
DARK PLAY: NOTES ON A BALINESE MASSACRE

John Sidel

**Geoffrey Robinson. *The Dark Side of Paradise: Political Violence in Bali*
Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995. 341 pp.**

There is an old trick for stimulating discussion in otherwise moribund seminars: assign two readings which, taken together, comprise an important "debate." In the study of Southeast Asia, for example, the most famous such pairings—the Feith-Benda debate, Scott vs. Popkin—have, no doubt, proven convenient for teachers and instructive for students in numerous courses over the years. As in cockfights, it appears, the key lies in finding a well-paired match, sharpening the instruments of combat, and nudging the contestants to display their plumage and "thrash it out" on the open floor.

Geoffrey Robinson's important and timely new book, *The Dark Side of Paradise: Political Violence in Bali*, certainly deserves its day in the classroom arena. But who or what would serve as a suitable match for this formidably researched, powerfully argued study? Clifford Geertz's work suggests itself as an obvious candidate, especially as Robinson has mustered a barrage of evidence and arguments which attack anthropological studies of Balinese society. Indeed, Geertz's famous cockfights, funerals, peddlers and princes, and theater states provide useful points of potential contrast and debate with Robinson's more historically—and politically—grounded account of Bali. Yet, as argued in this brief review essay, his book has considerable relevance beyond the shores of the much exoticized isle and should be posed against Geertz in a larger arena, where rival understandings of Indonesian politics and of Southeast Asia's post-colonial predicament are ultimately at stake.

Invented Traditions, Constructed Castes: Dutch Colonial Bali

As Robinson makes clear in the book's preface, one key aim of his study is to debunk the twin myths of social harmony on Bali and of timeless Balinese culture and tradition. Drawing on a wide variety of both historical sources (mostly in Dutch) and available scholarship, Robinson instead underscores the extent of internecine warfare and the importance of the slave trade in Bali in the centuries preceding the imposition, in 1908, of a colonial state apparatus over the entire island. Following in the paths of specialists on Java, India, and other parts of the colonized world, he chronicles the "invention of tradition" by interested colonials and the entrenchment and legal codification of "a caste hierarchy and a set of rules regarding caste relations and prerogatives which in practice had never before existed." (33)

The notion of Bali's cultural uniqueness, Robinson shows, received crucial support from the Dutch cultural and educational policies known as *Baliseering* (Balinization) and the "restoration of tradition" in the 1920s and 1930s, policies adopted by colonial officials pushing for "preservation" (rather than Christianization) of Balinese culture and religion as a strategy to stem the spread of Islam and nationalism from neighboring Java. The "creation of legal social categories and the attachment of differential privileges and obligations to them" (63), he makes clear, owed much to the Dutch formation of customary law courts staffed by ordained Hindu priests and to the Dutch policies of indirect rule which left local *rajas* with considerable discretion over land, revenue collection, and corvée labor mobilization. Finally, the pattern of indirect rule through eight separate kingdoms and the return to a "traditional" system of royal hereditary rule, Robinson argues, "ensured that *puri* (noble house) rivalry would remain at the heart of Bali's political life through the colonial period and well beyond." (47)

Yet the strength and originality of Robinson's work do not rest solely—or even largely—upon his above-noted success in discrediting overly ahistorical and apolitical anthropological accounts of Bali or in deconstructing the colonial origins and conservative implications of "Balinese tradition and culture." In fact, as Robinson notes, several anthropologists have already worked to historicize the notion of Bali's cultural uniqueness, and a number of anthropological accounts have remarked upon (if not endeavored to explain) the importance of political conflict and violence in Balinese society.¹ In studying regions beyond Bali, moreover, other scholars have surpassed Robinson in exploring the nexus of "culture and politics" and the problem of "invented traditions" in Indonesian society.² By now the project of deessentializing and historicizing "culture" is, of course, widely accepted, and practiced, by anthropologists, leaving historians and political scientists such as Robinson with not much of a "straw man" to attack. Understood solely as an historian's (or a political scientist's) attack on cultural anthropology, Robinson's book is too little—or too late—in terms of a cross-disciplinary challenge.

