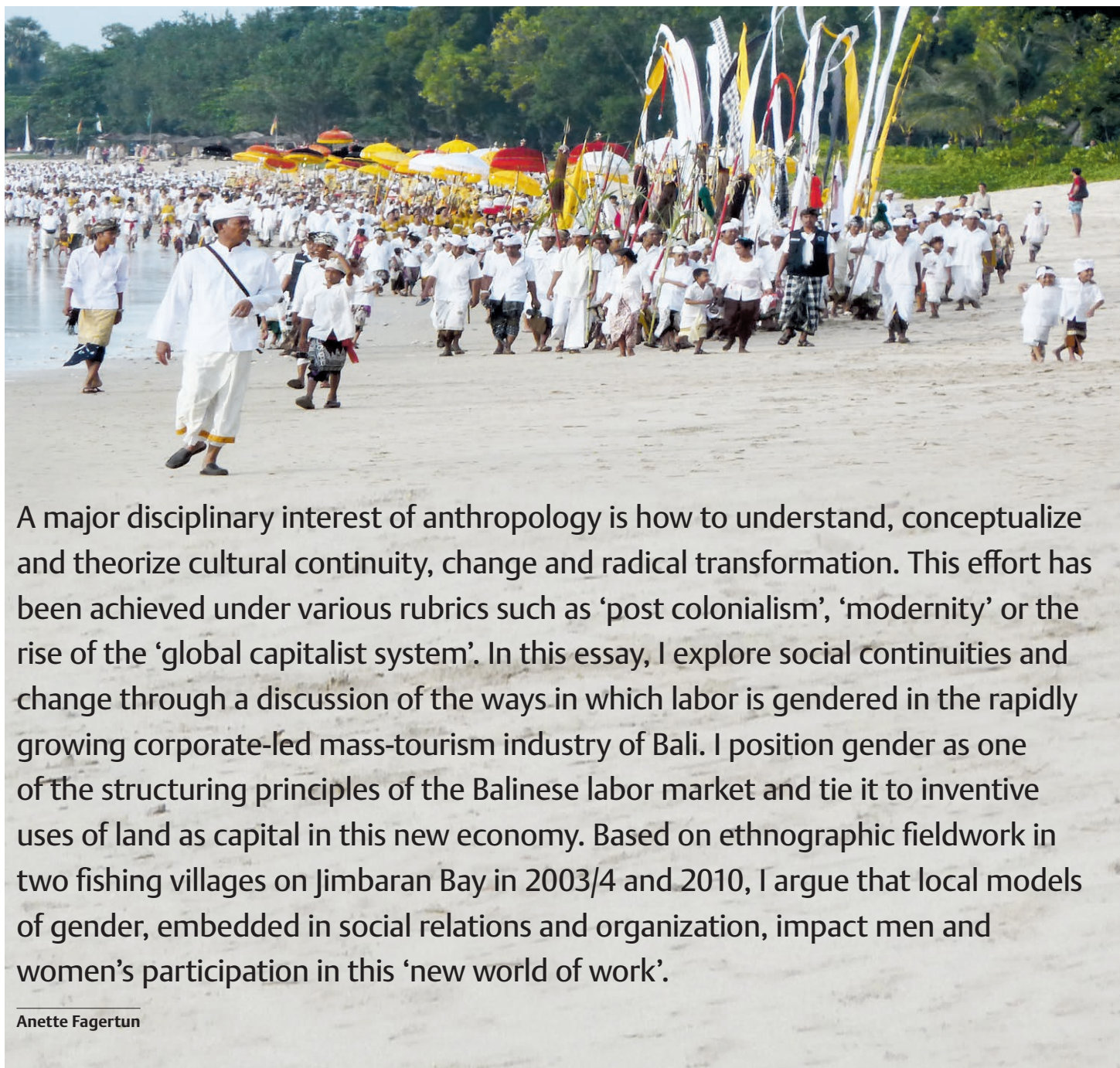


Gendered labor in 'Paradise': tourism as an engine of change in Bali



A major disciplinary interest of anthropology is how to understand, conceptualize and theorize cultural continuity, change and radical transformation. This effort has been achieved under various rubrics such as 'post colonialism', 'modernity' or the rise of the 'global capitalist system'. In this essay, I explore social continuities and change through a discussion of the ways in which labor is gendered in the rapidly growing corporate-led mass-tourism industry of Bali. I position gender as one of the structuring principles of the Balinese labor market and tie it to inventive uses of land as capital in this new economy. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in two fishing villages on Jimbaran Bay in 2003/4 and 2010, I argue that local models of gender, embedded in social relations and organization, impact men and women's participation in this 'new world of work'.

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PARTICIPATION in the rapidly growing economy can open new paths for social mobility in this Hindu-Balinese caste based society. Access to the new labor market, and a position within 'the social space of differences',¹ is structured by a range of factors. Because labor is embedded in local social relations, moralities and institutions, some groups are marginalized while others are granted access. ILO figures show an increase in poverty among workers in the formal sector of Indonesia; but conditions in the informal sector – estimated as double the size of the formal – are even worse, as workers here are not unionized and the majority are women working as housemaids, servants or helpers in family business.

Tourism as an agent of change

Today the travel and tourism industry is amongst the world's largest industries, and the Asia-Pacific region is the world's fastest growing tourist destination. Tourism as an 'economic engine' has become an alternative source for growth, contributing substantially to developing economies in the global south. It is also a labor intensive industry, which in Bali has been encouraged and justified for its potential to increase employment opportunities and thus develop the island economy. Bali's rapid economic growth since the mid-1980s is mainly the result of mass-tourism. In Bali, a small island with a population of about 3.9 million, tourism accounts for about half the economy and employs more than half of the workforce. Labor migrants account for about ten percent of the population, and about two and a half million tourists from all over the world visit the island every year. The tourism and service sector is a composite industry involving transport, accommodation, catering, entertainment, natural resources as well as other facilities and services like shopping malls, golf courses, parks, etc.

