Managing Turbulent Hearts

A Balinese Formula for Living

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INTRODUCTION

Beyond Spectacle and Bright Face

I do not wish to suggest that there is any essential Balinese culture. There are only the myriad statements and actions in which people living on the island of Bali, and calling themselves Balinese, engage.
—MARK HOBART

Any history of the ideas that constitute an ethnological tradition need only presume that mistaken views were likely mistaken for interesting reasons.
—JAMES BOON

"How does one feel empathy for gazelles?" the famous anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who spent two and a half years on Bali studying the Balinese, is reported to have asked. In this he reflected attitudes which have dominated Western interpretations of Bali and cast a romantic and aestheticizing cloak over this South Sea island (Boon 1977).

As artist/anthropologist Jane Belo, who was a contemporary of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead and worked closely with them, wrote:

> The babies do not cry, the small boys do not fight, the young girls bear themselves with decorum, the old men dictate with dignity. . . . The child . . . has only to obey the prescriptions of tradition to become an adult happily adjusted to the life which is his. . . . The women accept without rancor the role of an inferior. . . . The system of stratification works smoothly as a rule, and all those individuals who conform to it seem happy. . . . The immutability of all the laws of conduct relieves the individual of any responsibility except that of obeying them. . . . And since they are his habits, he does not even have to think of them ([1935] 1970, 106–9).

My account will be different. The Balinese I came to know during twenty months' fieldwork among them emerged as distinct individuals, struggling, often troubled, lovely to be with and often beautiful to behold, but nonetheless accessible to a degree of understanding as one labors to overcome exoticism and create resonance in oneself to their experienced life situation.

There is indeed much in Balinese life to nourish a distanced, aesthetic admiration. In their collective rituals and their art forms they fashion spectacles of great beauty and complexity. In their social encounters they create a mood of poise and gaiety that dazzles. But for every elaborate offering, there are countless others scraped together from the meager elements at hand. For every splendid ceremony there are numerous inconspicuous ones where people had to make do with what they could ill afford, straining hearts and family relations in the process, and yet the spectacle is so poor that few of us might care to carry its image home in our photographs.

I am struck that even my photographs testify to the extraordinary and splendid. Bali seems to entice everyone into ignoring the commonplace except when it is transformed into dramatic delights, an onlooker's feast.

There is thus a glaring discongruity between people's everyday experience of life on this island and its representation in Western media and works, just as there is between the photos I took and the testimonies my diaries and field notes record.

To grasp how people actually experience their lives, we need to attend more closely than has been customary among anthropologists working in Bali to the ways in which Balinese interpret themselves and each other in their own forms of discourse and in the large and small events of their particular lives: not their terms for gods, institutions, calendars, and rituals so much as the concepts with which they feel and think about, and handle, the tasks and tribulations of their individual existences.

It was here that I became aware of an effort, an experienced ubiquitous endeavor of "making one's face look bright and clear" in a world where there is, as they say, "so much to care about." What Westerners have perceived as an innate aesthetic mood, an ingrained disposition to be graceful and poised, I found instead to reflect a deliberate attitude, a willed response of "not caring," "forgetting" the bad that has come to pass, and "letting bygones be bygones" if one is to thrive, or even to survive.

Why is this observation so important? It provides an alternative key to interpreting and understanding *all* expressions and interactions of Balinese. Realizing it matters profoundly, because it situates people's actions and communications in a different context—a world of effort, struggle, perhaps even covert desperation, not one of tranquility. In such a world, options, acts and statements will take on very different meanings and significance, and attempts at interpretation which ignore this will tend to prove very wide of the mark.

Through my intimate association with Balinese in everyday life I met with the concept which seems to me to be at the root of a Balinese design for living—*ngabe keneh*—what I translate as "managing the heart." It is this that forms the connecting thread throughout the book. In Balinese experience as I came to understand it, all appeals to ancestors and gods will be fruitless unless one engages in a deliberate effort to help oneself by the active deployment of feeling-thought:

> "Yesterday, I planted mango stones, for the future, for the children. My husband just watched. I cut down the old branches of the banana trees. He just watched . . . As one sows, one will reap. . . . So I struggle to do always the best. When God sees that, he will reward me . . ."

