RITUAL AND WORLD CHANGE IN A BALINESE PRINCEDOM
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Series Editors
RITUAL AND WORLD CHANGE IN
A BALINESE PRINCEDOM

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Series Editors’ Preface

— Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern

We are very pleased to include Lene Pedersen’s Ritual and World Change in a Balinese Princedom in the Ritual Studies Monograph Series. The work presents a lively ethnographic account of a Balinese princedom, informed by the historical positionality of a range of actors, e.g. the Balinese themselves and the Dutch colonial personages. Through an exploration of ritual performativity the contemporary political context of the study arena is detailed in relation to the agency and motives of the persons involved. Also, important questions of how local constructions of identity and power relations are sustained in conjunction with the nation-state are examined.

Pedersen’s work is written in an accessible and lively manner while addressing topics of interest to researchers in a range of disciplines (e.g. Anthropology, Religious and Ritual Studies, History, and Southeast Asian Studies). This study exemplifies the ways that people cope with structuring their political and ritual lives at the local level while balancing influences from the nation-state and other outside forces. This approach is of particular interest in terms of the study of globalization, transnational flows of ideas and practices, and glocalization (the local appropriation and transformation of globalizing influences and their incorporation into local sets of practices).

The processes by which people create a place with identities of a particular sort are numerous. In our research in Scotland (see Strathern and Stewart 2001) and Ireland since the mid-1990s we have seen that a proliferation of local and regional festivals that celebrate traditions, crafts, food, dancing, recitations, and re-enactments have been taking place. These activities are all centered on specific places where particular local identities are being emphasized. The Ulster-Scots movement in Ireland that we have described in our writings is an excellent example of the local re-imagining of identities which are both transnational and local in character (see Stewart and Strathern 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 20004c; and Strathern and Stewart 2003, 2004a, 2005a, 2005b). History is a vital component of these studies.
The relationship between history and anthropology is clearly represented in Pedersen's work. Her research fits neatly with the growing trend in which anthropological work has become much more historical in character as researchers have become more aware that what they observe and discuss as customs or structures are in fact elements in history. Everything has a history, and everywhere customs, practices, and structures are in processes of change; sometimes these changes are large but sometimes they are small and gradual. A concern with the dynamics of these changes is fundamental in research work nowadays. Anthropologists at one time argued that one could not take history into account where it was not known. But ethnohistory, the history of a people as they themselves recount it, is always available, since universally people do have their own accounts of history. And when we are working in the midst of peoples with long written histories and traditions of scholarship it is obvious that history must be a large part of our knowledge basis. Every anthropologist, then, must be to some extent a historian. We have found this true in our fieldwork in Scotland and Ireland. But it is equally true for our work in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, where much can be learned from studying the people's own ethnohistory and from taking to heart the fact that they do not make the distinction between history and myth in the same way that anthropologists have tended to do.

For example, in the Duna area of the Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea, stories of the founding of groups among these people are important for understanding their patterns of social structure today, since they define the structure of authorized leadership in local groups (see Stewart and Strathern 2002; and Strathern and Stewart 2004b). But these same stories have gained renewed importance in dealing with mining companies in the late nineteen nineties, since the people have used the geographical basis of their stories to make claims for compensation for environmental pollution on the companies. The Duna also mix pre-colonial ritual practices with introduced Christian ones to recreate and emphasize relationships with the local environment, its fertility, and the cosmos at large.

The use of ritual practices to balance the emplaced relations of persons within their cosmological worlds is aptly demonstrated by Pedersen's study. She encapsulates this by stating that "through these chapters [of the book], a combined theme of fertility and power has wound, like the snake of the keris [a long dagger], the cosmic object that embodies both male and female characteristics, the symbol that binds together the realm. The ritual of maligya [a post cremation ceremony to purify and deify deceased ancestors] is about the recycling of souls and regeneration at all levels of existence."
Pedersen’s study tackles and provides new solutions to some fundamental problems in the analysis of early state forms in South-East Asia, particularly those arising from Clifford Geertz’s work on the ‘theater state’ in Bali. While stressing the effective roles of ritual and ceremony, she also notes the importance of charisma and violence in maintaining the ruler’s powers, and the significance attributed to magic in the spheres of both ritual and charisma: a significance well exemplified in the symbol of the keris, dagger and snake, male and female. The keris can be seen as a transform of the python symbol, which carries potent associations throughout Eastern Indonesia (Strathern and Stewart 2000).

Pedersen’s work is also a valuable contribution to the theory of ritual generally. She reviews the ideas of Valerio Valeri on Huaulu rituals, and of Maurice Bloch on the Merina circumcision rituals, and concludes that Balinese rituals are complex and multi-centered, that ritual meanings change because of flexibilities in their symbolism, and that over time they become the object of contest over power and resistance to power: all conclusions that are paralleled by investigations we have made into Taiwanese ritual practices centered on Mazu, a powerful female figure who is thought to protect those who fish for a living from shipwrecks at sea (Stewart and Strathern 2005). Pedersen’s argument thus not only illuminates her own ethnographic materials but also provides suggestive pointers in the direction of cross-cultural comparative studies in the wider Asia-Pacific context.

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