Tourism began in Bali with the Dutch colonization of the island in 1908, but it was during the *New Order* period of President Suharto (1966-1998) that it really developed. Bali was viewed by Dutch orientalist as a 'living museum' of the Hindu-Javanese civilization that had been swept away from Java by the coming of Islam, a view which informed the colonial policy of the preservation of this cultural heritage (*Balisering*). The island of Bali has been conceived ever since as 'the Island of the Gods' and the 'Paradise Island'. However, where culture is 'heritage' to be preserved, it is also a major capital to exploit for profit.² While the Balinese people try to make a livelihood by turning cultural practices into commodities for tourists,

these practices might in the end become indigenized as 'tradition' and 'authentic culture' and form the basis for asserting a new cultural identity and new cultural practices. When local communities develop as a result of tourism, one will see traditions, culture and the past continuously reinvented in order to uphold the image created through the visitor's gaze; simultaneously, material culture, people and places undergo commodification for the purpose of the global market.

The new 'world of work'

Of course, 'culture' is not the only thing being commodified, or the only 'object' exploited for profit, in the new economy. A general shift from subsistence economy to wage labor on the island, as in rural Southeast Asia in general, has led to the commodification of labor – labor in the abstract, as something that people 'own' and can choose to sell for a wage. With the tourist-boom in Bali, and the consequent expansion of the formal and informal service sectors of the economy, a range of new types of labor emerged and labor migrants from all over Indonesia started to arrive in large numbers. The level of employment in these sectors is indeed high, yet in Bali it is also highly structured according to gender, caste and class. While we do see that social mobility is increased through the emergence of new ways to earn a living, thus providing many Balinese with the base for participation as consumers of 'modern' goods and lifestyles, we also witness an increased social stratification among local communities. The competition for work in the tourism industry is fierce, and the majority of local villagers tend to compete with unskilled migrants for unskilled, menial and low-paying jobs, in informal sectors such as construction, laundry, gardening or maintenance at hotels, in restaurants or in the spa and tour guide sector, while the well-paying positions in the formal/service sector are filled by skilled migrants and expatriates.