My book seeks to convey what this implies on an existential level and as a continuing project, never to be set aside. Thus it is indigenous therapy with which I deal, but also much more in that "not so good feelings" are made an *issue* in interpersonal relations: "If people could see our heart, they would laugh and say, 'She does not know how to manage her feelings!'" The sanctions are dire and painfully felt, and "making the face look bright and clear" emerges thus as a moral injunction, a formula for life as well as for living.

As Mark Hobart observes, "Balinese villagers have developed elaborate powers of control by surveillance and discipline, through which people and their doings are subject to regulation. . . . The famed poise of the Balinese is as much a response to surveillance as it is any 'natural grace'" (1985c, 11).

To understand what this "famed poise" means existentially to Balinese, we must know what *it takes* to don the ever-bright face; how the bright face works—when it mirrors, as it should, "a good heart"—for physical and mental health; and how a "happy expression," which reads as synonymous with a "clear, bright face," is even considered to be a social duty with implications for public health: "If someone sits there just brooding, people will say he is thinking about himself only, not the whole of our people."

It was not by design that I came to focus on this. I went to Bali on a project that had an entirely different formulation and dealt with the impact of Islam on Bali-Hindu conceptions of personhood and conduct. Taking as my basis Clifford Geertz's famous study "Person, Time and Conduct in Bali" ([1966] 1973a), I intended to build on this and explore what modifications or changes ensued wherever Islam had replaced Hinduism as a formula for life. Because North Bali has the larger percentage of Muslims, it seemed opportune to do my study there.

When this focus was swiftly set aside, it was because life seemed to will it otherwise. On the second day of fieldwork, I began—still unaware—to be drawn into a life and an experience that challenged my powers of perception and my notions of basic human emotions to such an extent that not only my work, but *I*, was changed in the process. I tell of my experience in chapter 1.

"Another Bali" opened up, one which I would not have anticipated, indeed *could* not have anticipated, on the basis of my previous readings. At issue was not Islam thwarting an essential Hindu base, but the very construction and constitution of that base. Put simply, Balinese, as represented in some celebrated anthropological texts, did not fit with the lives and the fates of the people I perceived. The portrayal of Balinese as all-engrossed in theatrical display and bent on aesthetic pursuit now seemed exoticized beyond recognition.

I realized I would have to begin from beginnings: trying to construct my own understanding of how Balinese experience themselves and others in everyday life and how they represent themselves to themselves and to one another. Nor could I assume that there *is* any essential base. As Mark Hobart has written: "There are only the myriad statements and actions in which people living on the island of Bali, and calling themselves Balinese, engage" (M. Hobart 1986b, 152).

How can it be that the main thrust of my understanding should be so different from that inscribed in the greater part of the anthropological literature? How can I trust my interpretation sufficiently to pit it against those of such authorities as Mead, Bateson, Clifford Geertz, and others? Is it a matter of seeing one fragment only, one particular angle which has happened to loom large in my experience with Balinese and thus come to dominate my interpretation? Or is it a matter of observing Balinese at another time and place, thus that it is actually a different "people" of whom I write?

I think not. First, there are other sources from the 1930s and further back, such as the still highly recognized monograph by Covarrubias ([1937] 1973) which paints a picture much closer to mine; the corpus of traditional materials from Hooykaas (1974, 1978) and Weck ([1937] 1976), mainly from the South, lends further support. Even more compelling, there are evocative Balinese testimonies, such as the traditional poem cycle *Basur* (cf. Zurbuchen 1989) in which a widowed father gives trenchant advice to his two daughters, articulating a social unease and care, a fear of fellow villagers, kinsfolk, and sorcerers, and a stress on gentle demeanors and bright faces that would be most apposite to the concerns I discuss. Indeed, *Basur* is favored by Balinese both in the South and in the North, and we were given a copy by our first host to read long before we were in a position to recognize its relevance.

