

# ***AJEG BALI: MULTIPLE MEANINGS, DIVERSE AGENDAS***

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### ***Kebalian***

Much has been written about discourses of *kebalian* or ‘Balineseness’. Most such commentaries have focused on the nexus between religion, *adat* (custom), culture and tourism. Picard (1999: 21), for example, suggests that Balinese identity ‘is the outcome of a process of semantic borrowing and conceptual recasting’ that the Balinese have had to make ‘in response to the colonization, the Indonesianization and the touristification of their island’. Vickers (1989) devotes about a third of his groundbreaking book on the ‘creation’ of Bali to the idea of image-making in and of Bali, not only by Europeans but also by the Balinese themselves.<sup>1</sup>

From colonial times through Suharto’s New Order (1966-98) to post-Suharto *reformasi*, a consistent Balinese response to the ‘colonization, Indonesianization and touristification’ alluded to by Picard has been the development of strategies to defend the island from so-called external ‘bad influences’. Traditional values have been drawn upon at critical moments, the rationale being that the revivification of old principles will restore balance and order. It is a process referred to by some as the ‘retreat into ritual’ (Couteau 2003). The reconstruction of the past is thus a time-honoured practice in Bali.

In the 1920s the Balinese intelligentsia drew upon Hindu values in an effort to reform the Balinese religion and redefine the concept of culture. This effort had its first concrete results

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<sup>1</sup> See also I Nyoman Darma Putra 2003; Jensen and Suryani 1992, Putu Wijaya 2003.

when Bali, as part of the Republic of Indonesia, was required to have a universal religion: in 1958 the Balinese religion was recognised by the Ministry of Religion as a branch of Hinduism, with the name *Agama Hindu Bali* (Hindu Balinese religion). In 1965 it was renamed *Agama Hindu* (Hinduism; see Picard 2004).

A more concrete formulation and application of traditional Hindu values occurred in the 1970s and 1980s through the work of Professor Doctor Ida Bagus Mantra, the Governor of Bali, who aimed to build a Balinese identity deemed suitable to be part of the Republic of Indonesia. He adopted a 'return to roots' approach that advocated a strengthening of Balinese religion by looking back to its Indian origins, and at the same time presented Balinese Hinduism to the world as a part of international Hinduism (Vickers 1989: 212). His politics made a great contribution to shaping the social and economic structure of the island as we now know it.

The Kuta bombings of 12 October 2002 represented a defining moment for many Balinese. The media made much of the event as an important moment for Balinese to reflect on themselves: they must have done something very wrong to cause such a terrible calamity, bringing destruction and imbalance to the island. In such an atmosphere of desperation and uncertainty about the future, the only safe anchor is perceived to be the past, a past of traditional Hindu values based on culture and religion and which is able to re-establish the harmonious order in which mankind is One with the rest of the universe.

### ***Ajeg Bali***

A prominent feature of this post-bomb discourse on culture, religion and traditional values has been repeated allusions to and praise for the idea of *ajeg*, a phenomenon seen by some to be part of the revivification process alluded to above. The problem is that there is no consensus

as to what *ajeg* actually means in this particular context.<sup>2</sup> As a general guide, the somewhat glib explanation provided by a government official at a community meeting in Denpasar would seem to suffice: ‘Making Bali *ajeg* is defending our traditions and customs and the Balinese values that are beginning to fade in Bali at the moment.’<sup>3</sup> (cited in Suryawan 2004) However, the very newness of the word in popular usage, and the difficulty of endowing it with a precise definition, means that the *ajeg*-led discourse has the potential to assume a keener political edge and to be more divisive than previous articulations of Balinese identity. This is hinted at in a comment made by I Gusti Bagus Yudhara, Manager of Astina Tours and Travel, in a recent speech setting out his company’s strategic mission. While the company’s aim is to achieve *ajeg Bali*, he warned ‘If you don’t know where you are going, any road will take you there.’<sup>4</sup>

In interviews with writers, artists and performers in Bali during 2004, the question ‘What is *ajeg Bali*?’ elicited a variety of responses. We include here a selection, by way of indicating the diversity in interpretation of the term.

