

Book Reviews

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Storytelling in Bali. By Hildred Geertz. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016. xiii+534 pp.

In 1936, the anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead arrived in Bali with plans for a two-year study of “Balinese character” (Bateson and Mead 1942). For the first few months of their study they stayed with the German painter and musician Walter Spies, who had taken up residence in the village of Ubud. Upon seeing some of the Western-style paintings that Balinese had started producing with the support of Spies and his Dutch colleague Rudolph Bonnet, they decided to study them and their makers with the idea that it might enrich their insight into the Balinese psyche. Most of the painters were from the nearby village of Batuan, where Bateson and Mead moved after their stay in the mountain village of Bayung Gedé. They collected over 1,200 paintings — out of which about 800 were from Batuan — and asked each painter to tell the story that he had illustrated in his picture.

In 1973, Mead showed these paintings to Hildred Geertz and suggested that she work on them. Seven years later, Geertz decided to follow up on Bateson’s and Mead’s research on the Batuan painters, in order to learn about the history and the meanings of their paintings. This book on storytelling in Bali is the end result of her long-term fieldwork in Batuan between 1981 and 1988, during which she combined her study of painting with an investigation of temple carvings and rituals and of dance and drama (Geertz 1994 and 2004).

Made expressly for Westerners, and following Western pictorial conventions but drawing their themes from Balinese culture, these

paintings are “like briefly overheard fragments from ongoing conversations between the Balinese and the foreigners in an intercultural situation in which each side only partially understood the expectations of the other” (Geertz 1994, p. 6). Just as the anthropologists were crossing the boundaries between cultures, so too were the young Balinese painters who were inventing a bi-cultural art form. Most of their paintings illustrate popular tales taken not only from the Balinese literary heritage and dramatic repertoire but also from oral storytelling — a widespread social practice in Bali in the 1930s. In intimate family settings at night, elderly people told youngsters tales that they themselves had heard in their childhood. A true performative act, akin to dramatic performances, the telling of stories was intended to teach moral principles, to prevent or correct improper behaviour.

At the time that she was working on the Batuan paintings, Hildred Geertz had already mentioned her interest in the stories represented in them, remarking that “no one yet has made an extended study of such storytelling” (Geertz 1994, p. 122). Her new study of Balinese storytelling is based on the collection of tales assembled by Gregory Bateson, typed in Balinese by his assistant I Madé Kalér and stored in the Margaret Mead papers in the Library of Congress in Washington. These tales were transcribed from interviews with the Batuan painters conducted with reference to each of their paintings. Bateson’s and Mead’s major consultant was a Brahmana Buda by the name of Ida Bagus Madé Togog, who in turn became Geertz’s main informant when she moved into Batuan. A prolific storyteller, he dictated the widest variety of the tales and authored most of the narrative paintings collected by Bateson and Mead. As a trained ritual specialist from a priestly family, Togog was well versed in Balinese literature and oral lore. Unconcerned about Western expectations, he did not speak “foreigner talk”, in the sense that he gave no explanation of terms or customs relating to “Balinese culture” for the benefit of a foreigner, as younger Balinese would usually do when faced with an ignorant outsider. Once she had become fluent enough in Balinese, Geertz asked Togog to tell her his life story,

which she translated into English, rearranging his spoken words so as to make sense to a reader of the latter language (Geertz and Togog 2005).

Storytelling in Bali is divided into five chapters. After an introduction presenting storytelling in pre-modern Bali, the second chapter describes the world of the storytellers, their village of Batuan and their encounter with the anthropologists who collected their paintings and transcribed their tales. In the third chapter, Geertz examines the circulation of popular tales and the contexts within which they were told; she situates them within the diverse literary and dramatic Balinese genres with which they are associated. Then, in the fourth chapter, she offers an anthropological and historical interpretation of what the meanings of the tales may have been to their tellers as individuals and as a group. A brief conclusion winds up her study by reflecting on the major function of storytelling in the orally grounded society of pre-modern Bali — the storage and transmission of information about the world. Two lengthy appendices complete the volume. The first is a compilation of the available information on the Batuan painters and storytellers, and the second the 137 tales collected by Bateson, translated into English and annotated by Geertz, with each one accompanied by the painting that illustrates it.

Hildred Geertz takes these tales as a starting point for an exploration of the social and cultural world of Batuan in the 1930s. Finding little overlap between the tales put together by the Batuan storytellers and other collections of Balinese folktales, she wondered how the former chose the stories that they painted and narrated. After due consideration, she surmised that neither the foreign anthropologists nor their Balinese assistant exerted any significant influence on the storytellers that might have skewed their choices of tales. Basically, she views storytelling as an interpretive process. It brings out, that is, certain cultural assumptions that bear witness to the specific concerns shared by both tellers and listeners.

What emerges is that the daily world of the Batuan painters and storytellers was very much like that depicted in their paintings and

in their stories, a world inhabited by countless spirits capable of both harming and helping people through their human intermediaries. Togog's life story in particular testifies to the pervasive Balinese anxieties about sorcery practised by fellow villagers and godly, demonic or ancestral wrath. At the same time, it reveals the power that healers and priests are able to harness for averting or curing such afflictions — an ambivalent power for both destruction and creation to which Balinese refer as *sakti*. Underpinning the notion of *sakti* is the idea that some human beings are able to channel the power of intangible agents (*niskala*) to bring about suffering and death as well as, conversely, well-being and prosperity. The Balinese world was still “enchanted” in the 1930s — and it remains so to a large extent today.

Hildred Geertz's study of storytelling in Batuan is a welcome addition to the work that she has previously published on this village. It is both rigorously researched and written beautifully — with the assurance of an anthropologist who has long experience of fieldwork on Bali. It will prove invaluable for readers of English who will have access, for the first time, to the tales that are still so much part of Balinese traditional lore.

REFERENCES

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