

Living Balinese heritage: Palm-leaf manuscripts and their caretakers

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BALI, THOUGH A SMALL ISLAND, harbours rich and diverse cultural traditions. Despite a rapidly modernising and developing Indonesia, the image of Bali as a 'culture-trove' harbouring timeless ancestral traditions remains popular among foreign and Indonesian tourists today. However, few visitors, even among the culture-savvy, venture into off-the-radar (and often run-down) institutions such as public libraries and cultural foundations, not to speak of Brahmanical houses (*griya*), where delicate treasures are stored. These centuries-old treasures, equally iconic as Bali's *barong* masks or *legong* dancers, are palm-leaf manuscripts (*lontar*). For over a millennium, *lontar* were the medium for the transmission of knowledge both of a sacred or mundane nature; they are traditionally regarded as powerful, almost supernatural objects.

These palm-leaf manuscripts and their Brahmanical scribes left a strong impression on the first European Orientalists who visited Bali between the late 19th and early 20th century, and contributed to the image of the island as a 'living repository' of Old Javanese 'high culture' and religion. *Lontar* have also been studied from the perspective of material culture, i.e., as artefacts testifying to a refined 'book industry' stemming from a pre-industrial world.¹ In anthropological circles, *lontar* are still perceived as relics from a dead past, *curios* at best, documenting an élite phenomenon that falls within the domain of the antiquarian or the philologist. Written in a language that few people can read, let alone understand, a current scholarly opinion is that they neither reflect nor bear any value to 'living' Balinese society, but rather serve the purpose of heirlooms (*pusaka*).²

The actors of the '*lontar*-phenomenon' – the (living) producers and collectors of *lontar* – are as rare and endangered as the fragile palm-leaf manuscripts they deal with and, therefore, as important to Balinese community as other kinds of – perhaps more 'marketable' – cultural heritage. Both the 'caretakers' and 'consumers' of *lontar* give these artefacts the role of carriers of cultural, legal, and religious values. By (re)producing the manuscripts, these actors disseminate knowledge to sections of society: via reading clubs held either at the neighbourhood and village level or within private circles; by copying and storing them in public repositories; by lending them to other actors for the purpose of being (re)copied; or, as is becoming increasingly popular, by singing, reading, and discussing their contents in public contests, TV and Radio broadcasts, etc.

Bali remains one of the very few places in the world where literary and religious heritage carried forward through a tradition of manuscript writing has survived alongside printing and, now, digital media. As early as the 1940s, a plethora of mimeographed or printed pamphlets 'flooded' the island. These publications were intended for the majority who could not read the scriptures in Old Javanese and Sanskrit, but who wanted to learn about the principles of 'Hinduism' that were traditionally inscribed on *lontar*. Yet, *lontar* were never entirely replaced as the medium *par excellence* to propagate religious lore. Nowadays, the activity of writing (i.e., engraving with a stylus) on *lontar* is usually carried out for a wide variety of reasons, such as for personal development or self-edification, for religious or ritual purposes, as a duty to the ancestors, to ensure the 'survival' of Balinese culture, as a means of livelihood, or to obtain supernatural powers.

Between tangible and intangible heritage

Intangible heritage includes "oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts"; it has to be "traditional, contemporary and living at the same time", "representative", and "community-based".³ Insofar as they represent material artefacts, Balinese *lontar* belong, strictly speaking, to the category of tangible heritage. However, the languages and texts they carry contribute to shaping the identity of the Balinese community, making them perfect examples of intangible heritage. In short, *lontar* represent an interface between the tangible and intangible dimensions of Balinese heritage.

The complex process of producing such fragile and refined objects requires much patience and a diverse set of skills,



Above: Oka at Yayasan Dwijendra, Denpasar. Photo Andrea Acri, 2012.

Right: Muditadnyana at home in Tenganan, Karangasem. Photo Andrea Acri, 2009.



which *lontar*-specialists received through oral tradition and perfected through practice. The *lontar*-specialists have to master the art of calligraphy, have a good grasp of the orthographic rules governing the complicated Balinese script, and possess (varying degrees of) knowledge of the challenging languages of the inscribed texts, namely Old Javanese (*kawi*), Sanskrit, or Balinese.

Although these specialists are the continuators of a centuries-long tradition, they also represent a product of modernity as they have been exposed to contacts with modernity and Western ideas, including local and global academia. Tourism has also impacted their activity. In coping with the changes and challenges of modernization and globalisation, these characters have found different strategies to survive through their art – and in so doing, made their art survive.

Three Balinese men of letters

I now sketch three Balinese figures that embody the specialized knowledge of *lontar*; they are Ida Dewa Gede Catra from Amlapura, Ida Dewa Made Oka from Denpasar, and Wayan Muditadnyana from Tenganan. All of them are past the age of seventy; none of them acquired their knowledge through a traditional teacher-apprentice model in their early lives, but started to operate in the world of *lontar* following a 'personal call' and much self-learning.