Kadek Suardana (performance artist):

*Ajeg Bali* itu tren, bukan sebuah tujuan.

*Ajeg Bali* is a trend, not a goal.

I Made Sidia (dalang/performer):

*Ajeg* itu kan stabil juga...lestari...apapun yang kita miliki harus dari warisan leluhur; harus kita terus lanjutkan biar *ajeg*, biar tetap tahan itu.

*Ajeg* is stable ...eternal... everything that we have must come from our ancestors , and we must continue it so that it is *ajeg*, so that it will endure

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<sup>2</sup> Stevens and Schmidgall-Tellings (2004) defines *ajeg* as follows: *ajeg* and *ajek* (Javanese) 1 invariable, constant, steady, stable. 2 regular.

<sup>3</sup> *Meng-ajeg-kan Bali adalah mempertahankan tradisi adat dan nilai-nilai kebalian yang kini mulai luntur di Bali*

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.yudhara.com/strategi.htm> Accessed 6 January 2005.

Jango Paramatha (cartoonist/journalist):

Arti ajeg itu adalah sesuatu yang tidak dinamis, statis...

The meaning of *ajeg* is something that is static, not dynamic.

Kata-kata dipegang oleh dua media sangat besar sekali, itu pengaruhnya luar biasa sekali. Semuanya pada tanya: ajeg Bali ajeg Bali! Itu luar biasa sekali. Sekarang yang kita inginkan sekarang... secara positif, secara pikir bagaimana memberikan roh, soul, terhadap kata ajeg itu biar berarti benar. Biar berarti bukan... stagnan..apa namanya..bukan mematikan dinamika budaya

This word has been manipulated by two big, very influential media. Everybody says: *ajeg* Bali! *ajeg* Bali! It's extraordinary. What we wish now... is to give a soul to this word *ajeg*... to make it right.....in such a way that it's not stagnant, it does not destroy the dynamic of culture.

Gus Martin (cartoonist/journalist):

...suatu kesadaran untuk memagari budaya Bali...melestarikan adat Bali

an awareness of fencing off Balinese culture... conserving Balinese *adat*

Mas Ruscitadewi (poet/writer/journalist):

...cuman sebuah simbol untuk keinginan...harapan bagaimana biar Bali itu seimbang...harmonis, ada keharmonisan di Bali

... (it's) just a symbol of the desire...the wish that Bali should be in balance...in harmony, that there is harmony in Bali.

IB Agastya (Hindu scholar):

Ajeg itu kesucian Bali...Dibangun dari awalnya, dasarnya kesucian itu berkaitan dengan sastra kuno, tata ruangnya, gunung, laut, lingkungan hidupnya itu.... Itu kunci Bali di masa lalu tapi juga di masa datang.

*Ajeg* is the sacredness of Bali...Established right from the beginning, the foundation of that sacredness is connected to ancient literature, to the orientation: orientation towards the mountain and orientation towards the sea... to the environment... That's the key to Bali, in the past and also in the future.

Wayan Sunarta (poet/artist/writer):

Konsepnya sebenarnya dilontarkan oleh *Bali Post*...yang merasa kewajiban untuk menjaga Bali. Tapi sebenarnya konsep itu telah digunakan untuk kepentingan politis.

The concept was actually put forward by *Bali Post*...which felt a duty to protect Bali. But the concept has in fact been used for political interests

Ngurah Suryawan (anthropology student):

Saya ingat itu terutama muncul dengan keprihatinan Bali untuk bangkit lagi kepariwisataan

I think it emerged primarily as a concern that Bali should revive tourism.

Rama Surya (photojournalist):

Di tengah situasi Indonesia sekarang ada otonomi, ada segala macam. Ini mungkin ada bagian dari strategi...

*Ada kaitan dengan otonomi daerah?*

Saya rasa ya.

In the midst of the situation in Indonesia now there's autonomy, there's all sorts of things. This could be a part of that strategy...

*So there's a connection with regional autonomy?*

I think there is, yes.

