Bali might be termed an anomaly in Indonesia. It is the only province that is both an island and the home of a single ethnic group, albeit a rather diverse one. It is also the only part of the archipelago to have steadfastly retained the Hindu-Buddhist culture that first came to the region over a millennium ago. Although the New Order state as the all-dominant force in cultural production left its mark on Bali, tourism and the strength of tradition have also been determining forces, differentiating Bali from other parts of Indonesia. I will argue that as a result of this unique situation, the ending of the New Order and the implementation of regional autonomy have not led to substantial changes in either the contexts of production or performances of the arts. This is not to suggest absence of change, but rather that contemporary performance activities are little different in kind from those taking place before 1998. As Balinese have always had at their disposal a range of cross-cutting groups which provide a focus for cultural activity and an anchor point for identity, there appears to have been no felt need to create new communities amidst the fluidity and uncertainty of modern life. In other words, there has been no discernible emergence of entities that define themselves as ‘communities’ (komunitas) in a different way to the groups which have long been a part of the performing arts landscape. These groups tend to be parochial in nature, fulfilling local roles and needs, without much reference to a sense of shared ‘Indonesianness’. Nonetheless, there remains a general commitment to promotion of diversity and an ethic of ‘each to their own’ – desa kala patra (place, time and circumstance) in Balinese terms, or Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in diversity) in the wider Indonesian context.

The first part of this chapter will provide an overview of significant events that have occurred in Bali since 1998 that provide the background to any discussion of the performing arts over the last decade. In the second section I will describe the practice of performing arts, in particular the process of learning and the social settings within which artistic activity occurs, which in part helps explain the absence of any dramatic change in focus or form. In the third part I will overview some of the current groups, individuals and institutions that are widely recognized as active practitioners and promoters of artistic production as well as innovation and experimentation.
The Socio-Political Context of Bali since 1998

The decade or so since the end of the Soeharto era has been witness to a number of momentous events in Bali. In addition to one-off occurrences there have been the constant socio-cultural, economic, and increasingly, environmental concerns surrounding the tourism industry.

Prior to 1998 there had been growing opposition to development on the island, particularly that financed by the rapaciousness of the Soeharto family and those closely associated with them. Politically, many Balinese had already thrown their support behind Megawati Soekarnoputri and her PDI-P party in their confrontation with Soeharto and Golkar, largely due to Megawati’s connection to Bali through her father and grandmother and PDI-P’s role as the successor to the PNI nationalist party. Given the context it was not surprising that Balinese actively embraced the calls for Reformasi, political reform. The degree of identification with Megawati as ‘one of their own’ was dramatically demonstrated in the riots which took place when she was denied the Presidency after the 1999 elections, resulting in the destruction of the government office buildings in Denpasar, Singaraja and Negara.

While the riots can be seen as a manifestation of frustrations over the sidelining of a candidate perceived to be non-Muslim, and directed towards symbols of government, the bombing of the Sari Club and Paddy’s Bar in Kuta on 12 October 2002, and the Jimbaran Beach bombing on 1 October 2005 by members of Jemaah Islamiyah were understood as direct attacks by Muslim outsiders against Balinese themselves and their visitors. In the main Balinese responded with remarkable calm, refraining from turning their anger and disbelief into violence or reprisals against Muslim residents. The main reaction was rather to question their own actions and neglect of ritual responsibilities, which may have caused the cosmos to be out of balance. Such self-reflection led to a ritual response in the form of a cleansing ceremony to appease malevolent forces and to ensure the spirits of those killed did not remain bound to the bombsites.

Throughout this same period the implementation of regional autonomy has necessitated a shift of bureaucratic responsibility from the provincial level to

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1 The most notable was opposition to development of the Bali Nirwana Resort near the seaside temple of Tanah Lot, and at Padanggalak to the north of Sanur beach. See Warren (1998) and Schulte Nordholt (2007) for further discussion of these and other development-related issues.

2 Schulte Nordholt (2007, 17) suggests that outside forces were also involved in the attacks, that they were not simply “a spontaneous expression of popular anger” but rather politically orchestrated from Java.

3 See Chapter 5 in Lewis and Lewis (2009) for extended discussion of the bombings and Balinese responses to the events.