

# Bali is a Brand: A Critical Approach\*

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## Abstrak

Kajian kebudayaan Bali kebingungan oleh karena yang dimaksudkan dengan 'kebudayaan' sangat kurang terang. Apakah kebudayaan merupakan esensi atau jiwa orang Bali, suatu gagasan politik yang direkayasa oleh Orde Baru, atau cara menjual seni pertunjukan, barang atau pengalaman kepada wisatawan? Jarang disadari di Indonesia bahwa Bali terkenal di Eropa sebelum Pulau Bali ditemukan oleh pelaut Barat yang sedang mencari sorga di dunia ini. Sejarah Bali tidak bisa dipisahkan dari khayalan orang Barat. Dilihat dari pandangan *cultural studies*, dari awal Bali merupakan 'brand' untuk dipasarkan – dan objek yang dijual adalah kebudayaan. Untuk mengerti apa yang sedang terjadi di Bali, perlu dipahami teori konsumsi dan *branding*. Walaupun kelihatannya yang dijual dan dibeli adalah barang atau pengalaman, sebenarnya yang dikonsumsi adalah perbedaan. Artikel ini menawarkan pemahaman mendalam mengenai hukum-hukum *branding* dari sudut pandang kajian budaya.

**Kata Kunci:** *Bali; Branding; Kebudayaan sebagai Komoditi; Teori Konsumsi; Discourse.*

*To speak of culture was always contrary to culture. Culture as a common denominator already contains in embryo that schematisation and process of cataloguing and classification which bring culture within the sphere of administration (Adorno & Horkheimer [1944] 1993: 38).*

*Culture...has always been an idea post factum [after the event], a notion oriented towards the past (to 'custom' and 'tradition'), descriptive of a state of affairs (and often of a status quo), a nostalgic idea at best (when it mixed the study of exotic societies with regret) and a reactionary ideologue at worst (Fabian 1991: 192, square parentheses mine).*

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*Ever since art came to be art, it has been connected to commodification (Karatani 1998: 150).*

First of all, I would like to thank the members of the organizing committee for the honour of inviting me to speak to this conference. And I trust that my remarks will be taken in the spirit in which they are meant – as a positive contribution to the long term future of Bali. In addressing the theme that I was asked to, I shall raise a series of critical questions and issues. By analogy, no one wants to go the doctor’s to be told that they might be gravely sick. However their prognosis is vastly better if they are indeed ill so that appropriate steps can be taken to diagnose and deal with the condition than being cheerful told that they are fine when they are not.

As the occasion for this conference suggests,<sup>1</sup> concern is growing over the direction and consequences for modernization in Bali. A focus of attention is the apparent antinomy between economic development and Balinese culture. The tensions and contradictions between the increasingly omnivorous demands of a market economy centred on international tourism and the need to protect Balinese culture at first sight seem self-evident. So does the solution: to ring fence the market economy and to preserve and, if possible, reinvigorate Balinese arts, religion and culture. Such a response however is deeply flawed, problematic and ultimately self-defeating. It is a case of mistaking common sense for good sense.<sup>2</sup> Before we can address the problems confronting Bali, as

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<sup>1</sup> The stated theme is *Budhijna Pratyapatti*, Culture Deepening, Spirit Gathering and New Reawakening.

<sup>2</sup> Gramsci noted that commonsense is deeply ideological (1971a, 1971b) or, as I would prefer, mythical in Barthes’s sense (1973) of offering both a framework of thinking and a means of articulatory closure against contrary arguments or evidence. Significantly in the present context, Gramsci also remarked:

Religion and common sense cannot constitute an intellectual order, because they cannot be reduced to unity and coherence even within an individual consciousness, let alone collective consciousness... Philosophy is criticism and the superseding of religion and ‘common sense’. In this sense it coincides with ‘good’ as opposed to ‘common’ sense (1971a: 326).

Heisenberg pointed out 'asking the right question is frequently more than halfway to the solution of the problem' (1958: 35). There is such a plethora of contradictory questions and answers though that first of all we need to look critically at what is at issue.

Briefly my argument is as follows. The contemporary fear that Bali's unique culture is about to be destroyed by contact with outsiders and tourism eerily reiterates colonial, and even pre-colonial, discourse. Central to these fears is a curious notion of culture as at once aestheticized in dance, art and religion; and reified, industrialized, packaged and peddled in almost every conceivable form.<sup>3</sup> In short, it is a full blown bourgeois vision of culture as a commodity. The struggle to rescue Balinese culture from 'culture' is in danger of being self-defeating because it relies on a concept of culture-as-commodity which erases what it seeks to preserve. This recognition allows us to rethink Bali not as a culture, but as a brand – a point illustrated starkly by Bali in effect being a brand before the island was known about (Boon 1977: 10-34). Bali's 'culture' is the product of such brilliant advertising that Balinese, let alone others, often imagine it as historical actuality rather than as successful branding. By contrast, far from being aesthetes, in the pre-colonial era Balinese preoccupations seem to have been strikingly bellicose.