Finally, a close reading of Bateson's and Mead's own texts indicates that their materials also comprise observations like those I stress. Bateson particularly has some startling insights, as when he sees the individual Balinese as if "forever picking his way, like a tightrope walker" ([1949] 1972a, 120); or when he interprets a Balinese painting as a "symbolic representation of Balinese social organization, in which the smooth relations of etiquette and gaiety metaphorically cover the turbulence of passion" ([1967] 1972b, 150). But such insights were largely left aside, and other and far simpler interpretations were favored, reading essential meanings directly from the surface forms—not least in Bateson's own main text from 1949.

These interpretations by Bateson and Mead which build directly on the overt forms of certain Balinese conventions and conceptions have since been revitalized and elaborated through Clifford Geertz's brilliant and evocative essays ([1966] 1973a, [1972] 1973d, [1974] 1984). These writings may well have been intended by him as both provisional and provocative, occasions to develop general ideas and perspectives on cultural analysis rather than steps in the authoritative construction of an interpretation of Balinese culture. Yet I do not think I am alone among anthropologists in having allowed them to become fused into a coherent, received wisdom about the essential characteristics of Balinese culture, such as I initially brought to my meeting with the field. In my own polemics in the subsequent text, I will thus focus on certain of Geertz's essays and interpretations and treat them as authoritative texts in the corpus of the anthropological literature on Bali, rather than as steps in a particular scholar's pursuit of shifting ideas. Indeed, read my way, they have served profoundly to challenge my own subsequent insights and sharpen my perceptions.

Of course, I fully accept that all views are particular views and that many truths can be told of something as creative and rich as the works and lives of Balinese. But my honest understanding is also that these other accounts of Bali, applied to the lives I have seen and the persons I have known, would have led to invalid understandings and *mis*interpretations of events I have seen, rendering them plausible to an outside reader but less than satisfying for one submerged in the context of those events.

I now believe—and will try to substantiate throughout the book—that the theatrical model in which much recent anthropological discourse casts Balinese is fundamentally misleading. It eliminates the feeling-thinking agent and miscasts people's deeply compelling concerns. Arjun Appadurai has coined the notion "gatekeeping concepts" (1986a) to show how ideas may become metonymic prisons for particular places: they may confine the inhabitants of that place so they seem incarcerated morally and intellectually by their "mode of thought" (1988, 37–40). Gatekeeping concepts

> define the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in the region . . . [so] the over-all nature of the anthropological interpretation of [that] society runs the risk of serious distortion. Here, of course, the central questions concern whether these gatekeeping concepts . . . really reflect something significant about the place in question, or whether they reveal a relatively arbitrary imposition of the whims of anthropological fashion on particular places (1986a, 357–58).

I believe that the theatrical model, enhanced by the attribution of supreme aestheticism, more reflects on Western sensibilities than it reveals anything significant about how Balinese understand themselves and their lives. I also believe it is fundamentally misleading in that it strips Balinese of what they regard as the quintessence of their humanity: the heart—regarded as the motivator of action.

While Balinese may say "the world is the stage of drama" (*dunia adalah panggung sandiwara*), the drama of which *they* speak is one replete with human passion and full of compelling concerns that spill over, causing predicaments, and where things are truly at stake. The actors are full-fledged individuals, and the drama is not for aesthetic delight but is about morality, vested interests, self-esteem, even matters of life and death. I tell the story of a young woman visiting a gracious elderly lady renowned for her religious piety—and the drama veiled by their gracious facades (chaps. 3, 5). It is not an exception but the rule; such or similar dramas are the stuff of so much of their interaction. And Balinese know it!