¹ See, for example, James A. Boon, *The Anthropological Romance of Bali, 1597-1972: Dynamic Perspectives in Marriage and Caste, Politics and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and Adrian Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created* (Victoria: Penguin, 1989).

² See, for example, John Pemberton, *On the Subject of "Java"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

Political Violence: Robinson's Bali in Comparative Perspective

Understood in its own terms, however, *The Dark Side of Paradise* offers far more than a "through a glass, darkly" view of Balinese culture and society. As Robinson clearly states in his introductory chapter and reiterates in his conclusion, the book aims to address three important questions about Balinese history:

How can we account for the dramatic variation in the pattern of political conflict in Bali, from apparent harmony to open political conflict? What explains the historical tendency for political conflict in Bali to follow class, caste, and ideological lines, and to override the sense of Balinese solidarity based on an awareness of ethnic, religious, or regional community? And finally, what were the historical and structural causes of political violence in Bali? (307)

In answering these questions and providing explanations for the patterns he describes, Robinson makes a set of arguments whose relevance goes far beyond the confines of twentieth-century Bali. In fact, his arguments provide the basis both for reassessing our understanding of the Sukarno era and for refining the tools for exploring local politics in contemporary Indonesia and throughout Southeast Asia.

The dramatic variation in patterns of political conflict in Bali, Robinson shows, has closely corresponded to decisive shifts in the power and orientation of central states in the Indonesian archipelago. Thus Robinson locates the source of "social harmony" in Bali not in the island's "traditional culture," but in the strength and solidity of successive colonial states, Dutch, Japanese, and, arguably, *Orde Baru*. Similarly, Robinson attributes periods of political turmoil in Bali not to enduring "primordial" cleavages and sentiments, but to the absence, weakness, rivalry, and/or disunity of central states, as witnessed in the period stretching from the Revolution through the massacres of 1965–66.

More pointedly, Robinson demonstrates the importance of overarching state structures and policies—rather than enduring cultural or societal features—for determining the pattern of political conflict in Bali. The Dutch (and Japanese) reliance on a system of indirect rule for extracting labor and revenue from the island, he argues, precluded the emergence of Bali-wide regional sentiments and prefigured both the recrudescence of long contained rivalries within the aristocracy, and the release of greatly sharpened class and caste cleavages and resentments, during the Revolution and in the early post-independence period. The weakness of Bali-wide state institutions left the island's post-independence political leaders highly vulnerable to fluctuations in national politics and (along with local capitalists) heavily dependent upon the center for patronage and protection.

Yet Robinson avoids an overly deterministic emphasis on Dutch colonial legacies by tracing the impact of central state pressures and fissures on political conflict in Bali in the Sukarno era. The central state's porous and fragmented control over the bureaucracy, most dramatically and decisively in the case of police and military forces, combined with political party competition for state office and resources to heighten the potential for conflict and violence. PKI cadres and sympathizers working from within the state used public offices, resources, and prerogatives to enhance class consciousness and to engender class conflict, most notably in the *aksi sepihak* campaigns of 1964–65. While the severity of the post-coup violence in Bali "appears to

have been in direct proportion to the radicalism and success of the land-reform campaigns" (272), Robinson shows conclusively that the massacres on the island took place through the initiative and orchestration of (local and Java-based) military authorities. Thus Robinson explains why Bali (along with Central and East Java) was the site of the greatest carnage in 1965–66 by situating local conditions within a broader pattern of national-level politics.³

Overall, *The Dark Side of Paradise* offers perhaps the single most compelling—and instructive—study of local politics in Southeast Asia. While painstakingly researched and documented, Robinson's work reaches beyond history, amply illustrating the possibilities of what might be termed a "comparative historical sociology" approach. Robinson's essential questions are, after all, explicitly comparative, addressing the issue of variation in patterns of political conflict and violence, and his arguments include comparisons across historical periods (i.e. "within the case"), counterfactual asides, and references to alternative local trajectories (most notably the regional rebellions of the 1950s).