The arts are little practised. Though the island produces cotton of the most excellent quality and in great abundance, the natives have not generally learned the art of painting or printing the cloth which they manufacture from it. The women here, as on Java, are the manufacturers of all the cloth used by their husbands or families. Their principal manufacture is in *kris*es and warlike instruments; they make fire-arms, and ornament the barrels, but purchase European

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, some were until recently inconceivable, for example the market in *taksu*, which is not restricted to gullible foreigners (<http://www.yahayoga.com/BALI%20RETREAT%2008.html>) but Balinese and Indonesians as well (<http://www.balidiscovery.com/messages/message.asp?Id=2683>). Quite how Balinese are going to reclaim religion and spirituality now that it has become a major export industry is far from clear.

locks (Raffles 1817: 234).<sup>4</sup>

Balinese are far from alone in inventing tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) but they are less usual in living out someone else's imagination so determinedly. And it is not just culture which is centrally implicated in this tangled tale, but the mass media through which Bali as a brand is disseminated globally.

### Lessons from the past

'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'  
George Santayana.

As scholars have noted, for centuries Bali has been inextricably entangled in European imaginings of an alternative world, free from the perceived defects of the society in question.

In Western eyes there was never a Bali *per se*, but only a Bali derived. The original ethnological idea of Bali sprang full-grown from the records of Portuguese Goa (Boon 1977: 17, all emphases in the original unless otherwise indicated).

Far from being weakened when confronted with the realities of Bali as a distinctive polity and society in its own right, the image has become increasingly over-determined.

More than any other tropical island, Bali has become the most exotic of exotic locations, a fantasy of all the splendours of the Orient and the beauties of the Pacific. Over three centuries the West has constructed a complex and gorgeous image of the island that has come to take over even Balinese thought (Vickers 1989: 2).

Nor are such fantasies confined to the West.

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<sup>4</sup> My thanks to Richard Fox at the University of Chicago for his useful comments and for drawing my attention this quotation as well as to the Balinese government website discussed below.

When Pandit Nehru, first prime minister of India and hero of the newly-emerging non-aligned nations, called Bali 'the morning of the world' he coined the most memorable of all the praises heaped on the island. Bali's image was not simply the province of Europeans and Americans who belonged to the world powers, it was international property (Vickers 1989: 2)

Quite what is entailed in Bali being the property of others?

How Bali came to be engineered has been discussed elsewhere (Boon 1977; Picard 1996, 1999; Vickers 1989), so I need only touch on three themes. The first is the long and tangled tale of how Bali has become identified with 'culture' as some sort of strange aesthetic entity. Revealingly, discussion about Balinese culture is remarkable for having little to do with most senses of this complex term except the most crassly commercial.<sup>5</sup> Originally the issue of whether Bali had culture was linked to broader debates, sparked off by colonialism, about the nature of Asian civilizations and their presumed degeneracy. To pre-colonial Sanskrit scholars like Friederich, unsurprisingly, it was Brahman priests who were 'the true bearers of culture' (Vickers 1989: 81). Under Dutch colonialism the problem changed to one of governance. In order to rule Bali, it was necessary to decide which bits of Balinese society and culture functioned in accordance with Dutch ideas of what was proper in order to build upon them. The colonial administrator Liefcrinck singled out villages as republics. As tourism started, it became a commercial imperative to provide visitors with what they

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond Williams famously remarked that 'culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (1983: 87). Of the strands, two are particularly relevant here. The first is culture as civilization, which is what preoccupied earlier scholars. The second dates back to Tylor 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (1871:1). As Fabian (above) noted, the holism of culture is attributed *ex post facto* and is nostalgic for a past and imagined state of affairs. The Indonesian term *budaya* is a neologism, which was co-opted by the New Order régime. Interestingly the Balinese paraphrase *tata cara*, the rules or order for doing things, 'how we do things around here' (Hobart 2000: 2), is a much more dynamic and open account which fits the actuality far better.

expected and had paid to see, namely the exotic. This took the form of dances (Hobart 2007; Picard 1996: 134-63) and art,<sup>6</sup> which were integral to the images of Bali marketed by the international press by the 1920s and 1930s. The trend was exemplified by Krause's book the title of which defined what were to become the key themes: Bali: people, countryside, dances, festivals, temples (Krause 1920, my translation of the title). It also introduced how, supposedly, 'Balinese art had an organic relationship to the community and religion' (Vickers 1989: 99-100). The template was set. So when, after Independence, Balinese set about arguing culture as art and the indissoluble link between religion, art and culture (Picard 1996: 167-71), they were reiterating an already venerable articulation. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose.*<sup>7</sup>

Two more themes should be noted. For all its exoticism and immanence, from early colonial days Balinese culture has repeatedly been depicted as fragile and under threat from the outside world, market forces and tourism or – the same thing – bravely triumphing over these threats.<sup>8</sup> What is striking about

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<sup>6</sup> Remarkably, a critical analysis of how 'creativity' is attributed to Balinese is lacking. Often it is a sort of default adjunct to references to art and dance. (After all, it is better to market them under the labels of 'authentic' or 'creative' than 'tired' or 'rehashed for tourists'.) Few terms have been as frequently and loosely bandied about. What account of creativity and aesthetics is involved is studiously vague and often contradictory. Bali is celebrated for its adherence to tradition. So creativity seems to mean not creating something new, different and original, but endlessly reinventing the past, which has the stultifying effect of innovation by copying what has worked beforehand. This is nowhere more obvious than in the art shops which are a weathervane of Bali's industrial encounter with the wider market economy. This process of 'involution' was nicely described by Goldenweiser (1936).

