Indic manuscript traditions.

In spite of the qualms expressed above, and the fact that the book does not actually make a groundbreaking contribution to the field of Balinese studies, it fully accomplishes its main purpose: namely, to document a great deal of relevant Balinese artworks and ritual objects in such a manner that they do not appear as mere ‘museal artifacts’ but as fully integrated in their lively contexts of production and use. For this reason—and also because it comes at an unusually affordable price for a book of such large format and printed (in Italy!) on high-quality illustrated paper—it should not be missing from the shelves of scholars of Bali, as well as anyone interested in Balinese art and culture.

Andrea Acri
Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
a.acri81@gmail.com

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