Ultimately, Robinson's explanations provide a powerful set of tools for scholars interested in examining local patterns of political continuity and change elsewhere in Indonesia and throughout Southeast Asia as well. Careful attention to the particular colonial-era reorderings of local social, cultural, and economic relations, Robinson shows, provides an essential backdrop for any analysis of post-independence "local politics." A narrow focus on local state institutions and social configurations, he notes, must be combined with an appreciation for the importance of national-level political and economic trends as well as the nature of center-local relations. Be it for Bali in the Suharto era, PAS versus UMNO in Kelantan, *chao pho* in Chonburi, or "provincial warlords" in Camarines Norte, Robinson's careful gridding of local political landscapes and chronicling of provincial political trends offers an exemplary model for other scholars to follow.

Robinson vs. Geertz: The Phantoms of *Aliran*, Class, and State

Yet if, as the saying goes, "all politics is local," then Robinson's study of Bali offers a sharply focused lens through which to reexamine early post-independence politics in Indonesia as a whole and throughout Southeast Asia. In this regard, his choice of Bali as a case study may well prove to be fortuitous, for the island serves not so much as "Indonesia writ small," but as an exception which could prove a new rule. Here Robinson's arguments can be most fruitfully counterposed against those of Clifford Geertz: not the Geertz of Balinese cockfights, funerals, and theater states, but the Geertz who wrote so memorably about Javanese town histories, Indonesian *aliran*, and "primordial sentiments" in the "new states" of Southeast Asia and beyond.

In his classic case study, *The Social History of an Indonesian Town*, Geertz sketched out a pattern of early post-independence social organization and political competition

³ See: Kenneth Young, "Local and National Influences in the Violence of 1965," in Robert Cribb (ed.), *The Indonesian Killings of 1965-1966: Studies from Java and Bali* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash Papers on Southeast Asia No. 21, 1990), pp. 63–99; and Iwan Gardono Sudjatmiko, "The Destruction of the Indonesian Communist Party, PKI: A Comparative Analysis of East Java and Bali" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1992).

in Indonesia that he termed "the *aliran* system."⁴ Literally a stream or current, an *aliran*, he noted, "consists of a political party surrounded by a set of sodalities—that is, voluntary organizations—formally or informally linked to it."⁵ In the Javanese town where Geertz (and others) conducted field work in the 1950s, the four main parties were those which fared most impressively in the national arena: the Partai Nasionalis Indonesia (PNI), the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI), the "modernist" Islamic party Masjumi, and the "traditionalist" Islamic party Nahdlatul Ulama (NU).

With one or another of these parties as nucleus, an *aliran* was a cluster of nationalist organizations—women's clubs, youth groups, boy scouts, charitable societies, cooperatives, lending societies, private schools, athletic clubs, religious organizations, labor and peasant unions, art groups, trade organizations—sharing a similar ideological direction or standpoint and loyalty to the same all-Indonesia leadership. There was a PNI peasant organization, a PKI peasant organization, a Masjumi peasant organization, and an NU peasant organization; there were PNI, PKI, Masjumi, and NU boy scouts, and so on: even the kindergartens divided up this way.⁶

These four party-centered *aliran* thus corresponded to four well-defined streams in Javanese society as identified in Geertz's own taxonomy: "traditionalist" and "modernist" *santri* or devout Moslems (i.e. NU and Masjumi, respectively), Javanist *abangan* commoners (i.e. PKI), and aristocratic *prijaji* (i.e. PNI). In this context, elections constituted more than just an arena for competition over state office and the attendant perquisites of power. As Geertz argued, "the election involved a clash of classificatory principles, of categories . . . and its outcome was an adjustment, as much conceptual as political." "The election," he concluded, "forced an evidently overdue reconstruction of the community's view of itself—of what sort of community it was, of what the elements that compose it were, of how they should be organized and expressed in public life."⁷

Cast in the light of a struggle between competing *aliran*, political conflict in early post-independence Indonesia thus appeared not so much as a contest for power, but rather as what Geertz characteristically described as "the search for a viable form."⁸ Concluding his local case study in the troubled days of 1965, he thus urged the reader to consider all recent Indonesian social processes as "importantly shaped by a sense of intellectual, moral, and emotional disorientation—by, if not a sense of

⁴ Geertz's discussion of *aliran* in this monograph drew heavily on his earlier work. See, in particular, Clifford Geertz, "The Javanese Village," in G. William Skinner (ed.), *Local, Ethnic, and National Loyalties in Village Indonesia: A Symposium* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1959), pp. 34–41; and Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1960).