A significant feature of *ajeg Bali* has been its promotion by the media. The regional newspaper *Bali Post* (along with its allied television station Bali TV,<sup>5</sup> *Genta* radio station and the tabloid publication *Denpost*), has been an important player in entrenching public awareness of this new concept. Many Balinese argue that the term was invented by the newspaper.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, *Bali Post* has made explicit its agenda to realise *ajeg Bali* in a startling

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5 Bali TV, a private TV station owned by the *Bali Post* group, has captured an audience lost by the state television station TVRI, which broadcasts largely old programmes. Bali TV's programmes include private ceremonies, broadcast under payment, and discussions on culture, tradition and religion.

6 This view was repeated often, particularly by writers, artists and performers, in interviews conducted by both authors of this article in Bali in 2003 and 2004. It was reinforced in an interview conducted by Carmencita Palermo with *Bali Post* chief Satria Naradha in November 2004.

diversity of areas, including politics, the economy and culture.<sup>7</sup> By way of defining *ajeg Bali*, the newspaper rejected the notion that restoring Bali to what it was like in the past is either feasible or desirable, and opted for a rather vague definition of *ajeg Bali* as ‘achieving balanced development’ (*terbangun secara seimbang*).<sup>8</sup>

In order to define and disseminate the notion of *ajeg Bali* the newspaper organised a series of discussions, culminating in a seminar on 1 August 2003 – ‘Towards *ajeg Bali*’ (*Menuju ajeg Bali*). The animated discussions by no means reached a consensus on the meaning or indeed the relevance of *ajeg*. The papers presented at the seminar were subsequently published in a special 40-page anniversary edition of the *Bali Post* on 16 August 2003 and have since been reprinted as a book – *Ajeg Bali: Sebuah Cita-cita*, published in January 2004, with an editorial by Satria Naradha, head of the *Bali Post* group.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Ajeg* – an Utopian dream?**

The first page of the special issue affirmed the commitment of the *Bali Post* to be a ‘medium for the struggle of the Balinese community’ (*media perjuangan masyarakat Bali*; AB: iv) and the media that will work with citizens and government to improve Bali (AB: v). The special edition of *Bali Post* took as its premise that Bali was under siege on a number of fronts – religious, economic, environmental, architectural – and, through publishing articles by a variety of writers, advocated ways to address all these issues through the restoration of

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<sup>7</sup> See *Ajeg Bali: Sebuah Cita-cita*, iii

<sup>8</sup> See *Ajeg Bali: Sebuah Cita-cita*, iii

<sup>9</sup> Henceforth in this article page references to the seminar papers from *Ajeg Bali* will be referred to as AB. Note that not all authors in this publication were participants in the *Bali Post* seminars.

balance and a more focused spiritual awareness. There was a clear message in many of the articles that problems had arisen because the Balinese had forgotten themselves and had abandoned their true nature, due to the physical and spiritual exploitation caused by tourism. This exploitation in turn was identified as the main cause of the economic crisis that Bali was facing, particularly after the bombings. The practical solution lay in an economic master plan in which particular attention should be paid to small industries and which, most importantly of all, should take into account the fundamentals of the Hindu religion. In particular, reforms should consider the Balinese concept of *Tri Hita Karana*, the relationship between humans and God, between humans and humans and between humans and the environment (Wirya 2003a: 64)

The *Bali Post* published an 11-point strategy for achieving *ajeg Bali*, most of which maintained the necessity of following religious principles, which must be concretely lived in the daily life of each Balinese. The last point says: ‘Avoid a radical-primordial and exclusivist stance, so that the condition that is created is inwardly strong, outwardly congenial’.<sup>10</sup> This appeal to avoid a fundamentalist attitude and to consider the outside world could be also interpreted as an effort to re-establish order within the island, an order that has produced the image of a safe place to attract investors and tourists on which the Balinese economy depends.

