The Meaning of Life, or How to Do Things with Letters

Richard Fox

Scholars of Balinese letters have often noted in passing that the characters, or aksara, employed to write Balinese texts are taken to be ‘alive’ by those who use them (see, e.g., Zurbuchen 1987: 56; Rubinstein 2000: 194; Hunter 2007: 283–4). This is arguably one of the more remarkable ways in which Balinese understandings of writing differ from their Euro-american counterparts. But what does it mean to say that Balinese letters are alive? It is all too clear that our received accounts of ‘life’ (Thacker 2010), and of ‘writing’ (Derrida 1974, 1981), engender considerable ambiguity. So, might attention to Balinese practices help us to think more clearly about the use of letters, and perhaps even what it means to be ‘alive’? My contribution to our volume offers some provisional reflections on the question. Its central contention is that contemporary uses of Balinese script are caught between two conflicting conceptions of writing, each allied to a different articulation of agency, life and matter. If having considered these examples our perplexity remains unresolved, the difficulties we encounter along the way should at the very least give us pause to reconsider prevailing approaches to Balinese practices of writing, both ‘textual’ and otherwise.

On Life

Let us begin with life. The idea of life is as slippery as it is consequential. Decisions regarding things so important as our care for the unborn and severely disabled entail judgments as to when life begins, ends and is ‘worth living’. Yet even cursory reflection on limit cases – say, the ‘life’ of viruses, or the idea of ‘brain death’ – would suggest our conventional terminology is rather too blunt an instrument for the questions we have allowed it to define. Looking to the historical and ethnographic record, we find others have had quite different ideas about life and what can – and ought to – be done with it. For the ancient Ionians, for example, Nature (φύσις) was itself alive, as evidenced by its movement and capacity for growth and self-transformation. Whereas, by contrast,
the modern world is one in which Nature has been reduced to a ‘standing reserve’ (*Bestand*), as the later Heidegger so bitterly put it, ready and waiting for exploitation by humanity in its ‘technological’ quest for progress. Certain trends to the contrary notwithstanding, it seems even our desires for environmental ‘preservation’ are guided by this logic of utility, and the graded order of life that it presupposes. Given the entrenchment of these ideas, is it even possible to think otherwise than exploitation? Or is the very idea of an ‘alternative’ mode of thought always already a standing reserve, which, rather like Luke Skywalker in his struggle with the Dark Side, becomes ever more thoroughly coopted the harder we fight? It is with an eye to these and related issues that I propose we examine the various linkages between life and writing in contemporary Bali.

A Note on Terms

When it comes to ‘life’ the key Balinese words are *urip* and *idup*. As one might expect, we find the most elaborate treatment in van der Tuuk’s *Kawi-Balineesch-Nederlandsch Woordenboek* (KBNW; 1897–1912). Consonant with both the later lexicography (e.g., Barber 1979, Kersten 1984, Warna 1990) and present-day Balinese usage, the KBNW described *urip* as the ‘high’ (*hoog*) or refined form of *idup*, for which ‘life’ or ‘to live’ (*leven*) is offered as a simple equivalent. Under each term – both *urip* and *idup* – is provided a series of cognates in other regional dialects, together with numerous examples of usage. These include words derived directly from the root form (e.g., *ngurip, humurip, murip* as ‘bringing to life’ [*in het leven brengen*]), as well as phrases that make use of the root and its derivatives (e.g., *toja pangurip-urip* as a kind of life-giving water [*het levend maken water*]). As in the KBNW more generally, examples are drawn both from literature (e.g., the Tantri stories) and colloquial speech (e.g., an exclamation made following earthquakes). Yet, despite these numerous examples, the KBNW gave no clear indication that the use of these terms might be anything other than equivalent to Dutch, or more broadly European, ideas about ‘life’.

This would perhaps pose less of a problem were it not for the fact that Balinese attribute ‘life’ – that is, *urip* or *idup* – to things that most modern Europeans and Americans would consider ‘dead matter’.¹ For example, as

¹ I have had no little difficulty in trying to find a phrase in colloquial Balinese that approximates to the broadly western notion of ‘dead matter’. To my amusement, and that of my Balinese consultants, a mechanical rendering of the phrase ‘dead matter’ – as *lakar mati*, – is more