

*The Life of a Balinese Temple: Artistry, Imagination and History in a Peasant Village.* By Hildred Geertz. Illustrations by Sandra Vitzthum. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004. xv, 292 pp.

In this remarkably original book, simultaneously a work of socio-political, cultural, and art history, Hildred Geertz explores transformations in Bali over time by focusing on a particular architectural object: Batuan Village Temple (*Pura Desa Batuan*). Although this temple, like most in Bali, appears venerably ancient, an expression of unchanging tradition, Geertz demonstrates how such structures are continually renovated, amended, and re-imagined as well as preserved. Through a study of the production and use of stone carvings — the bas reliefs and statues adorning the temple's myriad altars, walls, and gates — the book addresses fundamental issues as well in the anthropology of art. The result is a brilliant account of processes of cultural production from 1917 to the present, and, to some extent, extending into a more distant, less accessible, past.

As Geertz notes, anthropologists conventionally treat particular things or events as a means to learn about values or social relations, while art historians typically focus on the singular as a manifestation of creative vision. Geertz combines these approaches by attending both to individual works (discussing how, when, and by whom they were made, as well as how local actors speak of and use them) and to the forms of life with which they are entangled.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first, “Work,” Geertz introduces the temple and the village, and discusses the fieldwork on which the study is based before tackling the various activities through which villagers engage with the temple, making use of its “spaces and structures.” Geertz’s main concern here is to highlight multiple forms of relevant work, playing on the Balinese *karya*, “to work”, which encompasses both large rituals (involving the presentation of offerings and prayers) and corporeal and social labour on communal structures such as temples (erecting temporary and permanent structures, serving on committees, performing, and carving statues). Geertz argues that ritual occasions provide crucial

“interpretive frames” for understanding the carvings. Focusing on the “work” done at this particular temple also allows Geertz to present contending cosmological and social positions. These include the plural cosmologies relevant to contemporary Balinese, especially those of the Hindu Dharma movement (which treats divinities as abstract and Indic symbols of general cosmic forces) and those of ritual practice (in which they appear as spatially located actors who wreak natural and social havoc if ignored). Socially, work around the temple includes the forging and dissolving of political alliances, through which some residents came to be excluded from temple membership.

In Part Two, “Works,” Geertz addresses individual shrines and decorative elements, the material forms Europeans would most identify as art. She traces the emergence of today’s temple over time by focusing on the actual carvings one by one, more or less in the order each was made. Geertz not only attends to who commissioned and made each artifact (where discoverable) and the human and economic resources available for such projects, but also presents what people told her about specific pieces. At the same time she embeds her discussion in local, regional, and provincial history: we see the temple taking material shape simultaneously with political, cultural, and economic networks. Thus Geertz tacks between approaches familiar from art history, treating each work as the expression of skilled innovation by its makers, and those familiar from anthropology. Particular acts of modifying the temple speak to conflicts between village factions and between the village and agents such as the princes of Gianyar, colonial administrators, and Indonesian bureaucrats. Thus the temple’s modern-day appearance not only derives from its function as a place where human agency is extended through alliances with non-humans, but also indexes struggles within and beyond the village. Five of the chapters in this section address particular historical periods (pre-colonial Bali, the colonial regime, the struggle for Indonesian independence, the New Order nation-state, and contemporary tourism). An important additional chapter elaborates Geertz’s reflections about art, aesthetics, coherence, representation, sacredness, and universality.

This is one of three books Geertz has written on Balinese art, focused on the village of Batuan. Geertz embarked on the project hoping to uncover local aesthetic principles through which she could relativize the universalist pretensions of the category of art. Bali seemed an apt place to pursue such a goal, given its reputation as a place where “everyone” is an artist — a claim that, however problematic for the island as a whole, seems right for Batuan. She quickly discovered, however, that Balinese intellectuals did not theorize along such lines (though she provides insight into criteria for appreciating carvings on the basis of cut and brilliance). But people had many other things to say about the images decorating the temple, which generated much food for reflection about the relationship between art and society, especially in her provocative demonstration that assemblage itself forms a creative act (a particularly useful insight for Bali).

Geertz lays out such issues with admirable clarity. Part One challenges familiar ideas about the relations between art and society: Batuan Village Temple clearly is neither the mechanical product of an unchanging collective consciousness nor simply an expression of the creative impulses of gifted individuals. In addition, she subscribes neither to universalist nor thoroughly relativist positions concerning art (or for that matter religion) but rather treats the categories of European art history and philosophy and those of Balinese intellectuals symmetrically, regarding all of them as produced in specific conditions, which include, of course, a history of significant interaction from the colonial era to the present. In a related vein, she takes the partial connections between categories established through both history and her fieldwork as not only anthropologically productive but shared with Balinese interlocutors.

While the book may be read as an exemplary account of the formation over time of Balinese villages and temples as built environments and social organisms, Geertz rightly emphasizes that there is nothing typical about Batuan. Not only has it been a site for innovations in the visual arts since the 1920s and 1930s — stimulated by new technologies and themes introduced by expatriate artists, new tourist markets, and two visiting anthropologist-collectors,

Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson — but it is also a centre for the performing arts, whose dancers perform regularly throughout the island and even around the world. In addition, temple renovation has been able to draw entirely on local artisans, a situation impossible in many places. Moreover, the carvings do not only speak to regional tastes (Gianyar style looks fussy to other Balinese) but also to the extraordinary wealth that tourism has pumped into the area. And as Geertz discovered, not only art but also social ferment makes Batuan noteworthy: tensions between traditional and emerging classes and ideas led to a dramatic rupture in village society around this temple. Yet it is precisely where it is most particular that the analysis proves most satisfying, as in our discovery that the iconography of particular statues serves as a reflexive representation of the specific dance styles performed here during rituals.

In the course of discussing the temple, the practices associated with it, and the mutation of both its material form and its socio-political relationships over time, Geertz introduces countless novel interpretations of Balinese history and society. These range from small but significant alterations in the language used to describe familiar phenomena, to explicit discussions of translation issues. Thus Geertz not only rejects the term “caste” to describe Balinese social relations but begins the important task of historicizing the use of such categories, noting, for instance, that terms such as *triwangsa* only came into currency among Balinese after the Indonesian revolution. Geertz also repeatedly reminds readers that Balinese bring a host of different interests and understandings to bear on their activities, including artistic and religious activities, emphasizing as well that rituals and temples are never exactly alike.

If specialists will find much to interest them here, so will those with a more casual interest in Bali or in art. Geertz deftly tackles such clichés of guidebooks, journalism, and documentaries as the claim that “all Balinese are artists,” or that Balinese have a mysterious capacity for harmony. While all of Hildred Geertz’s work on matters Balinese constitutes a significant archive on the famous province, this book deserves a particularly wide readership. Those interested in art,

material culture, history, and religion will all find much to stimulate their thinking. With its wonderful illustrations (photographs, plans, and drawings by Sandy Vitzthum), elegant prose, and user-friendly explanations, it could be assigned easily in courses on Southeast Asian art, history, or religion. In short, this is first-rate book, by a first-rate scholar.

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