<sup>7</sup> The more it changes, the more it is the same thing.

<sup>8</sup> The aesthetic stance much adopted by commentators on and aficionados of Bali neither was, nor is, as innocent as it claims. On the contrary, it does vital work in attempting to suture antagonisms.

The most typical subversion of colonialism is its aestheticcentrist way of appreciating and respecting the other... Aestheticcentrists always appear as anticolonialists. In the same way, they always appear as anti-industrial capitalists, although their aesthetic stance was produced by the advent of industrial capital. Furthermore, aestheticcentrism is at the core of fascism: Appearing to be anticapitalist, it attempts to aesthetically sublimate the contradictions of the capitalist economy (Karatani 1998: 153).

I am grateful to my PhD student Kate Wakeling for drawing my attention to this

the later versions of this argument<sup>9</sup> is how neatly it replicates a notorious colonial model: the dual economy, by which the fragile 'native' sector required insulating and protecting against international market forces.<sup>10</sup> The argument hinges on imposing dichotomies upon complex political, economic and social relations. The effect is to conjure up a sense of fundamental difference which, as we shall see, is constitutive of Bali as a commodity.

Lastly, how did Bali and its culture come to be designated as a special place to visit? *Pace* the more optimistic commentators, it is not simply that Balinese culture is so self-evidently excellent that the whole world is queuing up to experience its uniqueness. Part of the story is more sinister. The fallout of press coverage of the massacres in 1906-8 presented the Dutch with a major domestic, and even international, publicity problem, which they addressed cleverly.

The scar on the liberal imagination of the Netherlands produced by these massacres had to be healed, and preservation of Balinese culture, in combination with tourism, were the most effective balms for the healing process... From savage Bali, the Dutch and then the other European visitors to the island turned to female Bali (the island of bare-breasted smiling women) then to cultured Bali (the island where everyone is an artist) (Vickers 1989: 91, 78).

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interesting Japanese critique of Orientalism.

<sup>9</sup> A popular misconception is that Balinese Dance and Drama has lost much of its lustre: that gamelan are rusting in their pavilions and dancers leaving the stage for a life on the juice blender. The truth is that Bali is undergoing a cultural renaissance with bigger and brighter temple festivals, revived art forms and more orchestras than ever before (Wijaya, Pemayun & Raka 1981:1, cited in Picard 1996: 168).

Note the familiar and uncritical idea of culture.

<sup>10</sup> Dualistic economics was, according to its leading proponent the Dutch economist Boeke, designed to address a series of antitheses. These were the relative immobility of the peasant strata; the sharp distinction between urban and rural; the dichotomy between a market and goods' economy; the local nature of village society; the organic nature of peasant society; and the non-economic nature of the local economy (1966). His encapsulation of this last, tellingly, resurfaces in tourist descriptions of Bali.

The entire life of the village is dominated by religion and semi-religious customs and traditions, and behaviour by the predominant need to feel at ease; economic needs and their strictly economic gratification are no more than of secondary importance (1966: 190).

It is worth noting that the history of Bali is intimately linked with dissemination of fantasies through the media, from magazines and books to cassettes, films, videos and blogs. The panoply of modern (at the time) media technology was brought to bear to 'preserve' Bali.

### **Bali is a Brand**

The key terms of representations of Bali were then largely set close on a century ago. It was a fragile culture centred on an organic unity of artistic creativity, dance and religion which needed preserving from excessive contact with the outside world, but which (with scant recognition of the irony and contradictions) people ought to rush to experience in their millions (before it was too late). Instead of engaging yet again in the Sisyphean struggle of pushing the rock of Balinese culture up a mountainside, let me take another approach. Beguiled by the lure of exotic cultural difference, most commentators have failed to notice the obvious. Bali is a brand; and culture is its showcase product. Suddenly the inconsistency between declaring the island to have a unique and imperilled culture and the determination to flog it off to all and sundry makes sense. As Bali was a brand before anyone knew it had 'culture', and as Bali's reputation was long for violence and belligerence, it is the brand which, in the colonial period, created the culture rather than *vice versa*.

So what is a brand? A brand starts life as a name, in this instance 'Bali'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The branding of Bali as a process has a quite distinct dynamic from debates about Balinese-ness (*Kebalian*). The massive scale of tourism has resulted in

blurring the boundaries between inside and outside, between what is 'ours' and what is 'theirs', between what belongs to culture and what pertains to tourism... Thus the Balinese, enjoined to exhibit their identity in reference to the outside world's view of them, have come to search for confirmation of their *Kebalian* in the mirror held up to them by tourists (Picard 1999: 16-17).

