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*Kebalian: The Dialogic Construction of Balinese Identity*. By Michel Picard. Singapore: NUS Press, 2024. xiii+449 pp.

In 1938, the Consultative Council of Balinese rulers (Paruman Kerta Negara) established a commission to compile the holy scriptures of the Balinese religion. For two years, its members sought out manuscripts that would demonstrate the “common foundations” of their shared religion (p. 156). Yet, in 1940, the council’s president conceded that the project had failed because variation in ritual practice made it impossible for commissioners to “agree on a religious canon valid for the whole island” (p. 156).

At first glance this puzzling episode evokes conventional accounts of Bali as an island buffeted by external political, religious and cultural forces. For example, the project was initiated by a council that was sponsored by the colonial government, implemented by means of scouring the Dutch archive at Gedong Kirtya, and inspired by a desire to defend Balinese religious practices from Muslim and Christian proselytization. Yet, in the end, it was not outsiders who sealed the project’s fate but the Balinese priests who participated as commissioners.

Michel Picard’s marvellous book locates this episode within a long history of contestation over *Kebalian*, or Balinese-ness. Taking issue with those who portray the Balinese as victims of external forces, the book examines the many ways in which Balinese intellectuals have defined their own identity, albeit in “dialogue” with external actors such as the Indonesian state, Dutch colonial officials, Muslim and Christian missionaries and Indian Hindus, as well as tourists, artists, anthropologists and scholars (p. 8). Opening with the popular metaphor of Balinese identity as a tree with “religion” as the roots, “tradition” as the trunk and “culture” as the fruit (p. 3), the book traces the construction of this threefold identity across the colonial, Sukarno, New Order and Reform eras of Indonesian history. Throughout, the book emphasizes the debates that unfolded among the Balinese intelligentsia about the meaning of these complex terms.

Specifically, the book details how Balinese elites guided dual processes of “religionization” and “Hinduization” that transformed Balinese identity during the twentieth century (chapter 1). From the colonial era until the New Order, Balinese intellectuals increasingly distinguished between religious belief and ritual practice, making their religion recognizable to outsiders and legible to the Indonesian state. But even as these developments unfolded they were vehemently debated across two important social cleavages: the status divide between noble (*triwangsa*) and commoner (*jaba*) title groups; and the philosophical divide between conservatives, who wished to continue the practice of village-specific customary rituals, and reformers, who wished to universalize the religion such that it could be practised anywhere by anyone (p. 242).

The book demonstrates that significant innovations in Balinese identity often followed shifts in the balance of social and political power across these cleavages. For example, the principle of “Belief in the One and Only God” enshrined in the 1945 constitution empowered reformers who wished to standardize the Balinese religion (chapters 5–6), just as decentralization during the Reform era enabled the conservative, noble priesthood to reclaim customary rituals as an essential element of Balinese religious practice (chapter 8).

Picard’s attention to detail throughout the book buttresses his compelling narrative. The prose is elegant, the Malay and Indonesian translations are precise, and the notes are not to be missed (personal favourites include chapter 3, note 46, in which Margaret Mead likens a rival anthropologist to the witch Rangga, and chapter 4, note 10, which briefly profiles I Gusti Nyoman Pandji Tisna, novelist, poet and raja of Buleleng). But most of all, it is the array of primary sources that make *Kebalian* such an impressive piece of scholarship. Not only has Picard interviewed almost all the contemporary figures that populate his narrative, but he also interprets sources written in at least six different languages, including colonial-era periodicals such as *Surya Kanta*, *Bali Adnjana* and *Djatajoe*, and the published proceedings of Parisada Dharma Hindu Indonesia, the governing body of Hinduism in Indonesia.

The book leaves no doubt that the Parisada Dharma Hindu Bali (as it was originally named) achieved sweeping changes during the 1960s. Under the leadership of Ida Bagus Mantra, the Parisada enumerated canonical texts (*Çastra Dharma Hindu Bali*), issued the Five Articles of Faith (*Panca Çraddha*), and composed a Hindu catechism (*Upadesa*), among other reforms (chapter 6). Yet the sharp debates that characterize the rest of the book seem to fall silent during this period of momentous change. While these developments are situated against the horrific violence of the 1960s, including a “massive slaughter of alleged ‘communists’” (p. 215) and the onset of the New Order, perhaps the book could have elaborated more fully how the tumultuous politics of the era facilitated reforms that in other times would have encountered stiff resistance.

Its richness and insight make *Kebalian* an essential resource for Bali studies, but its appeal should extend beyond Baliologists. For example, its account of religious evolution, its examination of temple-state relations and its descriptions of Bali’s encounters with colonial rule and contemporary globalization will interest many social scientists.

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