IDG Catra is known to scholars of Balinese and Old Javanese literature worldwide as the 'best source of information' on *lontar* in Bali. Catra was exposed to traditional literature and palm-leaf manuscripts by occasionally attending reading sessions with senior men in the village. 30 years into his career as a school teacher, he was finally taught to write on *lontar*. He then practised traditional dance and textual singing, and started to

study Sanskrit as an autodidact. A couple of years later he had already established his own personal library, now consisting of more than 2000 *lontar* and typewritten copies. In 1991, Catra took over the administration of 'Proyek Tik' – a project dedicated to the transliteration of texts on *lontar* into Romanized paper copies, which was established by Prof. Dr. Christiaan Hooykaas in 1972 and continued until today by his pupil Dr. Hedi Hinzler.⁴ Catra is now a highly respected figure, consulted on matters of culture and religion by the local authorities, and called upon in the capacity of jury in prestigious competitions.

Catra's strong grasp of Old Javanese represents the continuation of a local tradition of textual practices and hermeneutics. He is very rigorous in mentioning his manuscript sources in a colophon – something he claims to have derived from the colophons of manuscripts and Western philologists – and advocates the old practice of engraving *lontar* with a knife rather than using a laser stylus, as some have recently tried to do. Whereas Catra is keen on technology, and makes use of a computer to produce his typescripts, he hopes that the introduction of computer fonts for Balinese script will not negatively impact the art of calligraphy.

The second character is IDM Oka. Oka spends most of his days in the library of Yayasan Dwijendra, engrossed in the activity of etching *lontar*. After five years of schooling, Oka started to work as a carpenter. At the age of 55, he took an interest in *lontar*, and especially calligraphy – which he perfected through self-learning. Soon his fame as an exquisite calligrapher spread far and wide, and village-heads from all over Bali requested his services. Yayasan Dwijendra then commissioned him to build its collection of manuscripts, which now numbers almost 200 *lontar* – most of which have been copied by Oka himself, who had loaned them from *griya*. His personal collection includes hundreds of manuscripts, mostly containing medical texts (*usada* and *obat-obatan*).

According to Oka, to fill both sides of a single palm-leaf takes about half a day. Given the difficult and painstaking nature of this activity, which is vital to the preservation of Balinese heritage, Oka hopes that the local government will introduce Balinese script and the art of calligraphy in primary schools, and also establish foundations in the traditional villages (*desa pakraman*) to teach young Balinese how to read the Old Javanese texts.

Our third character is Wayan Muditadnyana. Since 1974 he has produced hundreds of *lontar*, which are not only written in exquisite calligraphy, but also illustrated with abundant drawings of the stories narrated in the literary texts. This genre, called *prasi*, is especially popular among foreign tourists, who appreciate the beauty of the images, and see these artefacts as works of art. The village of Tenganan has now become a hub for trading these *lontar*, and many have started to produce illustrated *prasi*, although Muditadnyana's art remains unrivalled. Muditadnyana displays a keen interest in Balinese literary and cultural issues and, besides calligraphy, is skilled in traditional textual singing. His creations appeal to discerning collectors and tourists alike, and are useful to scholars too, as some of the *prasi* may constitute unique copies of otherwise inaccessible *lontar*.

The three characters sketched here illustrate telling examples of how 'tradition' has met 'modernity' in Bali. Insofar as their skills have become their means of livelihood, catering to the demands of local society, local and foreign academics, and tourists, these men of letters are the living embodiments of a tradition that is reinventing itself, and beacons of 'sustainable humanities' in a globalized world. These 'caretakers of *lontar*' carry the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts, and therefore they themselves represent living embodiments of intangible heritage. Hopefully, their knowledge will not disappear with them.

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Notes

- 1 See the surveys by Rubinstein and Hinzler: Rubinstein, R. 1996. 'Leaves of Palm: Balinese Lontar', in A. Kumar and J. McGlynn (eds.) *Illuminations; The Writing Traditions of Indonesia*, pp. 129–154. Jakarta: The Lontar Foundation;
- 2 Hinzler, H. 1998. 'Balinese Manuscripts and Their Uses' & 'The Preparation of Balinese Manuscripts', in J. McGlynn (ed.) *Indonesian Heritage; Language and Literature*, pp. 26–29. Singapore: Archipelago Press.
- 3 A critique of this view may be found in Acri, Andrea. 2011. 'A new perspective for "Balinese Hinduism" in the light of the pre-modern religious discourse. A textual-historical approach', in M. Picard and R. Madinier (eds.) *The Politics of Religion in Java and Bali. Syncretism, Orthodoxy, and Religious Contention*, pp. 143–167. London/New York: Routledge.
- 4 Source: www.unesco.org.
- 5 See 'Balinese Manuscripts Project' by Hedi Hinzler, <http://tinyurl.com/o8356xa> (accessed Sept 2013).