What is remarkable, but little remarked on, is how the language of branding and consumption pervades not only the language of government, but how it has been naturalized in academic accounts. Picard's sub-title is: *transcultural constructions of Balinese identity*. What is gained in sympathy for, and participation in, the ethnographic



The essence of the marketing process is building a brand in the minds of consumers... A brand name is nothing more than a word in the mind, albeit a special kind of word. A brand name is a noun, a proper noun, which like all proper nouns is usually spelled with a capital letter... A successful branding program is based on the concept of singularity. It creates in the mind of the prospect the perception that there is no product on the market quite like your product (Reis & Reis 2003: 5, 7).

So neatly does this fit that it is perfectly plausible to re-read the analyses of the history of Bali as the history of the making of a brand.

This brings us however to an apparent contradiction. In Bali, culture is that which is supposed to stand opposed to and above the market. It is the principle of inherent value, following Boeke, which transcends monetary exchange and so is identified with, and enshrined in, art, dance and religion. To understand what is at issue we need to appreciate the relationship between money and value. A money economy is based on 'the reduction of qualitative determinations to quantitative ones' (Simmel 1990: 277). In other words, qualitative differences in value become comparable and exchangeable.

The quantitative tendency exemplified by money contributes...to the acceptance of *relativity*, in which more and more things are not simply put in relation to one another, but are rendered equivalent in value or made unconditionally interchangeable (Lury 2004: 4)

Calon Arang plays, once performed at night under conditions of significant danger, can now be witnessed and photographed safely and conveniently in daylight by charabancs of tourists for a fee.<sup>12</sup>

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experience is lost in critical analytical detachment.

<sup>12</sup> Delightfully it was two anthropologists who helped this conversion because when Bateson and Mead wished to photograph a Calon Arang performance, it had to be in daylight because of the technical limits of film at the time. This opened the way to entrepreneurial Balinese to market commercial performances.

The desire of many Balinese to place a few remaining activities beyond the reach of this interchangeability is understandable. But it should not distract attention from the fact that what has made this necessary is that so much of Balinese culture has already been thoroughly commoditized.<sup>13</sup>

While central to marketing strategies, brands and branding depend on precisely this anxiety about making everything exchangeable, and the commercialization and industrialization not only of consumer goods but, as the Frankfurt Critical School argued, turning culture into a 'culture industry'.<sup>14</sup> In a world of increasingly remotely delivered and anonymous goods and services, the management of brands involves 'the controlled re-introduction of quality into the means of exchange' (Lury 2004: 5). That is they are ways of articulating quality back into a quantity-driven market. What distinguishes the beaches of Bali from the tens of thousands of kilometres of other tropical palm-fringed beaches, most of which are cleaner, quieter and safer? Just as when you buy

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<sup>13</sup> The Balinese provincial government's appreciation of the centrality of branding is clear from their website ([http://www.baliprov.go.id/var/index.php?op=branding\\_bali](http://www.baliprov.go.id/var/index.php?op=branding_bali); accessed 6<sup>th</sup>. June 2008, my translation). In an attempt to market Bali as spiritual, they find themselves committed to trying to suture irresolvable antagonisms. The opening text reads:



#### **Explanation of the Logo**

After passing all the stages of the correct methodological framework, the form of Visual Branding for Bali and a tagline has been produced, which encompasses the values encountered in the previous stages. Aimed at a brand differentiation which registers Bali's excellence in cultural and natural particulars with a strong and special spiritual touch so, in the visual and tagline of Branding Bali, it appears that spiritual aspects are given a very dominant slant. As a consequence there certainly appear certain elements with a philosophical importance in order to revitalize 'Bali's spiritual soul'.

<sup>14</sup> The contradictions are outlined in the opening quotation. Matters are not quite so simple though. Adorno and Horkheimer are themselves guilty of nostalgia and élitism in dismissing all forms of popular culture by antithesis to high art, which ignored the social practices of all but a tiny privileged minority.

a Mercedes-Benz, you are buying the image of engineering and luxury, so when you buy a Balinese beach holiday, you are buying the imagination of an exotic experience. That you may encounter little of Bali except waiters, masseuses, shops and bars, or at best a packaged tourist dance, matters little. You are being sold an idea and a perception.

A brand does more. It is a 'medium of translation' which 'mediates the supply and demand of products through the organization, co-ordination and integration of the use of information' (Lury 2004: 4). Books like Krause's were important because they claimed to translate Bali to its potential market.

The kinds of upper-class tourists who went to Bali in those days were educated in the major European languages, and would have been able to read Krause's book [which was in German] even if their first language was English. Even if they could not read it, they could always look at the pictures. Krause's book had everything needed to entice those dreaming of an Eden outside the despoiled and decadent Europe which they knew' (Vickers 1989: 99, my parentheses).

What Bali has over more conventional brands is that it promises not just escape from tedium or normality, but it offers the prospect of cultural translation, of a unique engagement with difference.

Now this difference is of a particular kind. Ultimately Bali as a brand is defined negatively. It is what Europe (the USA, Singapore, Japan or wherever) is *not*. A brand which depends on being what something is not has a difficult task to define itself in positive terms. So it is not Balinese religion or dance *in itself* which is important, but that it is different from what happens elsewhere. So Balinese may be mistaken in thinking it is their art or dance or spirituality as they understand and appreciate it which is the attraction. On this account spirituality, for example, simply means 'not how things are where we come from', wherever that be.

