

If *ajeg* is the answer, then what is the question?: New identity discourses in Bali¹

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'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more or less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean different things.' (Carroll 1960, 269)

Introduction

Much has already been written about discourses of "Balineseness".² Most such identity discourses have focussed on the nexus between religion, *adat* (custom), culture and tourism. Picard (1999, 21), for example, suggests that Balinese identity 'is the outcome of a process of semantic borrowing and conceptual recasting' that the Balinese have had to make 'in response to the colonization, the Indonesianization and the touristification of their island.' Vickers (1989) devotes about a third of his groundbreaking book on the 'creation' of Bali to the idea of image-making in and of Bali, not only by Europeans but also by the Balinese themselves.

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² I Ngurah Suryawan (2004) describes 'Balineseness' as 'an illusion that is held firmly in the minds of the Balinese people' (sebuah ilusi yang terpelihara kuat dalam pikiran orang Bali)

From colonial times through the New Order to post-Suharto *Reformasi*, a consistent response to that 'colonization, Indonesianization and touristification' has been the development of strategies to defend the island from external so-called "bad influences". This paper considers a recent manifestation of this motif in the period now commonly referred to as 'post-bomb Bali'. In particular the paper explores ways in which a new term, *ajeg Bali*, has become part of a discourse on culture and identity that has been promoted through Balinese mass media.

The Kuta bombings of 12th October 2002 represented a defining moment for many Balinese. The media made much of the bombings as an important time for self-introspection - there was a commonly held view that the Balinese must have done something wrong to bring such destruction and imbalance to the island.³

In an atmosphere of desperation and uncertainty about the present and the future, for many the only safe anchor is the past, a past of traditional values based on culture and religion and which is able to re-establish a harmonious order in which mankind is one with the rest of the universe.

In Bali traditional values have periodically been drawn upon at critical moments, the rationale being that the revivification of old principles will restore balance and order. In the 1920s the Balinese intelligentsia drew upon Hindu values in an effort to reform the Balinese religion and redefine the concept of culture. This effort had its first concrete results when Bali, as part of the Republic of Indonesia, was required to have a universal religion: in 1953 the Balinese religion was recognised by the Ministry of Religion as a branch of Hinduism, with the name *Agama Hindu Bali*.⁴ A more concrete formulation and application of traditional Hindu values occurred in the 1970s and 1980s through the work of Professor Doctor Ida Bagus Mantra, the Governor of Bali, who aimed to build a Balinese identity deemed suitable to be part of the Republic of Indonesia. He adopted a "return to roots" approach that advocated a strengthening of Balinese religion by looking back to its Indian origins, and at the same time presented Balinese Hinduism to the world as a part of international Hinduism. (Vickers 1989, 212)

Legitimising the present through a reconstructed past is thus a recognised practice in Bali. In the post-bomb discourse on culture and religion, the idea of *ajeg* is seen by some as part of that legitimising process. For most Balinese the problem is that nobody seems to know what *ajeg* actually means. As a general guide, the glib explanation provided by a government official at a community meeting in Denpasar would seem to suffice: 'Making Bali *ajeg* is defending our

³ These sentiments were repeated in interviews conducted by the authors with Balinese writers, artists and performers in July-August 2003 and January 2004.

⁴ Later in 1965, it was renamed *Agama Hindu*.

traditions and customs and the Balinese values that are beginning to fade in Bali at the moment.⁵ (Suryawan 2004) However, as the following discussion will show, the very newness of the word (the semantic origins of which are unknown), and the difficulty of endowing it with a precise definition, means that the *ajeg*-led discourse has the potential to assume a keener political edge and to be more divisive than previous articulations of Balinese identity.

Role of the media

A significant feature of *ajeg Bali* has been its promotion by the media. The regional newspaper *Bali Post*, along with the associated television station Bali TV, has been an important player in entrenching public awareness of this new concept. *Bali Post* had an explicit agenda to achieve what it termed (without actually defining) *ajeg Bali* in areas such as religion, tradition, economy, art and culture. To that end the newspaper organised a series of discussions culminating in a seminar on 1st August 2003 with the title 'Towards *ajeg Bali*'.⁶ The papers presented at the seminar were published in a special forty-page edition of the *Bali Post* on the occasion of its 55th anniversary on 16th August 2003.