Or take a man (Hindu) at war with his community over the issue of whether he can or cannot run the electricity at his tourist pension on the occasion of the Balinese New Year, *Nyepi* (a time when everything should be still and dark). In the end members of the community punished him by cutting down the beautiful old trees on his beach; this is high "drama" but tells us little of what was at stake for either of the parties or what actually motivated their actions. Nor does it begin to trace the tragic implications for parties implicated against their will in the conflict and turmoil—in this case, an impoverished man only fortuitously drawn in, who yet lost his capital and critical source of livelihood.

Cares spill over. People may be trapped. The idiom of drama or theatricality captures only one facet of the pattern of life. And when this part is taken for the whole and used to epitomize "*the* culture" we stand truly in danger of imprisoning people in (what we adduce to be) their "mode of thought," besides essentializing culture in a way that is quite unwarranted.

Might it then be that some of my disagreement arises because I have been a different place from anthropologists such as Bateson, Mead, and Clifford Geertz? Is North Bali, where I worked, only superficially similar to the South, from which the overwhelming part of the anthropological literature derives, and in deeper ways quite different?

My fieldwork was carried out during twenty months between January 1984 and March 1989 in and around Singaraja, the capital of Bali's northernmost province, Buleleng. Singaraja is a town of some fifty thousand people, serving a hinterland of approximately one half million. It was the capital of the Dutch colony from 1849 to 1949, and Margaret Mead wrote in 1942 that the Singaraja region was more influenced by Western impulses than South Bali. Today the tables are turned. Since the transfer of the provincial capital to Denpasar in the 1950s and the advent of mass tourism to Bali in the early seventies, North Bali has had considerably less Western influence than the South. Shoestring tourists who come to Lovina, the beach west of Singaraja, generally stay not more than a week, whereas the better-off stay only one day or two, if they include North Bali on their itinerary at all.

Since North Bali is manifestly so much less spectacular than the South, I suspect that the same focus on aesthetics and splendor is reflected in the fact that the lion's share of anthropological fieldwork has been carried out in the South-Central part, comprising only approximately 5 percent of the island's surface and 40 percent of its population.

But Buleleng people contest the idea that they have less spectacular ceremonies than the South. One only has to know where to go to find them; they are not traded off against tourist tickets as in the South. Indeed, when a budding entrepreneur in Singaraja brought a small carload of tourists to a cremation in his local community, this was widely frowned upon, and he did not repeat the experiment. Actually, the South cannot compete with the North, say Northerners, regarding some particularly beautiful customs which are unique to the region: e.g., the *mepeed* held in connection with cremation when all the descendants of the dead, clothed in dazzling garments, parade through the village from the house of the dead to the death temple and back; or the practice on *Kuningan*—a major Balinese yearly ceremony—of women adorned with *real* golden jewelry congregating by the thousands in the death temple (in the South they use only imitation, Northerners say). I have heard astonished tourists remark that the most magnificent offerings they had come across anywhere were carried by women by the roadside in the region around Singaraja on *Kuningan*. Northerners know and are proud of such facts.

I have also heard Northerners say that there are some character differences between Southerners and themselves. Take naming customs and what they reveal: in the South, it is said, people are given just any name, meaningful or not, but in the North names are chosen with care and applied deliberately to shape character. This means it takes something to bear a name. A name compels, it commits: "I said to my son, 'Remember! If you cannot live up to your name, people might laugh!'" The difference in custom indicates to some people in the North that Northerners are braver and stronger.

More important, there are notable differences between North and South in social organization, relevant to the way persons are embedded in society. Relatively few Northerners live in the large, enclosed compounds found in the South, and most households are based on an elementary family unit—though frequently supplemented by other, coresiding relatives. These are traditional, not recent, patterns. Birth rank seems to play a lesser role than in the South: the vast majority of the population is of common (Sudra) birth, and many villages are composed entirely of commoners (Barth 1991). The area is also affected by its focus on an old, established port and urban center (Singaraja), in contrast to the South where life has been rural in its focus and the urban, now swiftly growing, centers are historically recent. Singaraja, moreover, has been open to the traditional cosmopolitanism of the Sulu Sea, with a steady influx of Chinese, Bugis, Javanese, and South Arabians. As a result, non-Hindu communities and congregations are found in higher frequency in the North, including 8 to 10 percent Muslims compared to an island average of 4 percent.