## How Successful is the Branding?

In its early days, as we have seen, the marketing of Bali as a brand allowed the Dutch to turn a brutal and rapacious colonial episode of the *puputan* and the attendant disastrous media coverage into a thriving élite commercial venture using the same media that lambasted them. How does the present branding of Bali fare by comparison? Let us judge against the laws of branding.<sup>15</sup>

1. *The Law of Expansion: the power of a brand is inversely proportional to its scope.*

Whereas Bali's brand was tightly confined to epitomizing the exotic (be it dance or bare-breasted women), now the appeal is right across the board from white water rafting to hang gliding and night life, markets in which other places are better qualified to compete. The Bali brand has lost its power for the same reasons as Chevrolet and Ford in the USA (Reis & Reis 2003: 9-15).

2. *The Law of Contraction: A brand becomes stronger when you narrow its focus.*

Concomitantly, narrowing one's focus (like Microsoft which has 90% of desktop operating systems worldwide) signals what the brand is about (Reis & Reis 2003: 16-23). What the Bali brand now stands for is unclear. Advertising Bali as spiritual merely confuses matters, because that is not what the brand represents to the market.

3. *The Law of Quality: Quality is important, but brands are not built by quality alone.*

Unfortunately a brand name without quality is not enough (Reis & Reis 2003: 56-63). Bali's landscape – one of Krause's selling points is vanishing, as strip development continues unhindered,

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<sup>15</sup> For convenience I use well known book *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, which, in a fine piece of branding the back cover proclaims as by 'world-renowned marketing guru Al Reis and his daughter'. So it must be true.

as garbage accumulates and as greenery is cut back<sup>16</sup> to make Bali resemble almost anywhere else in urbanizing Asia. Now Bali as an architectural style of hotel is springing up in more attractive locations, other places can do Bali better than Bali.

*4. The Law of the Name: In the long run a brand is nothing more than a name.*

'Don't confuse what makes a brand successful in the short term with what makes a brand successful in the long term... Throughout Asia you see the same pattern. Rampant line extensions that are destroying brands... East Asia has a branding problem' (Reis & Reis 2003: 73, 77). The problem is not exclusive to Bali, but is injurious all the same.

*5. The Law of Mortality: No brand will live forever. Euthanasia is often the best solution.*

Brands have lives (Reis & Reis 2003: 164-69) and, for the reasons outlined among others, Balinese should recognize that Bali as a brand has been going for a hundred years and has been expanded, diluted and over-extended, perhaps beyond recuperation. The best hope, if it is feasible, is to implement the first two laws. As it is a society of some three million people, slow decline rather than euthanasia is the likely fate.<sup>17</sup>

The cold appraisal of Bali as a brand makes uncomfortable reading. However the laws of branding do highlight traps into which many major business corporations have fallen. So, however valuable it may be as part of a domestic conversation among Balinese, faced

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<sup>16</sup> Balinese, like people elsewhere faced with unpalatable self-truths, tend to go into a state of denial no matter how often what is happening is pointed out. The untidiness of Bali recently hit the national newspapers (Widjaja 2008; I am grateful to Rucina Ballinger for bringing this article to my attention).

<sup>17</sup> An obvious point that Balinese are not alone in missing is that an unprecedented period of global economic growth has come to an end. The prospects for international tourism are therefore correspondingly grim.

with the increasingly visible consequences of the mass marketing of Bali, the proposal to rebrand Bali as spiritual is unlikely to solve the more general problem.

### **Evaluating what branding does**

If brands are about trying to re-introduce a sense of quality, what is distinctive about quality in this sense? The answer requires a short detour through Kant's distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives, because it suggests new ways of thinking about Balinese culture and religion. A hypothetical imperative is instrumental: if you wish to achieve a particular end, then you should do such and such. That is it is about means of achieving ends. By contrast, a categorical imperative designates actions that you should do this because it is a good thing to do. It defines those actions that are ends in themselves. Now the value of money is that it broadens the scope of what can become means to the point that almost everything is potentially instrumental, measurable and negotiable against other things. Against this stand values which cannot be traded, which are valuable in themselves. The argument applies to actions and people. You may treat someone as a means to an end or as an end in themselves.

Crucially the distinction is analytical. There is not a simple discriminable class of means to ends or of ends in themselves. A person may undertake an action as an end in itself or as a means to an end. Cremations in Bali are a good example. You may carry out the rites of *pitrayadnya* because this is what descendants should do for those who conducted *manusayadnya* for them. You do it because it is the right thing to do. However many cremations in Bali are held on a scale where such obligations are the means to other ends. Among the politically ambitious, cremations have long been an occasion to make public statements about one's power, wealth and importance. That is they are more means to ends than ends in themselves. The ritual inflation that follows impacts heavily, even disastrously, on ordinary families who find

themselves expected to meet escalating standards of magnificence, which have precious little to do with the fate of the souls of the dead. Nor is it possible, as protectors of Balinese culture might wish, to designate certain fields of activity – art, dance or religion – as ends in themselves which are immune from instrumentality. Motives are often mixed. An example is a great work of literature, which has profound religious significance such as the Ramayana. Yet, in the *Kecak* dances performed every day, this seminal work is being peddled for the tourist trade. Few excuses are thinner than the categorical claim that the dancers are teaching tourists about their sacred texts. Incidentally the same problems hold for dance troupes who go on international tours. Whatever their disclaimers about disseminating Indian and Balinese culture and Hindu religion, it has been reduced largely a means to an end – profit, celebrity, publicity, contacts, position.