A recurrent and important motif for Balinese is the need for a harmonious relationship between all elements of the Universe, which will ensure the continuation of life. Humans are responsible for maintaining that harmony. On this reading, being *ajeg* seems to lie in remembering this responsibility and an *ajeg* economy implies recreating the lost balance. One

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10 Menghindari sikap radikal-primordial dan mengeksklusifkan diri, sehingga diharapkan kondisi yang tercipta adalah kondisi ‘ke dalam’

kita kuat, ‘ke luar’ kita simpatik.

article, for example, suggested that the imbalance was caused by excessive investment in the tourism sector, meaning that everything has been sacrificed for tourism, especially land and water previously used for agriculture (Wirya 2003b: 76). Furthermore, the World Trade Centre attacks, the Bali bombings, the war in Iraq and SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) have demonstrated that Bali's economy cannot depend on tourism alone. Appropriate economic development, it is suggested, must be based on *Tri Hita Karana*, and it is necessary to create a balance between the tourism and agriculture sectors (Wirya 2003b: 77). The romanticising of the notion of *ajeg* can be attributed to its purported links to the village, the place where, as Ari Dwipayana (2003) points out, all that is sacred, pure and unchanging in Balinese tradition is to be found. For some, becoming *ajeg* implies a return to village values and village lifestyles.

### **Bali for the Balinese**

In interviews with the authors,<sup>11</sup> Kadek Suardana, the high-profile performance artist and chairman of *Yayasan Arti* unequivocally declared that in his view *ajeg Bali* has its origins in Balinese concerns about the arrival of large numbers of immigrants in Bali, hoping for a better life.

Strict control of non-Hindu and non-Balinese residents of Bali is exacted through a special permit (*Kartu Identitas Penduduk Pendetang*) – a sort of resident's permit for Indonesians which identifies them as internal migrants, distinguishing them from the original residents (Suryawan 2004). A significant number of articles and commentary on *ajeg* hint at an agenda of further discrimination against non-Balinese citizens in Bali. Using the word *pendatang*

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11 9 January 2004 and 2 November 2004



(‘newcomer’, ‘arrival’) as code for immigrants from other parts of Indonesia, these articles, overtly or implicitly, attribute much of the blame for Bali’s current predicament to those non-Balinese and project the idea of *ajeg Bali* as meaning ‘Bali for the Balinese’. This signifies a shift in focus in the discourse on ‘protecting Bali from outside bad influences’, which previously referred mainly to tourism and alien values brought by globalisation. Since October 2002 the ‘other’ has been more explicitly manifest within the Indonesian nation itself – a sort of ‘domestic other’.

Putu Suana, in an article discussing the lack of harmony evident in the buildings and hotels of the cities and resort areas, suggests that the *pendatang* have brought to Bali an architectural style (*rumah susun*, high-rise) that has created imbalance in the environment. In order to redress this, Balinese should apply traditional principles based on Hinduism regarding organisation of space (Suana 2004: 167).

In some quarters the *pendatang* are described as a new source of disharmony, a potential cause of cultural degradation if they are not controlled (Arsana 2003: 198). The Regent (*Bupati*) of Jembrana, for example, argued the need for special financial support for his regency because it was the area suffering most from mass immigration from Java, which had led to an increase in theft and other criminal activities (Winasa 2003: 201-2).

*Pendatang* are not the only reason for the decreasing number of Hindu Balinese in Bali. The problem lies also in the fact the Balinese are having fewer children, according to the Balinese psychiatrist Luh Ketut Suryani in her book *Perempuan Bali Kini* (2003). In this book (published by *Bali Post*), after a gloomy description of a contemporary Bali which has lost its way, with a young generation focused on alcohol, drugs, free sex and love of western culture, Suryani instructs Balinese women on how to save Bali. They have to bear in mind their main role, which is to be a mother able to produce a great new generation of Hindu Balinese who

will save Balinese culture from all the destructive outside negative influences. In one chapter of this would-be 'manual' for modern Balinese women, Suryani tells readers that the destiny of Bali is in their hands. Because of the birth control programme very few Balinese couples have more than two children, which has led to a decrease in the Hindu Bali population. In Suryani's view, having more children and educating them as good Balinese Hindus will obviate the danger that they could become a minority in their own home and will save Balinese culture (Suryani 2003: 99).

