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Of Shamans, Gurus, and Witches

Esoteric Bali as a Global Concept

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In 1993, Italian Yoga teacher Gino di Simone ‚discovered‘ a tiny ashram at the bottom of Bali’s holy mountain *Gunung Agung*. The ashram belonged to a Brahman Guru called *Ratu Bagus* (Renard 2006, 16). When a group of Italian travelers visited the ashram two years later, they found a group of young men humbly dressed, practicing some wild kind of *Osho* style shaking meditation combined with martial arts techniques and the defense of thrown rocks and coconuts.¹ Another ten years later, the group appears completely changed: We visit a modern Yoga studio with several dressed-up Balinese and Western people practicing Shaking. Among them the kindly smiling guru wearing a shiny white robe instead of his sweatpants and T-shirt from a decade ago.²

Actually, the Ratu Bagus movement has developed from a local phenomenon of some poor villagers to a global trans-cultural movement within only ten years, especially attracting people from Western countries. According to his own statement, Ratu Bagus is represented so far in 20 countries through coordinators and countless *Shaking Groups*.³ His ashram is still located in Karangasem on the side of *Gunung Agung* and is run by Balinese followers of the guru, providing accommodation for spiritual tourists and room for workshops. Ratu himself has undertaken several journeys to Europe to spread his teachings; here, he combines *New Age* concepts with traditional Balinese medicine, declaring Bali as a center of spiritual energy (Renard 2006; Williams 2008).

The rapid transformation of the *Ratu Bagus* movement is astounding: How was it possible that this obscure, village based kind of ‚spiritual martial arts group‘ could develop into a

1 See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rsqG_gDVCVE (all internet references as seen in April 2015).

2 See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0m3mwARgVho>.

3 See <http://www.ratubagus.com/English/Contacts+and+Groups>.

global esoteric movement attracting people obviously from the Balinese and Western middle class? To answer this question, one should not so much look at the teachings of the particular guru, but at the esoteric concepts of Bali in general, concepts that were introduced to the international spiritual discourse some decades ago and are connected to issues of Balinese identity and religion dating back to colonial times. If one wants to understand this global concepts of *Esoteric Bali*, one has to turn initially to the ,invention' of Balinese Hinduism by local intellectuals reflecting the colonial policy of the Dutch authorities in Bali. It is this process which provides the immediate context for ideas of Bali as a place of Indian spirituality thus securing the island's status in esoteric discourse.

1. Balinese Esotericism as a Product of Global Religious History

The idea of Bali as a place of esoteric wisdom cannot be understood without looking at the politics of the Dutch colonial administration that reigned Bali between 1908 and 1942. However, it was as early as in 1817 that Bali became the point of negotiation of certain Western orientalist imaginations on religion and society: that year British orientalist Thomas Raffles came up with the idea of Bali as some kind of ,museum' of the indic states on Java that had perished long time ago (Raffles 1817, 61). Raffles' theory of Bali as ,little India' then became the core of Dutch colonial politics: having wiped out almost completely the higher Balinese aristocracy during their campaign of conquest in 1908, the Dutch sought to re-establish Bali's social structures based on the model of an (idealized) Indian society (Howe 2001, 21).

For our purpose, the religious policy is of special interest: here the picture of ,little India' fostered the conviction of Balinese religion as a legitimate form of worldwide Hinduism, that had to be protected against the influence of Islam and Christianity to secure peace on the island (Picard 2004, 59). This understanding was adopted by Balinese intellectuals working as clerks or school teachers for the Dutch administration and therefore being educationally trained in Dutch colleges. In such way, the first ,Hindu' organization was founded in 1917 by I Gusti Bagus Cakra Tanaya, alongside with several religious magazines propagating the subject of ,Balinese Hinduism'. While adherents of the traditional nobility favored a more local character of their new found religion, it was the group of young, upcoming *commoners* in Dutch services, who sought to unite Balinese religion with what was conceptualized as the world religion of Hinduism (as for example provided by Hindu reformer Swami Vivekananda and others). However, what both groups had in common was the conviction of Bali as a sole people and a stronghold of Hinduism – ideas completely new to the Balinese context back then (Picard 2004, 59–64).

The second aspect in forming a specific Balinese identity is also crucial: starting with the second generation of Dutch colonialists and orientalists (often born in Dutch India), the

picture of Bali as an exotic paradise attracted an increasing number of European artists, cultural travelers and tourists since the 1930s. Scholars like Frederick Albert Liefrinck fancied the simple life of the ordinary people of Bali, focused on detailed accounts on local arts and cuisine, and drew the picture of Balinese villages as spots of equality and even democracy (Wiener 1993, 93; Vickers 2012, 113-129). It's hardly surprising that the Dutch colonial administration drew on pictures such as the latter to give Bali a more positive image after the devastating conquest that had caused international debate. Six years after the massacre of the Balinese high court, the Dutch steam boat company *KPM* advertised Bali as the Garden of Eden, and in this way established the picture of Bali as an exotic and paradisaical tourist destination (Vickers 2012, 131).

With these two points in mind - the colonial conception of Bali as an outpost of Indian culture, and the provision of a basic traveling infrastructure - it is of course hardly astonishing that soon the *Theosophical Society* cast an eye at this 'Indian island'.

By that time, Dutch India was one of the main fields of Theosophical activity. While the first lodge in Java had been founded already in 1881, nearly half a percent of the Dutch population in Java were still members in 1930 - the highest amount of adherents of a colonial power worldwide (Tollenaere 1996, 107); besides, many of the members of local origin (mostly Javanese, Chinese or Indians) were part of the nobility or administrative elite of the colonial administration (Tollenaere 1996, 109-114). Considering that also the Dutch adherents were vast in number colonial bureaucrats, the assumption is close at hand, that Theosophical ideas might have played a role in conceptualizing Balinese religion as a form of world-wide Hinduism at the beginning of the 20th century. However, we can only speculate about this, so let's return to what we actually do know.