Hypothetic imperatives often take complex forms. Tourists who use Bali as a means of escaping what they consider the commercialized babble of metropolitan societies are using Balinese culture and religion hypothetically, just as are Balinese who sell that culture, act as guides, artists and so on. To repeat, the distinction is analytical. Motives are not necessarily simple. However nearly a century of tourism shows that, remorselessly, activities Balinese considered ends in themselves (like dance as *maturan* in a Pura) have been reworked into means to ends. This helps, I think, explain why Balinese lay so much emphasis on institutions like the *banjar*, *désa* and religious observance as bulwarks against the ever-increasing hypothetization of Bali. Because the distinction is analytical however, such attempts are in vain.

### **Rethinking Consumption**

Branding is part of a broader shift from a stress upon, and an articulation of the world in terms of, industrial production to one centred on consumption (Baudrillard 1990). Economic

metaphors permeate not just the language of politics and the mass media, but of academic commentary. So it is useful to review for a moment quite what is entailed in the emerging hegemonic image of consumption.<sup>18</sup> The result is unsettling, because familiar categories and assumptions transform like the cogs of a clock melting and passing through one another. However, if the logic of consumption, exemplified here by branding, is becoming pervasive, we might be wise to acquaint ourselves with it. The most comprehensive analysis of the presuppositions of this new world is by Baudrillard.

Consumption is not just about access to goods and services, but redefines human subjects and societies.

Individuals no longer compete for the possession of goods, they actualize themselves in consumption, each on his own... *There are no limits to consumption.* If it was that which it is naively taken to be, an absorption, a devouring, then we should achieve saturation. If it was a function of the order of needs, we should achieve satisfaction (1988: 12, 24).

For this reason consumption is in principle unlimited, because it is not objects but signs that are being consumed.

The conversion of the object to a systematized status of signs entails a concomitant modification in the human relation, which becomes a relation of consumption... In order to become the object of consumption, the object must become a sign... We can see that what is consumed are not objects but the relation itself – signified and absent, included and excluded at the same time – it is *the idea of the relation* that is consumed in the series of objects which manifests it (1988: 22).

Balinese become tokens to be enjoyed in a relationship that is largely

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<sup>18</sup> I use hegemonic here in Laclau & Mouffe's sense of a powerful set of articulations (1985). Brands are one form of articulation which disarticulate alternative representations.



imaginary.<sup>19</sup> And Balinese culture is something that you come to have a relationship with. While this takes Balinese a lifetime to achieve, consumerism requires satisfaction to be virtually instant. Balinese social life which teems with images and sounds is ideally pre-adapted to a world where signs are consumed at the cost of Bali and Balinese themselves becoming signs. But that is what branding does.

This proliferation of signs detached from their referents widens the possible field of consumption extraordinarily. It becomes possible to enjoy the sign – live like a Balinese king, take part in a temple ceremony, become a Lègong dancer – without the complicated constraints of being born a Balinese, learning the discipline required and subject to the rigorous standards they demand of one another. So visitors can enjoy a safe simulacrum which

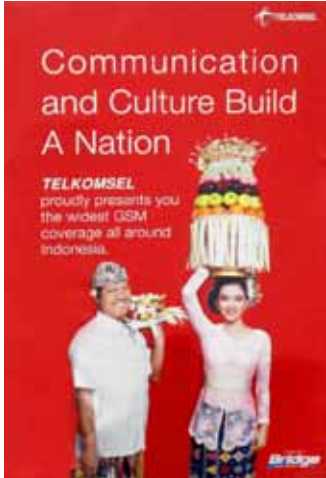
apes the forms or combines them in a disparate manner, it *repeats the fashion* without having lived it (Baudrillard 1970: 169, my translation).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Baudrillard's account is pertinent *inter alia* to relationships between Balinese men and foreign female tourists, who are living out the pun in the French *consommation*, which is both consumption and consummation.

<sup>20</sup> The original reads: '*il singe les formes ou les combine de façon disparate, il répète la mode sans l'avoir vécue.*' Tellingly this is part of Baudrillard's definition of kitsch which he identifies (as against snobbism) with the supremacy of the bourgeoisie. This analysis of consumption, taken together with distinction between the hypothetical and categorical, enables us to understand the plight of the Balinese under the New Order.