The first page of that special issue confirmed the commitment of the *Bali Post* to be a 'media for the struggle of the Balinese community.'⁷ Officially, the *ajeg* discourse led by *Bali Post* aimed to promote peace. It did not set an agenda that was chauvinistically Balinese. While sometimes it gave space to more extreme opinions, those views were couched in more measured terms than the ones, discussed below, that can be heard outside *Bali Post*, where the use of the term *ajeg* often has violent, aggressive connotations. Still without ever defining the term, the *Bali Post* went as far as publishing an eleven-point strategy for achieving *ajeg Bali*. Most of these points stressed the necessity of following religious principles, which should be concretely lived in the daily life of each Balinese. The last strategy is 'Avoid a radical-primordial and exclusivist stance, so that the condition that is created is inwardly strong, outwardly congenial.'⁸

***Ajeg* economy**

The special edition of *Bali Post* was based on the premise that Bali was under siege on a number of fronts - religion, economy, environment, architecture - and that the common way to

⁵ Meng-ajeg-kan Bali adalah mempertahankan tradisi adat dan nilai-nilai kebalian yang kini mulai luntur di Bali

⁶ Menuju *ajeg* Bali

⁷ media perjuangan masyarakat Bali

⁸ Menghindari sikap radikal-primordial dan mengeksklusifkan diri, sehingga diharapkan kondisi yang tercipta adalah kondisi "ke dalam" kita kuat, "ke luar" kita simpatik

address all these issues is to restore balance through a more focussed spiritual awareness. The message was that problems have arisen because the Balinese have forgotten themselves and abandoned their true nature as a result of the physical and spiritual exploitation caused by tourism. This exploitation in turn was targeted as the main cause of the economic crisis that Bali was facing, particularly after the bomb. The solution lay in an economic master plan in which particular attention should be paid to small industries and which, most importantly of all, must take into account the fundamentals of the Hindu religion. In particular reforms should consider the Balinese concept of *Tri Hita Karana*, the relationship between humans and God, between humans and humans and between humans and the environment.

This is a recurrent and important theme for Balinese: a harmonious relationship between all the elements of the Universe ensures the continuation of life, and humans are responsible for maintaining that harmony. On this reading, being *ajeg* seems to lie in remembering this responsibility and an *ajeg* economy implies re-creating the lost balance. One article, for example, suggested that the imbalance was caused by excessive investment in the tourism sector, meaning that everything is sacrificed for tourism - above all land and water previously used for agriculture. Another article discussed the lack of harmony evident in the buildings and hotels of the cities and resort areas. So-called 'newcomers' brought to Bali an architecture style that created imbalance in the environment. To redress this, Balinese should apply those traditional principles based on Hinduism regarding organization of space, in order to have a Bali that is *tetap ajeg* (still *ajeg*). (Suana 2003)

***Ajeg* ethnicity**

In some quarters those 'newcomers', specifically non-Balinese Indonesians, are described as a new source of disharmony, a potential cause of cultural degradation if they are not controlled. (Arsana 2003) Strict control of non-Hindu and non-Balinese residents is exacted through a special permit (*Kartu Identitas Penduduk Pendatang*) - a sort of visa for Indonesians within Indonesia. (Suryawan 2004) Several articles stress the decreased percentage of Hindu Balinese in the population, especially in Denpasar, and an increase in the number of Muslims, Protestants and Catholics. This signifies a shift in focus in the discourse on 'protecting Bali from outside bad influences', which previously referred mainly to tourism and alien values brought by globalisation. Post-bomb, the fear of the other is materialised within the Indonesian nation itself - a sort of 'domestic other'.

Bali Post itself gave space to different views on the issue of 'newcomers'. An article on 1st January 2003, reporting the New Years Eve speech of the Mayor of Denpasar, stressed that

Bali can be *ajeg* not despite the newcomers, but thanks to them. Denpasar, with diverse ethnicities, was depicted as the epitome of Unity in Diversity. But a diametrically opposed view was shown in another article, written by the Chief (*Bupati*) of Jembrana regency on 16th August, in which he argued the need for special financial support for his regency because it was the area suffering most from mass immigration from Java, which caused an increase in theft and other illegal activities perpetrated by those people attracted by the relative prosperity of Bali. The *Bupati* stressed that in the past the Island of Gods had attracted tourists because of its beauty and safety but that now it was a lost paradise. He called for a more *ajeg* Bali without the presence of unemployed non-Balinese. (Winasa 2003)

The theme of defending Bali from so-called 'external dangers' also took on a national flavour as seen in the front-page feature of *Bali Post* on 16th August, titled 'Realising the goals of the proclamation'.⁹ In this article *ajeg Bali* was envisioned as an aspiration of the proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia, and the integrity of Balinese culture was depicted as necessary for the integrity of the Indonesian nation.

