RIVALLING RITUALS, CHALLENGED IDENTITIES:
ACCUSATIONS OF RITUAL MISTAKES AS AN EXPRESSION
OF POWER STRUGGLES IN BALI (INDONESIA)

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1. Introduction

The tiny island of Bali (Indonesia) is well-known for its ‘thousand temples’ and their prolific Hindu rituals—as advertised in tourist promotions all over the world. Though depicted as a backdrop to Balinese culture that has unchangeably existed for hundreds of years, temple rituals are a dynamic and contested arena. Most of the temple rituals are carried out according to a ‘script’ focusing on the day the ritual has to be carried out, the number, contents, and composition of the offerings to be dedicated to individual deities and their shrines, as well as on its plot and the main actors. To some extent rituals may indeed give the impression of being firmly standardised and simply reproduced at regular intervals. However, a ritual needs to be successful in order to reach its goal: to please the gods and the ancestors, and to ensure the well-being of the humans, their livestock and also their fields. This goal can be reached only if the rituals are carried out according to explicit rules on the one hand, and standards set by the gods, sometimes without conveying them in advance to the human actors, on the other. Such demands, therefore, are beyond human control. It is failure that people fear most, since this will result in catastrophes like illness and the unexpected death of humans and animals (even epidemics), or droughts destroying the fields. Failure implies a disrupted relationship between humans and gods/ancestors that can be restored, if at all, only with great difficulty and sometimes after much loss.

Each temple ritual inherently carries the risk of failure. Most risks of failure evolve around two crucial issues: 1) infringing the rules of purity, and, closely associated with this, 2) disrespecting taboos, breaking rules of conduct, such as sexual relations that fall under the incest taboo, and sexual intercourse with animals, constituting a violation of the boundaries between humans (manusa) and animals (buron). Impurity (sebel) is attributed to those who have been in intimate contact with
death, illness, wounds, and menstruation. In one sense or another, these events are all associated with crisis. Death, the spilling of blood and the threat of disease attract beings of the world below, buta kala/buta kali, to invade pure space restricted to deities. Buta kala/buta kali are kept from the temples by blood sacrifices, and, among other offerings, rice wine and liquor poured onto the ground. Both, incest and bestiality result in cataclysms, the dissolution of categories that social order carefully separates. This sort of cataclysm inflicts sebel on the whole body of a village community and puts it into a state of emergency. No temples may be entered and no rituals held until whole cycles of purifications have been held. Impurity in this encompassing sense implies a collapse of distinct spaces, deities—and values; it invokes a world of chaos, destruction, and failure.

Apart from failure, it is possible for the actors to commit mistakes either unintentionally (Hüsken 2004: 2), these being only later acknowledged by the gods or, often in combination with the above, as part of a contentious issue among the rivalling actors. In contrast to failure, mistakes are subject to negotiation; they can often, at least partly, be corrected by repeating a sequence or juxtaposing an additional one. The boundary between the notions of failure and mistake becomes blurred as soon as actions perceived to be potentially failure-inducing—ineffectiveness or counter-productivity of the ritual—become subject to negotiation among the actors.

In this paper I shall put Balinese temple rituals in the context of power relations between different groups of people. The politically and socially sometimes tense relationship between such groups are reflected in the performance of rituals and the debates about the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of performing these. I shall describe and discuss contested temple rituals by using two different examples: a recent one from a village in South Bali, Intaran, and a historical one as reflected in oral histories and religious practices from Sembiran in North Bali.1 The two villages today display remarkable differences concerning their social

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1 Fieldwork in Intaran was carried out between 1988 and 1993; for a detailed description of temples and temple rituals see Hauser-Schäublin 1997. Fieldwork in Sembiran and adjacent villages started in 1995 with several stays of different length, each ranging from two to eight months and totalling about two years. Fieldwork took place under the auspices of the Indonesian Institute of Science (Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia), Jakarta, and Universitas Udayana in Denpasar with Prof. Dr. I Wayan Ardika as my sponsor. I am indebted to the German Research Council and the University of Göttingen for supporting my research between 1997 and 2004.