These differences reflect a long cultural history of parallelism, divergence, and convergence; they are not merely the result of the colonial encounter. Whereas early sources of Balinese history from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries give few indications of regional contrast, toward the end of this period Javanese influence increasingly took hold in the South, culminating in the transfer of the Majapahit court from Java to Bali in 1478. The North was not an effective part of this state structure, but continued on with traditional parochialized Balinese culture and local politics until unified by a local ruler, Panci Sakti, in the mid-1600s. The effects of this kingdom were probably neither as deep nor as uniform as those of the Javanese-based state system of the South; and a great variety of local systems, now generally classified as Bali-Aga, have peristed to this day. The differences in both caste organization and in local household and neighborhood patterns can reasonably be explained by these historical contrasts.

Yet the differences should not be exaggerated; and in most situations of interaction between Balinese they are underplayed, whereas common identity, common history, and shared institutions are made salient. Nor is it adequate to speak simply of differences between North and South. It is a ubiquitous feature of complex traditional civilizations that their institutions are locally variable, forms are prolific, and regionalism flourishes on all levels. This fact is often missed and regularly distorted in the usual format of anthropological studies; but I shall not pursue the argument here as it is central to Fredrik Barth's forthcoming book (1991). Suffice it to say that the persons, events, and dilemmas I describe here would be neither startling nor difficult to interpret to Southern Balinese: North and South together compose one people and one civilization.

To what extent can I hope that my data have captured such broad commonalities? With a perspective and method which demand an intimate and comprehensive view of whole persons over time, I cannot rely on large numbers to secure representativeness. May idiosyncrasies of a few of these persons, or misinterpretations on my part regarding the life situation of some of them, or the simple inadequacy of such a small sample, have led me astray?

The methodology I have adopted should protect against such eventualities in two ways. First, my focus has not been on isolated individuals, but on persons-in-interaction: my data come from the relations of each of these focal persons I portray with scores of others, their exchanges with their social environment over a period of time that varies from a few months to five years, intermittently observed. I have shared in their interaction with salient others in the social circles in which they are embedded. I have followed the changing interpretation and appreciation on both sides of such relations and seen something of the course of shifts and changes in the quality of their relationships. My "sample" of unfolding relationships is thus much larger than it might appear if one thinks merely in terms of personal portraits or biographies. Besides this, of course, I have accumulated a broad range of data, as has also my husband, from diverse communities, occasions, and areas, including South Bali.

Second, I have endeavored to use a diversity of differently positioned persons as foci. Within Buleleng, eleven different people can be said to have served as such foci, embracing women and men, young to middle-aged, Hindu and Muslim, and poor to relatively prosperous. Some of these move in overlapping circles, others do not meet at all. The concepts, ideals, fears, and concerns which resonate across such different circles will have a generality and degree of validity sufficient to illuminate the world in which Balinese move.

This then has been my focus: to try and grasp how people actually experience their lives, lives lived according to Balinese ideas, concepts, and conventions. How can we best develop a degree of understanding, a resonance, for the events that happen in Balinese worlds, the meanings they have, and the experiences they induce?

These are the materials I wish to present and the questions I wish to pose; and so my book has become a rather different text from most books in anthropology. I do not enter into an analysis of the main institutions and organization of any community; I do not give an account of customs, or cosmology, or the necessary struggle to make a living. I do not thereby mean to belittle the importance of such facts. As premises and constraints they govern the lives of which I tell, and so their consequences loom large in the very events that I describe: they are there, refracted in the circumstances and scenarios I present. But rather than take apart the events to show the patterns of custom and necessity, I have purposely allowed myself instead to foreground *other* aspects that lead directly to the particular themes that I wish to raise. In part I feel I can allow myself this option because so much has by now been written on Bali from other priorities, and readers can use that literature to critique my account. I also know that Fredrik Barth (1991) will address many of these issues elsewhere, on the basis of our shared pool of field data.