⁵ Clifford Geertz, *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1965), p. 127. The resemblance to the religious "sub-cultural groups" called *zuilen* (pillars) or "blocs" identified as undergirding Dutch society and politics is striking, perhaps revealingly so. On Dutch *verzuiling* (or "pillarization"), see: Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), especially Chapter II, "A Nation Divided," pp. 16–58.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 127–28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

meaninglessness, at least a very thorough confusion of meaning—and as conducing toward either an increase or decrease of that disorientation.”⁹

Several years later, Geertz wrote in a similar vein more generally about the problem of “civil politics” in “the new states,” against the larger backdrop of what he described as “a whole host of self-reinforcing whirlpools of primordial discontent.”¹⁰ In this regard, he cited the anti-Communist massacres of 1965–66 in Indonesia as an instance of “extraordinary popular savagery . . . mainly along primordial lines.”¹¹ Laying bare the underlying political agenda of his avowedly “cultural” anthropology, Geertz thus concluded:

what the new states—or their leaders—must somehow contrive to do as far as primordial attachments are concerned is not, as they have so often tried to do, wish them out of existence by belittling them or even denying their reality, but domesticate them. They must reconcile them with the unfolding civil order by divesting them of their legitimizing force with respect to governmental authority, by neutralizing the apparatus of the state in relationship to them, and by channeling discontent arising out of their dislocation into properly political rather than parapolitical forms of expression.¹²

In short, Geertz depicted the political conflict and violence of the early post-independence era in Indonesia as reflecting the dangers of “primordial sentiments” untamed and run amok; Suharto’s New Order, by contrast, thus appeared as a necessary attempt to domesticate and integrate the *aliran* of Indonesian society.

Against the *aliran*-centered account of early post-independence Indonesian politics, class-based analyses have fared rather poorly. Even the PKI, it has often been argued, only very weakly adhered to a class-based strategy, its repeated claims of a united front with the “national bourgeoisie” a mere fig leaf for a more narrowly political (and opportunistic) alliance with President Sukarno. Moreover, as Rex Mortimer noted many years ago, the PKI’s own tendency to moderate class appeals, its reliance upon patronage and kinship in recruiting among the peasantry, and its alliance with Sukarno “set problems for any view which sees as *the* central issue in post-independence politics a threat to the elite posed by the social unrest which the PKI in part expressed.”¹³ Even accounts which stressed the class-based nature of rural conflict in 1964–65 conceded that the *aksi sepihak* campaigns in East Java typically pitted *abangan* peasant against *santri* landowner, with class consciousness admittedly “incipient.”¹⁴

Against this backdrop, Robinson’s account of Sukarno-era politics in Bali provides the most powerful counterpoint to the *aliran*-centered view of the period. In Hinduized

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz, “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 276.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 277.

¹³ Rex Mortimer, “Class, Social Cleavage and Indonesian Communism,” *Indonesia* 8 (October 1969): 11.

¹⁴ See, for example, W. F. Wertheim, “From Aliran Towards Class Struggle in the Countryside of Java,” *Pacific Viewpoint* 10, 2 (September 1969): 1-17.

Bali, after all, *santri-abangan* cleavages were not in evidence, yet political conflict and violence culminating in the massacres of 1965–66 were at least as severe as observed in East Java. Thus Robinson's account of Balinese politics during the Sukarno period recasts the supposedly paradigmatic *santri-abangan* (NU vs. PKI) conflict in East Java as just a single variation on a larger theme, one rooted not in essentialized *aliran*-based cleavages and antagonisms, but in deepening class consciousness and conflict driven by an historical confluence of economic and political trends.