But other views are also in evidence. Dira Arsana's article also cited the New Year's Eve speech of the Mayor of Denpasar, Puspayoga, in which the latter suggested that Bali can become *ajeg* not *despite* the *pendatang*, but precisely *because* of them. For Puspayoga, Denpasar's multicultural population mix was a source of pride (Arsana 2003: 199).

### ***Ajeg* – Hindu machismo?**

A significant amount of public commentary on *ajeg* puts the lie to the repeated claim by *Bali Post* chief Satria that *ajeg* has universal and harmonious connotations and that it is inclusive, especially towards Muslims.

Several articles on *ajeg* express concern at the declining proportion of Hindu Balinese in the population, especially in Denpasar, and an increase in the number of Muslims, Protestants and Catholics. While some contributors emphasise the importance of the resident's permit for non-Balinese, others opt for the familiar solution of Hindu teachings which, while they are considered the solution to the problem, nonetheless need to be reinterpreted and rationalised. There have also been calls for a more spiritual Hinduism, calls to refrain from using ceremonies as extravagant profit making festivals. *Agama* (religion), with *adat* (tradition) and

*budaya* (culture) are considered by many to be the weapons with which to face outsiders within Bali.

Since the Bali bombings a number of high-profile Balinese have expressed concern about the impact of *pendatang* on Hinduism. In an article on inter-religious relations in Bali, Bodrek Arsana reports on a seminar titled ‘Anticipating the Desecration of Hindu Symbols’,<sup>12</sup> at which a member of the provincial legislature in Bali warned the audience of the possibility that Hindu Balinese could be marginalised by migrants from other regions. He lamented the proselytising activity of Christians and Muslims in Bali, and the increasing number of churches and mosques being built (Arsana 2003: 14).

The idea that *ajeg* is a Hindu concept, and thus ‘belongs’ to Hindu Balinese is unambiguously expressed by the journalist and writer Putu Setia, who writes in an online article that he is greatly saddened by the decline in the Hindu population in Bali and that his preference is to talk about *ajeg Hindu*, not *ajeg Bali*. His reasoning is that

with *ajeg Hindu*, the thing that is first of all made *ajeg* is the Hinduism of the Balinese. (This will) prevent Balinese from converting to other religions, by providing instruction in the Hindu religion to young children from a very early age. (It will) prevent Balinese from selling their land by instilling in them the concept of loyalty to their ancestors, meaning that their inheritance must be protected. (It will) put a check on other religious ideologies, by whatever means

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12 Antisipasi Pelecehan Terhadap Simbol-Simbol Hindu

necessary, including if necessary limiting the building of non-Hindu places of worship in Hindu enclaves, in line with existing regulations<sup>13</sup> (Setia 2004).

It is a view echoed by Balinese Chief of Police I Made Pangku Pastika, who argues for *ajeg* based on Hindu philosophy, rather than more narrowly on Hindu religion. Identifying four obstacles to the realisation of *ajeg* – gambling, illicit drugs, theft and prostitution – the police chief asserts that *ajeg* based on the philosophy of Hinduism, which is ‘rich in universal ideas’ (*sarat dengan muatan universal*) does not exclude people of other faiths. This does not, however, prevent him from expressing disquiet about the change in Denpasar’s demography, with figures suggesting that in five years time the ratio of ‘locals’ (*penduduk lokal*) to ‘newcomers’ (*pendatang*) in that city will be 20:80 (*Bali Post*, 2004).