But I also wish at least to have voiced the irreverent question of whether an anthropology of experience really needs to take second place to the description of custom, the interpretation of culture, or the investigation of material patterns. Perhaps a direct approach to the lived significance of other people's concerns should be granted as much primacy as those other approaches.

I arrived for fieldwork in December 1983, having previously visited the island twice as a tourist. We came as a family, my husband, anthropologist Fredrik Barth, our son, Kim, aged seven, and I. My fieldwork took place at first—when I thought I was studying the impact of Islam on indigenous conceptions of person and self—in a Muslim village south of Singaraja, with visits for comparative material to its neighbouring Hindu village and two villages west of Singaraja with mixed Hindu-Muslim population. As I was drawn into the life of the young woman you meet in chapter 1, it became important to have easy access to her circle, and so I settled with my family in Singaraja. We lived in turn with two families, one Hindu, one Muslim, and I worked increasingly in four relatively distinct circles of acquaintances in three town quarters (*banjar*/*kampong*), one Hindu, one Muslim, and one with mixed Hindu-Muslim population. How I worked, what approach to fieldwork and methodology I followed, is set out in chapter 2. Here let me just note that I tried as much as possible to be a friend and sympathetic listener to people. I never used a tape recorder and rarely took notes on the spot. Thus most of the conversations and observations I relate are rendered from memory.

I made no fewer than seven visits to Bali between 1984 and 1989 and spent a total of twenty months on the island. Revisits were also not planned originally but became the more important with my growing focus on how people cope with life's trials and tribulations through time. Fredrik and I worked in parallel, but not together, and pooled, as we always have, our field notes. After our first and longest joint stay, I next went back alone, a year later, for a stay of two months, but I was made so critically aware of Kim's role in opening up homes and hearts that ever after I tried to bring him along, and on two occasions the whole family went back together.

The linguistic situation in the North demands a note of explanation. It is complex, with two languages, Balinese and Indonesian, in common use and intermixed to the extent that it is not at all uncommon for people to use words of both languages in their speech. Indonesian is the national language and the medium of instruction in schools. It is a Malay language, easy to learn to read and write, and "neutral" in the sense of not being differentiated by words and levels to connote status differences. In Balinese, by contrast, there are at least three different levels, marked by entirely different words, to denote whether one is speaking to a person above, below, or on the same level as oneself in rank. The difficulty of learning the complex vocabulary *and* of knowing when to use the appropriate forms, combined with the danger feared to befall anyone who offends by inappropriate use, is given as the main reason for the increasing use of Indonesian in homes and gatherings. Some parents also say that the particular form of colloquial Balinese spoken in many Singaraja neighborhoods is so coarse that they would rather have their children speak Indonesian, which is inherently polite. Some parents speak Balinese with one child and Indonesian with another thought less clever and more prone to make mistakes in Balinese.

The form of Indonesian spoken and written in North Bali is somewhat different from the national language. A process of Balinization goes on whereby Indonesian words take on Balinese spellings: *sedih* (sad) becomes *sedeh, terkejut* (frightened) *tekejut, jelek* (bad) *jele*, etc. I generally use the Balinese spelling in my text. The glossary at the end may prove helpful.

I have done my utmost not to betray the trust of friends and acquaintances who opened up their hearts to me and revealed secrets which might make people laugh, they fear, if these could be attributed to themselves. I have changed all names and anonymized locales. I have also changed aspects/details of life histories and biographies, but in such a way that the fictitious persons who emerge *might* have been "real." They have the kinds of characters and feeling-thoughts of particular Balinese I know, but without in any way revealing real persons. I hope my deep gratitude and my appreciation and respect for everyone show through. This book is dedicated to Balinese friends.