As a result of the requirement that Balinese embrace a duly acknowledged religion – in accordance with the Islamic model of what constitutes a religion – the locus of Kebalian clearly tipped in favour of *agama*. Here I am no longer referring to the communal identity Balinese could secure from practicing their traditional religion... [but an] official version of Balinese religion [which] bears little resemblance to everyday religious practices in houseyards and village temples... This Balinese investment has occurred mainly to the detriment of tradition... While Balinese tradition is rendered vestigial and appropriated by the state, Balinese culture appears to be thriving to the point that local and foreign observers alike feel justified to speak of the island's cultural renaissance (Picard 1999: 43-44, my parentheses).

Religion and culture have not been turned just into means to ends, but into signs by which Bali becomes at once a brand to be marketed and a fixed 'identity' to be lived out as part of the singular politics of the New Order.



The everyday branding of Bali at work



Dance (Olèg Tamulilingan) and religious offerings being used to sell branded products

Everything becomes rewritable through the mass mediation of signs to meet the demands of constructed brand identities. Consumption turns out to be

There are many ways in which lack may be understood here. The most obvious is the manufactured need vicariously to experience something different from 'despoiled and decadent' European (and now more generally metropolitan) society.

### **The Media and Bali – epilogue or epitaph?**

The story remains to be told of how central the mass media have been to the making of Bali over the last hundred years or so – from European newspaper accounts of the *puputan* to travel advertisements to clips on YouTube. However sophisticated the analyses of the transformations of the island, they tend to presuppose that representations may be read off and studied as if they were academic texts, as if the different media did not work in quite different ways, have different histories, uses and styles of reception by different readers and viewers. Because of the complexity of establishing how different media work and what people make of them, most analysts fall back on the tired fantasy

that meaning may be determined at the point of production (Hobart 2005, 2006). Media however are not neutral, but partly constitutive of what they mediate. The act of representing is not innocent. To develop Nelson Goodman (1968), you represent something *as* something else to someone on an occasion for a purpose. As you cannot represent anything or anyone in their fullness and range of contexts to all possible readers or viewers, the media work by condensing complexity to simple understandable terms, that is by caricature, by addressing (in Althusser's terms 'interpellating') people in ways they are familiar with and by appealing to an imagined body of shared understandings, which the media themselves create through interpellation.

Although media output now circulates globally, its readerships and audiences are differentiated. How Europeans, Americans and other Asians expect Bali to be represented differs between places and media, and differs from what Balinese have come to expect. In the developed parts of Indonesia television has come to be the mass medium *par excellence*. But how does television work? Whether it is state or commercial television, it reduces complex events through categorization which

constructs a conceptual grid within which 'raw' events can be instantly located and thus inserted into a familiar set of conceptual relationships. Categories are normalizing agents (Fiske 1987: 287)

Events and trends can often be deeply disturbing, so television works

to claw back potentially deviant or disruptive events into the dominant value system [through the presenter or news reader]... who does not appear to be author of his/her own discourse, but who speaks the objective discourse of 'the truth'... This authenticity guarantees the 'truth' of the interpretation that this mediating (Fiske 1987: 288, my parentheses).

But what is truth and what objective looks very different if you are an itinerant peddler and a tourist in an air conditioned limousine. So whose objective view of world does television promulgate? In Europe and the United States,

Objectivity is the 'unauthored' voice of the bourgeoisie (Fiske 1987: 289).

So whose voice speaks for contemporary Bali and elsewhere in Indonesia? What is being normalized? And what disruptive events are being clawed back into a safe and acceptable frame?

State and commercial television stations in Indonesia have addressed these questions rather differently. In the past, the unauthored voice was of the political élite articulated by civil servants, *pegawai negeri*.<sup>21</sup> Now a crucial feature of such powerful articulations is the obverse: they disarticulate other voices and other accounts. For national networks, as a group of highly mobile professional broadcasters emerges, the dominant voice seems to be that of an internationally oriented bourgeoisie (Barkin 2006) with nationally and regionally inflected concerns, but broadly cognate with their counterparts elsewhere. The burgeoning popularity of local commercial television stations raises intriguing questions about the social position of these broadcasters and their sense of who they imagine to be the audience they address.<sup>22</sup> Commercial

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<sup>21</sup> Few topics are more in need of intensive critical examination than the role of *pegawai negeri*, especially under the New Order and after.

<sup>22</sup> One should not exaggerate the extent to which broadcasters worry about what audiences make of broadcasts, because they are protected by an array of mechanisms from audience surveys or anecdotal feedback, which can easily underwrite almost any prejudice. That is why the Althusserian notion of interpellation which stresses class and other social position is probably more useful. Preliminary research on two local stations, BaliTV and JogjaTV, suggested an important difference. The Balinese producers imagined their audience as if they were highly homogeneous (ethnic Balinese, Hindu, adult, male) and addressed them as if they required guiding (in New Order fashion) in order successfully to implement presumed shared values. By contrast, in Yogyakarta which is exceptionally mixed and with a large student population, the broadcasters carefully avoided appearing pedagogic or infantilizing audiences in favour of differentiating their audience and trying to present different sectors with tailored programmes.