Gender and land

Within this process land has become capital that can be exploited for profit. In Bali, agricultural land is rapidly converted into tourist facilities; people sell their land to investment companies, hotel chains, and foreigners who seek business opportunities or who are looking for a holiday home. The massive conversion of land into 'concrete forests' is a way to accommodate the rapidly expanding tourism industry in this 'global tourist resort', but it is also a substantial increase in income for some Balinese villagers.

Such land conversions may have many and deep implications for local people's lives. For one, the ownership and rights to land are being contested, something that has already created serious situations of land deprivation for local villagers and spurred deep conflicts between family members and villagers. Originally it was only 'wasteland' that was being sold off to the tourism industry; but these days all types, including agricultural and grazing land, and even forests, are being sold or leased. Selling land has become a good business – for men. Land is traditionally owned by men and men inherit land through their fathers, in accordance with the Balinese patrilineal kinship system. However, married women can access land through their husbands/brothers/fathers and on Jimbaran Bay, a new form of land use has turned into a good business for some village women.

Unskilled labor migrants from all over Indonesia arrive in Bali in large numbers. Most of these migrants cannot afford to buy land or a house, but still need food and a place to live. This has become a new niche for many village women. They build boarding-houses (*kost*) on their compound land and rent out rooms to migrants, profiting from their housing needs. These women are thus self-employed in the informal sector of the new economy; they have found a 'micro-niche' based on their access to attractive land, which provides them with a steady monthly income and a secure future. This reality gives them opportunities to participate as consumers in the new economy and climb the social ladder.

The gender of labor

While women tend to engage in labor within the domestic sphere – as landladies, maids, running small shops close to the house – men tend to monopolize jobs that involve greater spatial and temporal mobility, such as fishermen, taxi drivers, guides or gardeners. In Bali this is closely tied to local configurations of gender, imbued with sexual double-standards, which make women particularly vulnerable to sexual insinuation and gossip through their association with the tourism industry. Local women, especially those who are married, are therefore reluctant to take on employment in the tourist sector and are doubly – as women and 'unskilled' – restricted from participation in the formal sector of the new economy. Women's work often takes on a 'flexible form', which accommodates all their (other) work-duties in the household, and is culturally construed as 'helping out others'. This flexibility is conditioned by the principle of gender, which informs the division of labor between the sexes – where women's roles have primarily been inside the household, and men's outside the household.

Even as more women are engaging in waged labor nowadays, the aspect of 'helping out others' still continues. This might be conceived as representing continuity in gender models in a situation of rapid transformation in people's everyday labor situation. A common way for local women to justify their income and having remunerative employment, is their wish to 'help their husbands'. The husbands are fishermen, taxi drivers or guides, who in the low season might struggle to make ends meet. Men agree that their wives' employment is a help to them; it is not necessary, but it is welcome. Men's and women's jobs are not always different – we find, for example, that both men and women can wait tables or work in laundries – however, as Strathern put it: "...what is contrasted are the ends to which the labour is put".³ Arguably, it is not only the form of work in itself, but the *gendered moralities of work, through which work is organized and ascribed meaning, that form women's flexible work situation*. Moreover, and perhaps as a consequence, women are invested with what I have elsewhere termed 'encompassed agency': women's wage work is considered of lesser value than that of men and is limited to 'helping' by the imperative status of the work of men as 'providers'.

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Notes

- 1 Bourdieu, P. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- 2 Picard, M. 1990. "Cultural tourism" in Bali: cultural performances as tourist attraction', *Indonesia* 49:37-74, see p.55
- 3 Strathern, M. 1988. *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, see p.148

Above: Village ceremony - the Bali-Hindu ceremonial life is elaborate and intensive.