

Custodians of the Sacred Mountains: Culture and Society in the Highlands of Bali. By Thomas Reuter. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002. 400 pp.

Bali is a fascinating island. Within one cultural sphere major contrasts exist side by side and form as such an ideal laboratory for anthropological research. Only a few hours drive from the centre of globalized tourism at Kuta beach, which was in October 2002 hit by a terrorist attack, one can find in the mountain area of inland Bali ancient temple systems and ritual networks which date back to the ninth century AD. The mountain Balinese, or Bali Aga, who managed to reproduce these old structures, have by and large been ignored by Western scholars who focused their studies mainly on south Bali with its distinct flavour of Hinduism and aristocratic court culture. Seen from the south, the Bali Aga looks like a cultural backwater, a relic of the past. Thomas Reuter reverses this image by arguing that mountain Bali was actually the breeding ground of the first Hindu-inspired kingdoms, centuries before the influences of the Javanese kingdom of Majapahit took root in the southern part of the island. He also demonstrates that mountain Bali was never isolated and marginalized. Instead, there was a complex relationship in which new power holders in the south recognized and respected the ritual authority of the sacred mountain temples. Some of these ritual networks maintain their autonomy and show a remarkable degree of continuity.

Reuter claims that his book is the first comprehensive ethnography of the Bali Aga, but this is somewhat misleading because he fails to mention the monograph by his colleague Samuel Wälty on the area of Kintamani which was published in 1997. Despite this minor omission, Reuter's book is not only a milestone in the anthropology of Bali but also an important contribution to the comparative study of Austronesian societies.

Theoretically embedded in what we may call the "Canberra School of Austronesian Anthropology" the book analyses the ritual domains, or *banua*, of mountain Bali in terms of dualism and precedence. Dualism

(predominantly expressed in paired male-female oppositions) is a recurrent ordering principle; the dynamic status economy which is characterized by co-operation and competition is founded on a time-based and process-oriented notion of precedence, depending on a degree of temporal proximity to a shared origin or ancestor. The relevance of this analytical model is elaborated in the first part of the book which offers a detailed study of ritual domains, the most important of which has its centre at the temple of Pucak Penulisan in the village of Sukawana. This part of the book is solid ethnography, consisting of a convincing and theoretically informed representation of the dynamic structures of these ritual networks, based on an impressive amount of empirical data. This ethnography is a valuable contribution to our knowledge of Bali.

I am less impressed by the second part of the book. Here the study of mountain Bali is correctly situated within various Balinese, anthropological, and state discourses which are critically examined. This could have been a good closing chapter of the book, but Reuter wanted more. He also launches an ambitious theory of an intersubjective representation of human interaction in the field of the cultural production of knowledge. He even calls in this respect for a fundamental and general critique of all representation systems (p. 310). Seen against the backdrop of the subject matter of the book, this statement seems to me a bit “oversized”.

Reuter needs a lot of words and tends to become repetitive in what is basically a crusade against a postmodern anthropology, which is mainly concerned with itself. Instead, Reuter argues in favour of an anthropological description of a shared cultural system as it is represented by Bali Aga themselves. Anthropology is thus an intersubjective co-production of generalized knowledge. His rather exaggerated representation of postmodern anthropology (pp. 254–55) looks a bit outdated as it is primarily based on Marcus and Fischer’s 1986 book. Meanwhile, other people have said some relevant things on the production of knowledge as well — for instance, Cohn (1987) and Pels and Salemink (1999) on colonial ethnography; Kuper (1999) on anthropological knowledge; and Barth (1993) on Bali.

I do not only fail to see the innovative aspect of Reuter's theory but I have also a problem with the way he elaborates his idea of inter-subjective representation. His emphasis on the generalized knowledge of shared cultural systems tends to lead to a single and essentializing model of a society which is predominantly run by institutions and in which individual actors and their particular perspectives and concerns remain invisible. Moreover, people do not live within a single hegemonic system of knowledge, which exclusively informs their actions. Fredrik Barth rightly remarked in this respect that

[w]e need to be far more sensitive to the diversity within and between people's minds, the various ways they always have sustained ontologically incompatible systems of knowledge, and the multiple ways in which their acts and their practice can be interpreted, by themselves as well as by others. (1996, p. 319)

I miss also a more systematic analysis of the encounter with the (post-)colonial state. The impact of new state institutions is mentioned in passing (pp. 185–86, 192–93, 205, 281–90, 313) but deserves a more coherent historical examination in order to understand the conditions under which certain ancient ritual networks survived, whereas others adapted to new circumstances, or disappeared.

My disagreement with Reuter is a matter of anthropological taste. I admire his ethnography of ritual systems of mountain Bali, and his book provides a solid basis for further studies on this neglected part of the island.

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