Unsurprisingly, the internet is a rich source of dialogues on *ajeg Bali*, most characterised by a different tone from that created by *Bali Post*. For example, a message posted on 18 November 2003 to the discussion forum ‘Umat Hindu Bali BANGKITLAH’ (Hindu Balinese ARISE)<sup>14</sup> expressed the concern that Bali was already dominated by Islam. The discussant suggested that Muslims were being sent to Bali in order to increase the number of Muslims on the island, through settlement and marriage. Muslims do not eat in Balinese food stalls and avoid Balinese; Balinese should do likewise. Balinese should fight Muslims with the same weapons, including making it difficult to build new mosques, just as Muslims do with Hindus

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13 Dengan ajeg Hindu, maka pertama-tama yang dibuat ajeg adalah kehinduan orang Bali. Cegah orang Bali pindah agama dengan memberikan pendidikan agama Hindu sejak dini kepada anak-anak. Cegah orang Bali menjual tanahnya dengan menanamkan konsep bhakti kepada leluhur sehingga warisan harus dipertahankan. Bendung misi agama lain dengan segala cara, jika perlu termasuk membatasi pendirian tempat ibadah umat non-Hindu di kantong-kantong umat Hindu sesuai dengan aturan yang ada.

14 <http://www.stormpages.com/kebenaran2/wwwboard/387.html>

in Yogyakarta. At the conclusion of his message the author incited Balinese to be *ajeg* in order to avoid Bali becoming Islamic territory: 'Now it's up to us, whether we want to become an Islamic region or to still be *ajeg* Bali'.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, he suggests spreading his message to Hindu Balinese or 'remain silent, indifferent, but our grandchildren will be disappointed in us for it'.<sup>16</sup> *Ajeg* is thus unambiguously constructed as anti-Islam.

Responses to this message were varied: there was one who agreed that Bali had to be 'vigilant about the Muslim virus' (*tegas dengan virus Muslim*, 19 November 2003). A Muslim contributor attempted to moderate the debate, speaking of the universal teaching of religions based on love (*cinta kasih*; 27 November 2003). In reply the same day a discussant suggested that s/he had faced discrimination in the workplace on account of being a Balinese Hindu. On 11 December another contributor claimed that s/he was not surprised at the fact that the bomb was placed in Bali, a place where Australian tourists go naked like pigs (*babi*) imitating the habit of the natives. S/he also predicted more bombs until the island vanished into the sea.

### ***Ajeg* as nationalistic ideal?**

The theme of defending Bali from so-called 'external dangers' took on a nationalistic flavour in the front page feature of *Bali Post* on 16 August 2003, titled 'Realising the goals of the proclamation' (*Mewujudkan cita-cita proklamasi*). In this article *ajeg Bali* was envisioned as a fulfilment of the proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia, and the integrity of Balinese culture was depicted as necessary for the integrity of the Indonesian nation.

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15 Sekarang tergantung kita, ingin menjadi daerah Islam atau Bali tetap ajeg.

16 diamkan saja, acuh tak acuh tetapi pasti kita akan disesalkan oleh anak cucu kita kelak

The *Bali Post*'s *ajeg* campaign culminated the same evening in a special event called 'Bali Red and White' (*Bali Merah Putih*) which was broadcast by Bali TV on the occasion of both the 55th anniversary of *Bali Post* and the 58th anniversary of independence of the Republic of Indonesia. As noted above, the *Bali Post* group has been particularly prominent in the *ajeg* campaign: talk shows and performance contests have actively involved Balinese audiences. The programme for the 55th anniversary of *Bali Post* included the winner of a song contest organised by *Bali Post* and the *topeng bondres* group Gita Ulangan, winner of the *Bondres* competition organised by *Bali Post* (2003) earlier in the same year.

*Topeng Bondres* is an offshoot of a ceremonial mask dance-drama called *Topeng Pajegan* or *Topeng Sidhakarya* (from the name of the last mask performed, the one who completes the task, the ceremony). In *Topeng Sidhakarya* several masks representing nobles, servants and comic characters tell a story and entertain the audience with teachings and jokes. *Topeng Bondres* resulted from efforts by the performers to adapt their practice to audience tastes. In *Topeng Bondres*, a popular segment of *Topeng Sidhakarya* unconnected with the story narrative, consisting entirely of jokes, has been extracted and performed as an independent show. Highly appreciated by contemporary Balinese audiences, *Topeng Bondres* is often commissioned to inform an audience about a new government project, a new law or to promote a political candidate, or to entertain people in the context of ceremonies.