We know (mostly from the works of Herman de Tollenaere and Frederik Bakker) that in 1915 - one year after the tourism campaign of the *KPM* - Javanese Theosophist Mas Djono came to Bali for a short trip, followed by Prince Mangkoe Negoro VII; from 1918 to 1921 Raden Mas Soetatmo Soeriokoesoemo toured the island, finding the Balinese of a „purer spirituality“ than the people of Java. In 1934 the General Secretary of the *Nederlandsch-Indische Theosofische Vereeniging* spent his holidays in Bali (Tollenaere 2004, 41 f.), and when Raden Mas Koesoemodihardjo came to Bali for a „propaganda trip“ (Bakker 1993, 43) three years later to make contact with reformist circles, he could give account of a Balinese lodge with 16 members that was headed by the north-Balinese noble I Gusti Ketoet Djelantik (Tollenaere 2004, 42). We do not know what consequences this propaganda trip had in Bali, but Koesoemodihardjo detected a „great interest in Theosophy“ and found the dogmas of Theosophy having much in common with the teachings of the local palm leaf manuscripts (*lontar*) held by influential families and

priests. It was about the same time that an Indonesian translation of a lecture on *Bhakti* by Annie Besant circulated in Bali which had been published by the lodge in Batavia (Bakker 1993, 43).

2. The Popularization of Esoteric Bali

It's hardly surprising that the process of the genesis of a Balinese Hinduism soon attracted proponents of Theosophy: The colonial conception of Bali as substantially 'Indian' in nature and culture provided several points of contact for Theosophical ideas, and even the palm leaf manuscripts - re-presenting mainly the pre-colonial context - were regarded congruent with the teachings of the *Theosophical Society*.

But it should take another thirty years before esoteric ideas of Bali would take full effect. Starting point for this process was the newly emerged fascination for Bali in the US and Europe, which was grounded by the influence of Asian religion on the pop culture and *New Age* wave of the late 1960s (Knoblauch 2009, 110). While *New Age* expanded the esoteric discourse of the 19th century on broader circles of the population in Western countries, it was also responsible for a veritable boom in spiritual tourism (Timothy/Conover 2006). Here again, the effort of the Indonesian government to develop Bali as a destination for modern mass tourism (see Picard 1997), led to a vast number of spiritual seekers traveling the island in the late 1960s and during the 1970s. After the provision of a highly structured first class tourism had failed, the Balinese government focused on a certain form of localized cultural tourism (*pariwisata budaya*) to foster an individual and personal experience of Bali (Vickers 2012, 254). It is this concept that paved the way for hosts of spiritual tourists and Hippies residing in simple lodgings (*losmen*) mainly in South Bali; these young people with the interest in Indian gurus and the use of psychedelic drugs to gain illumination re-iterated - as the heirs of Theosophy - the concept of Bali as a keeper of old wisdom (Vickers 2012, 256). In such a manner, they basically tied on the idea of *Indian Bali* as a shelter and museum of esoteric 'Eastern' knowledge that had characterized the Javanese Theosophists' image of the island three decades earlier.

So far we can only speculate what influence the popularity of *Esoteric Bali* has had on the identity of many Balinese people. As *Eat Pray Love*, the famous book by Elizabeth Gilbert (2006), has shown, the connection of traditional Balinese doctors (like the above mentioned guru Ratu Bagus) and Western spiritual seekers is of a charming harmony, and other traditional healers (*balian*; see Hobart/Ramseyer/Leeman 1996, 174-200) have organized for the provision of shamanistic services not only in local workshops, but also over the internet to address a global customer base.⁴ As another element, Yoga has had a fixed position in Bali's cultural center of Ubud for many years, and - same as in many

⁴ See <http://www.balishaman.com>.

Western countries – is part of the economically important wellness and Spa sector attracting not only tourists (Stausberg 2011, 130-134), but also many Balinese people. Like Michel Picard has spoken of a „touristification“ of Balinese culture since the 1920s (Picard 1997), one is tempted to presume some kind of an *esoterization* of Balinese identity, when we look for example at the website of the important *Bali Tourism Board* advertising Bali for its „spiritual relationship between human and God“⁵ and its rich and „deeply spiritual culture“⁶. Be that as it may – what can again be said, is that a sliding esoterization of Balinese identity wouldn't be astounding, as the conceptualization of Bali as a museum of ancient India would provide perfect points of contact for esoteric concepts of the island.

Anyway – what the Balinese context can show, is that the history of the making process of esoteric knowledge is often a highly *entangled* one (see Conrad/Randeria 2002), as we can see here the concept of *Esoteric Bali* being the result of a negotiation process between European and local actors. What may be called *Balinese Esotericism* is actually of global character, not only in concept and often structure, but also in cases of history and context. In trying to understand the historical nature of this product of Theosophy, colonialism and global tourism, it seems necessary *not* to unveil the ‚true origin‘ of what we have conceptualized as Balinese Esotericism, but in the contrary trace *back* in time the underlying concepts of this idea – to reveal that its true origin is to a lesser extent a clear point of departure, but becomes absorbed in the complexity of historical contexts (see Foucault 1977). With this in mind, I wonder how many of our today's concepts of reality and history can be considered as purely Western or in other ways local – all the more as the tiny island of Bali has proven to be such a delightful product of global history.

5 <http://www.bali-tourism-board.com/about-bali>.

6 <http://www.bali-tourism-board.com/about-bali/bali-tourism-board-get-a-taste-of-paradise-in-bali>.

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