Predictably perhaps, the Internet is a rich source of significant dialogues on *ajeg Bali*, most characterised by a different tone from that created by *Bali Post*. For example, a message posted on 18th November 2003 to the discussion forum 'Umat Hindu Bali BANGKITLAH' ('Hindu Balinese ARISE')¹⁰ expressed the concern that Bali was already dominated by Islam. The discussant suggested that Muslims are sent to Bali in order to increase the number of Muslims on the island, through settlement and marriage. Muslims do not eat in Balinese food stalls and avoid Balinese; Balinese should do likewise. Balinese should fight Muslims with the same weapons including making it difficult to build new mosques, just as Muslims do with Hindus in Yogyakarta. At the conclusion of his message the author incited Balinese to be *ajeg* in order to avoid Bali becoming Islamic territory: 'Now it's up to us, whether we want to become an Islamic region or to still be *ajeg* Bali'.¹¹ *Ajeg* is thus unambiguously constructed as anti-Islam.

Erect *ajeg*

Degung Santikarma, a Balinese anthropologist currently working on violence in Bali, is one of many people trying to interpret this new discourse on culture. Santikarma reads in the term *ajeg* an aggressive, masculine and militaristic connotation. On his reading, the term has been promoted by the conservative *Bali Post* with the support of Bali TV and using the Bali

⁹ Mewujudkan cita-cita proklamasi

¹⁰ <http://www.stormpages.com/kebenaran2/wwwboard/387.html>

¹¹ Sekarang tergantung kita, ingin menjadi daerah Islam atau Bali tetap *ajeg*.

bombing 'to erect new boundaries between cultures and religions and to spark new fundamentalism as a response to fundamentalisms elsewhere in Indonesia and around the world'. (Santikarma 2003a)

While 'erect' is the only translation of *ajeg* that Santikarma proposes in his English-language article, he gives a broader interpretation of the term in his Indonesian version of the same article, published in *Kompas* a month later. Here he uses the adjectives *kokoh, tegak, tegar, kekal, kencang, kuat dan stabil* - 'strong, erect, rigid, everlasting, taut, forceful and stable'. Whereas in the article in English Santikarma stresses the masculine/macho and fundamentalist connotations of *ajeg*, in the Indonesian version he also emphasises the local political and economic aspects of the discourse. He argues that this discourse, created by bureaucrats and the media, aims to legitimise the power of the traditional elites (such as Brahmans and aristocrats) and to eliminate foreign competitors. Although the content of the two articles is not very different, it is worth noting that in the English version there is a denunciation of Hindu fundamentalism, underlining a tension between Hinduism and Islam, while in the Indonesian version the focus is more on economic and political power dynamics. (Santikarma 2003b)

New wine in old bottles?

The discourse is undeniably reminiscent of the New Order slogan *melestarikan membina dan mengembangkan kebudayaan Bali* ('preserve, create and develop Balinese culture'). The question is whether *ajeg Bali* represents something special or markedly different from that old discourse, or whether the term is used with the same connotation as the 'old' *lestari* (preservation).¹² Another issue that needs to be addressed¹² is the intersection between *ajeg Bali* and regional autonomy legislation in Indonesia which, since January 1st 2001, has devolved to the regions powers and responsibilities previously held by central government. Some preliminary research suggests that this has led to heightened notions of regional identity and to a revitalisation of regional cultural traditions.¹³

Some contributors to the discussion on *ajeg* agree that, rather like the state ideology of *Pancasila*, the term is an empty shell - it can be as meaningful or as meaningless as you want it to be.¹⁴ As Ngurah Suryawan (2004) says, it can be, and has been, used to 'comment on anything at all' (*mengomentari apa saja*). To gloss Alice, it can 'mean different things'. As such, it can be

¹² See Helen Creese's article on *ajeg* in *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, Issue 10 (August 2004) <http://www.she.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue10/creese.html>

¹³ Barbara Hatley has done recent research on this on Yogyakarta, for example.

¹⁴ This sentiment was repeated often during discussions with writers, artists and performers in Bali in January 2004

entirely innocuous - jargon for the bureaucrats, or it can be very powerful - a weapon for the disgruntled.

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