Held at the Denpasar Arts Centre on 16 August 2003, on the open stage and arena known as Arda Chandra, the event comprised contemporary dance styles, a fashion show, Balinese pop songs and *bondres*, performances that were regularly alternated with TV advertisements broadcast from two big screens situated to the side of the main stage. At the far side of the stage were two red and white curtains and at the centre of the stage a red motorbike was displayed for promotional purposes. The *candi*-like entrance of the Arda Chandra was still

visible, but on the upper edge, instead of the expected relief of the Art Centre's emblem, a big panel displayed the logo of the 55th anniversary of *Bali Post*. The number 55 overlapped the red and white flag of the Republic of Indonesia. It clearly resembled the Independence Day logo – symbolising the dovetailing of the mission of the *Bali Post* and that of the nation. The *Bali Post* was clearly setting out to establish itself as symbol of nationalism. Two presenters, a male and a female, emphasised the aim of the event by reiterating the main topic of the evening – Bali Red and White (*Bali Merah Putih*<sup>17</sup>) – before each performance, and stressing how Bali, more Balinese than ever, being *ajeg*, could contribute to the nation. Such expressions of trust in a future Bali *ajeg* and the necessity of being united with the nation represented a sort of intermezzo.

Part of the event was a fashion show, parading exclusively Balinese textiles for male and female models, with lines inspired by traditional costumes but with a very modern flavour, designs that were clearly suitable for export and the Jakarta market. They represented modern, marketable Balinese culture.

The pop songs, beautiful models, contemporary dance, and special effects were interrupted for about 40 minutes to give space to the *bondres* group, Gita Ulangun, winner of the *Bali Post's Lomba Lawak Bondres*, organised on 15-16 April 2003. The group had been asked by the host of the show, *Bali Post*, to develop the topic *ajeg Bali* and *Merah Putih*. The performers, taking on a variety of masks, made various jokes about morality, religion, stress, job matters, extra conjugal relationships, and the lack of tourists. Only with the last character, an old villager, was the term *ajeg* explicitly mentioned. The old man, in need of medicine,

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<sup>17</sup> The reference to 'red and white' would be immediately comprehended by an Indonesian viewer as a reference to the Indonesian national flag, respectfully known as Sang Merah Putih (Exalted Red and White).

asked who was going to pay for it. A younger character answered, ‘The one who uses pays for it.’ The old man complained about this rude answer, pointing out that the young man would be old one day as well. Then he launched into a complaint about the general attitude of young people, who wait for the death of their old folk so that they can be free to sell the land. He went on:

Yen raga di Bali sing dadi keto, apa ne makawinan, yen sing raga bakal nyaga Baline, nyen buin ? Tepuk tangan! Awanane Baline arus ajeg, iraga idup di Bali, Baline patut kalestariang, bila perlu dikembangkan. Pang sing jeg gradag-grudug kema mai.

Kalau kita di Bali tidak boleh begitu, kenapa begitu, kalau bukan kita yang menjaga Bali, siapa lagi? Tepuk tangan! Makanya Bali harus ajeg, kita hidup di Bali, Balinya harus dilestarikan, bila perlu dikembangkan. Supaya tidak karuan kesana-kemari

Here in Bali we are not allowed to do that. Why not? If we do not defend Bali who else is going to do it? ... Applause, please! ... For that reason Bali has to be *ajeg*, we live in Bali; our Bali has to be preserved, if we want to develop it.

The dialogue continued with a discussion on the necessity of employing the *Merah Putih* principles, namely national principles, in order to achieve *ajeg*. *Ajeg* was also indicated as the solution for facing the difficulties of being Balinese nowadays: in this period of globalisation with so many foreign influences Balinese need to be smart in order to choose the ‘proper’ influences for Bali.



Summarising this brief dialogue we can identify the following main points:

- The need to respect the elders who are the protectors of the land that should not be sold, thus ensuring continuity of tradition;
- The need to apply a filter to elements of ‘overseas’ cultures coming to Bali;
- Universalisation of the concept *ajeg* – being united for a better world;
- Application of the concept of *ajeg* with a nationalistic flavour, stressing the importance of maintaining a united Indonesia.