Here, the key to Robinson's argument lies in the most interesting and original chapters of the book (chapters 8–10) and in his discussion of what he describes as "The Struggle for the State, 1950–1965." Following Ben Anderson, Robinson characterizes the Sukarno era as one dominated by the tensions between a highly mobilized post-revolutionary society and a displaced, weak, and fragmented state in the process of reconstituting itself.¹⁵ The intensity of political party competition during the Sukarno period thus reflected the unparalleled extent of political mobilization during and after the Revolution, the susceptibility of the state's various apparatuses (most notably the local police and military commands) to "capture" by competing political parties, and the importance of state-based resources and prerogatives for driving, deepening, and ultimately deciding conflicts between rival social forces. In this regard, Robinson's careful consideration of rising class conflict in Bali during the *aksi sepihak* campaigns of 1964–65 reveals not the mobilization of "traditional" cleavages and antagonisms, but rather the impact of shifts in social and economic conditions as well as the intervention of state leaders and agencies in national and local arenas.

Overall, the contrast between Robinson's account of Bali in the Sukarno period and Geertz's *aliran* and "primordial sentiments" offers a well-paired match for classroom debate, and not merely as an academic exercise for its own sake. In recent months, violent "riots" and "disturbances" in various parts of Indonesia have gained considerable attention in the local and international media, raising fears about the resurgence of so-called SARA (*suku, agama, ras, antar-golongan*) conflicts in Indonesian society and reviving well-worn arguments about the supposed indispensability of an authoritarian state for maintaining peace, order, and social harmony in this multi-ethnic, religiously diverse archipelago. Viewed against the Geertzian backdrop of *aliran* politics and enduring "primordial sentiments," these unfortunate incidents thus serve to legitimize the New Order regime and to discredit arguments for democratization in Indonesia.

Yet Robinson's account of Balinese politics during the Sukarno period offers a very different lens through which to view recent events in Situbondo, Tasikmalaya, Rengasdengklok, and Pontianak, one far more attentive to the role of the Indonesian state in generating social conflict. Over the past three decades, the Suharto regime's very own policies have been responsible for exacerbating the potential for class, ethnic, religious, and regional tensions and resentments in Indonesian society. The regime's centralization of power and wealth in Jakarta, promotion of conglomerates owned by ethnic Chinese "pariah" capitalists close to the presidential Palace, "transmigration" of Javanese to the Outer Islands, and occupation of East Timor since 1975 are only some

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson, "Old State, New Society: Indonesia's New Order in Comparative Historical Perspective," *Journal of Asian Studies* 42 (May 1983): 477–496.

of the most glaring examples of such policies. In recent years, moreover, the government has *actively* encouraged Muslim leaders to revitalize discussion of the role of religion in politics, and in many recent instances of "communal" violence (such as the burning of churches in East Java in 1996), the hidden hand of the government is reported to have played an instigatory role. As Robinson's analysis suggests, it is no coincidence that incidents of so-called "social violence" have occurred with growing frequency as the 1997 election approaches and as the succession to Suharto draws nearer, causing deep-rooted tensions within the New Order regime to surface, intensify, and percolate down to society.

In short, while the details of these unfortunate incidents remain rather murky, a revisionist approach to the Sukarno period may offer a measure of much-needed historical illumination.¹⁶ As Robinson concludes his excellent study of Balinese politics: "the roots of loyalty, conflict, and violence in any political community are unlikely to be located in primordial givens or in patterns of "traditional" rivalry, but rather in the dialectical interplay of historical forces." (313) Today, as Indonesians continue what Geertz described as their "search for a viable form," interested observers would do well to examine Robinson's timely challenge to the conventional wisdom on Indonesia's usable past and its uncertain future.

¹⁶ See also the many insightful retrospective essays in David Bouchier and John Legge (eds.), *Democracy in Indonesia: 1950s and 1990s* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash Papers on Southeast Asia No. 31, 1994).