television stations operate however under a restraint largely absent from state TV: they depend on advertising and sponsorship income. What commercial television actually sells is audiences to advertisers. These considerations are germane to BaliTV's campaign to promote *Ajeg Bali*, a difficult phrase to translate which connotes the need for strong upstanding unwavering adherence to tradition, but one which for better or for worse has become part of the brand of BaliTV.<sup>23</sup> What may appear to Balinese a wonderful movement to assert cultural pride and independence looks rather different in the light of the kinds of closure to which television as a medium is subject. And what kind of genre is it? Fiske's analysis of news as a genre is apposite. Whereas the real is multifaceted, formless, potentially threatening and addressed in feminine narrative, genres like soap opera, masculine narratives stress closure, authority and clear solutions. The struggle

to control the disruptive forces of reality is reflected in its formal dimension by the struggle of a masculine narrative form to impose its shape on the feminine... It is this interplay of similarity and difference with a fictional form that underwrites our distrust in dividing television generically into fact and fiction, and justifies thinking of the news as masculine soap opera (1987: 308).

Is *Ajeg Bali* then masculine soap opera? And what are the other visions of Balinese society that it disarticulates?

Television's powerful narratives in Bali as elsewhere may be not just misleading but dangerous, because they lead easily to self-misrecognition as do attempts to essentialize a single all purpose Balinese identity. The vision of Bali as a living museum

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<sup>23</sup> The translational difficulties give the expression a familiar ineffability at which good symbols and clichés aim.

'Ajeg' is a Balinese word meaning hard or stable or fixed. It has, to the ears of many Balinese, a distinctly macho sound, resonating with military bravery, unbroachable (sic) barricades, and unflagging erections ... If Bali Preserved was a sweet village girl being harassed by tourist men, Bali Erect is the urban inhabitant of places like Denpasar and Kuta, overrun by non-Balinese Indonesians who would steal their jobs, undermine their culture or even blow up their guests. (Santikarma 2003: 14-6, cited in Fox n.d.)

where century's old traditions are preserved from erosion and the perils of change from the outside world requires us to believe branding at face value. Far from Bali being some throwback to the imaginary heyday of medieval Indonesia, most of Balinese art, dance and 'culture' is a product of Balinese engagement with tourism from the early 1920s and later (e.g. Hobart 2007). Imposing the narrative of tradition fighting off endless threats is however fascinating in that it updates and cosmologizes the evident Balinese preoccupation with war (far from always defensive). So doing disguises the importance of a quite different narrative of great imagination, adaptability, foresight and intelligence when artists, dancers and entrepreneurs created a culture as a means of translating Bali to the outside world and eventually to themselves. Ossifying such technically inventive and vibrant adaptability into 'tradition' is to fail to recognize the genius of Bali and to condemn Balinese to empty, unproductive and misplaced nostalgia.<sup>24</sup> However comforting they may be as a reminder of what Balinese achieved in the recent past, the insistence on 'culture' (which as Fabian noted is always in the past tense), cultural programming on television and Arts Festivals invites Balinese to misrecognize themselves and where their proven ingenuity and abilities lie.

There is another danger of brands and the essentialized narratives that underwrite them. They stifle debate and argument. They turn the open unfinalizable dialogue upon which change and adaptability depend into the dead hand of monologue which silences by excluding the voices of all but a tiny minority.<sup>25</sup> What I have set out to offer here is a critical analysis of the problems of

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<sup>24</sup> This false vision may prove very expensive for Balinese. What opium did for their aristocratic forebears, the mass media may do now in inducing a complacent, even narcissistic, dream of recreating an imaginary past, while other parts of post-New Order Indonesia are busy making new opportunities for themselves in an increasingly cosmopolitan world.

<sup>25</sup> Butèt Kartaredjasa and Putu Wijaya have turned such monologues which were central to the hegemony of the New Order into devastating satires on the false pretences of patriarchy Indonesian-style.

dominant mass media which represent Balinese culture. However one positive suggestion arises immediately out of this discussion. It is the urgent need to open up discussion and debate to people who are interesting and willing to participate, not the *faux vox* pops of the mass media. What is striking about Bali is not how many people are included in the debate, but how almost everyone is excluded. Among these are at least two interesting and articulate groups which have been silenced or neutralized, albeit it in quite different ways. As Emma Baulch has shown, the first are young, often educated, people for whom the sterility of official Bali offers an unappealing future and who express their distance and difference through punk, reggae and death metal (2007). Whereas the pop music circuit is marginalized and ignored, the other group has been silenced even more effectively by being embraced by the establishment and turned into salaried civil servants. These are the actors who have long been the social commentators and critics in Bali, voices whom Balinese trusted and listened to because they articulated what many people felt but were unable to say. That was when they were independent and before they were co-opted to act as mouthpieces for official interests. As such extemporized guerrilla theatre which expressed the hopes, concerns and fears of Balinese is stifled,<sup>26</sup> what is fading away is one major medium of social argument and discussion. If that occurs more generally, what may be left are the relics of the brand that was Bali.

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<sup>26</sup> Theatre, including shadow theatre, has increasingly come to imitate commoditized TV shows and to slip into vacuous and effectively narrative-free set comedy routines. Ironically this trend may foreshadow the future of Bali as a post-critical sign that has lost its narrative.

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