
What happens when a French-Belgian veteran from Napoleon’s invasion of Russia, familiar with Voltaire and Enlightenment rationalism as well as Dutch colonial practices, is confronted with the intricacies of Balinese politics and culture? The answer is provided in the present volume over more than 800 pages of text. Pierre Dubois (c. 1776–1838) is not altogether unfamiliar in scholarship on Bali. His extensive accounts from about 1830 have been used by a number of scholars over the years, including Alfons van der Kraan and Henk Schulte Nordholt. Apart from a few passages, however, this intriguing complex of texts has remained unpublished until now. While Dubois is not the first European to provide long and detailed accounts of Bali, his predecessors Lintgensz (1597), Oosterwijck (1633), Raffles (1817) and Van den Broek (1818) merely stayed for very short periods of time and had little understanding of Balinese religion, calendar, festivals, caste, or politics. Dubois, on the other hand, stayed in Badung in South Bali between 1828 and 1831 with the delicate task of providing recruits for the Dutch war effort on Java. Apart from Malay he apparently learned some Balinese and was able to extract much information from local informants. In that way, he may be called the first European to provide an initiated account, in the form of a series of letters edited and translated in the present book. They carry the excessively modest working title Légère idée de Balie en 1830.

Helen Creese’s volume is, however, more than that. The first eleven chapters deal with Dubois’ biography, the historical background, the scope of his work, and textual transmission. Creese offers a major study of European-Balinese relations in the first third of the nineteenth century. Bali was a small but not insignificant region that still lay outside of direct European influence. The proximity to Java gave the island a strategical value, while its dense population offered possibilities for the colonial state. Drawing from largely untapped documents found in archives in the Netherlands and Indonesia, Creese paints a very detailed picture of the Dutch post in Kuta, and the efforts of Dubois to secure enough manpower to dispatch to the Javanese war theatre. As he soon discovered, the whole business was in fact a thinly veiled slave trade; the Dutch received ‘recruits’ whom the rulers of Badung wanted out of the way, and there was nothing voluntary about their departure—in fact, they were sometimes sent in chains. While personally disturbed about the arrangement,
Dubois loyally tried to achieve his task by keeping good relations with the local princes. This was made difficult by the utter fear among the Balinese elite of being invaded by the Dutch, a fear that Dubois termed ‘une maladie incurable’ (p. 124). Even in the best of circumstances, relatively small groups of recruits left Bali, and their impact on the conduct of the war was very limited.

It was during his stay in Kuta, in June 1829, that Dubois was invited by the Batavian Society for Arts and Sciences to write a comprehensive account of the still largely unknown Bali. Though not a scholarly person, Dubois was known as a conscientious and perceptive official and accepted in spite of his reservations. His efforts did not, however, result in a finalized manuscript, but rather a complex of letters preserved in different versions, directed to an apparently fictitious ‘monsieur’. This epistolary manner of arranging his work, a common device since the Age of Enlightenment, enables the author to express his views with personal flair, often imbued with irony and humor. As Creese points out, Dubois is familiar with the writings of Voltaire about Indian tradition, although he does not otherwise refer to Enlightenment debates.

For all his attention to detail and critical treatment of the received information, his views on the Balinese society he encountered are far from praising. Similar to much pre-1908 literature about Bali, Dubois’s letters offer an inconsistent mixture of curiosity and condemnation. In one passage Dubois asserts that ‘[i]t is well known that in Bali lives the finest race of men in the entire archipelago’ (p. 572), while at another place we read that they ‘are born with the inclination to acquire every vice, they live by practising those that they can profess, and they die arch-villains’ (p. 748). The detachment of Bali from the rapidly developing Western world is underlined by his statement that the Balinese will be unable to reach a higher, civilized state by their own efforts. In particular, the widespread use of opium evokes the disgust of the author. The diatribes of Dubois seem mainly reserved for the well-to-do populations of the larger settlements, not least the Brahmana who are castigated as corrupt tricksters. The villagers are, on the contrary, praised as hard-working and earnest, and Dubois in particular has many kind words for the female half of the population. At the same time, as Creese remarks, Dubois harbors relativist views and more than once hints that there is more than a European way of seeing things. He sometimes follows the common literary device of referring to European conditions in a non-Western context, not as examples of enlightened reason, but rather the contrary. In an amusing episode, Dubois introduces a fictive Balinese savant to the sights of Naples, including a performance by a castrati, followed by an explanation of his physical deficiencies. ‘“Ah, ah! Really, Sirs, I have learned enough. Nunas pamit (I take my leave).” And he will run off as fast as he can’ (p. 540).
So, how much do the letters tell us that we did not know before? In a long chapter Helen Creese discusses the information provided by Dubois on history, society, religion, and ritual, and how it stands up against other sources. The long and picturesque descriptions of ceremonies, funerals, court life, and royal intrigues carry the mark of self-experience and provide us with valuable insights in the life that was led, at least among the elite, before the onset of European influence. His extensive notes on mytho-history and religion offer intriguing examples of continuity and change in Balinese society. For example, he states that Galungan marks the Balinese New Year, in contrast with the present practice where it falls in March. This is no mistake on Dubois's part, but an older practice that can be substantiated from some other sources. Likewise, Dubois assigns the god Buda a central role which is not matched by later sources. He is the deity that provides humans with flesh and is closely linked to Siva and associated with smallpox (and has nothing to do with Gautama Buddha). Creese offers an interesting explanation for Buda's prominence in Badung around 1830, since this was the time of a severe smallpox epidemic. There are other aspects of Balinese culture where we might have wished Dubois to be more explicit. His description of Balinese painting is quite curt, as is the production of lontar manuscripts, and he dismisses the dances performed at court as merely tedious and based on absurd legends.

The book is a major achievement in the study of Balinese history and culture. The complex of letters, sometimes in a fragmentary and unfinished state, offers a vast panorama of Bali in the early nineteenth century, seen by a prejudiced but sharp-eyed official who had seen much of this world. In spite of the Orientalism-related theme, there are few references to postcolonial theory throughout the book, and relatively little context in terms of Dutch/European images about the Asian Other. However, the highly useful and down-to-earth comments by Helen Creese, together with her meticulous efforts to trace the life and times of Pierre Dubois, makes the book an inexhaustible source of information.

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