The message is that by being *ajeg*, Bali better serves national unity and contributes to harmony in the world.

*Ajeg*, as ‘flavour of the month’, has also been incorporated into *bondres* performance even when the performers have not been commissioned to do so. An example of this was seen in a *bondres* performed the following day (17 August 2003) at an Independence Day celebration at the Governor’s residence. On this occasion N. Sweca as *penasar*, the king’s servant, and Ketut Kodi as *wijil*, the *penasar*’s younger brother, performed for 15 minutes as a separate introduction to a *lawak bondres* (*bondres* with makeup instead of masks). The performers had not been given any special topic, but given the occasion (the Governor’s guests being officials, military personnel, politicians, and diplomats) it would be expected that performers would speak about Independence and the veterans and achievements of the Indonesian Revolution. As it happened, in addition to this traditional and expected Independence Day topic, the performers invoked *ajeg* discourse quite extensively.

The dialogue between the two performers lasted about 15 minutes and for the first half Kodi, supported by Sweca, developed their topic as follows<sup>18</sup>

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18 Private recording by Carmencita Palermo

We are here on the occasion of the 58th anniversary. Our nation is already mature. It's time to examine what we have achieved and what still needs to be done, even at this time when we are in such a critical state because of the bomb. But we must not stop; we have to look to the future. Maybe this is a way to get us to understand the mistakes of the past and plan a better future, in the interest of *ajeg Bali*, which is the aspiration of Balinese, and the aspiration of the proclamation [of Independence].

People complain and suffer. The solution? We should do what the Balinese people used to do in the past; we should have a greater variety of professions. Instead we have been concentrating on developing the tourism industry, and then came the bomb and dorrr ... death.

In the past in Bali a person was accustomed to having more than one profession: he worked as farmer, and if it failed he could work as a builder, if that failed in turn he could work as sculptor and so on. Instead now everybody is employed in the tourism industry. If tourism fails, the people, no longer used to working in agriculture, are left without a job. The investments should be equally distributed between agriculture and tourism, half and half 50/50. In that way one sector guarantees the other one ....

...This nation has been built up by the veterans and as children of the Nation,  
as the new generation we have to continue what was done by our heroes.

Kodi was apparently inspired by a number of the *Bali Post* articles about *ajeg Bali*, in particular Wirata's articles 'Who must save Bali?'<sup>19</sup> and 'Destruction must be avoided'.<sup>20</sup> An example of Kodi's use of the newspaper is his comment that *ajeg Bali* is the aspiration of Balinese and the aspiration of the proclamation. This is not uncommon practice for *topeng* performers; they decide what to say according to the occasion of the performance (religious or official), and according to the audience. For the 17 August performance he was not asked to speak about anything specific, but because the audience was mainly veterans and officials he felt that it was necessary to praise the former and remind the latter that all have a debt to the veterans for their service.

Kodi gets his inspiration from newspapers, television programmes and various other sources,<sup>21</sup> and the day before the performance he had read the 16 August 2003 edition of the *Bali Post*. In Kodi's words *ajeg Bali* means that 'Balinese culture must endure, not in the sense of enduring without developing, but developing for the prosperity of all.'<sup>22</sup> Such assessment resembles the old slogan of 'preserving and developing' culture. He may have

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19 'Bali, Siapa yang mesti menyelamatkan?' AB, pp. 2-6.

20 'Kehancuran mesti dihindarkan' AB, pp. 16-19.

21 Interview with Carmencita Palermo, 20 August 2003.

22 'Budaya Bali itu harus bertahan, bukan dalam artian bertahan tidak dikembangkan tapi dikembangkan, tapi selama pengembangan itu untuk kemakmuran bersama.' Interview with Carmencita Palermo, 20 August 2003.

been repeating the slogan he was used to, but he also underlined the necessity of not interpreting *ajeg* as simply a nostalgic return to the ‘good old days.’<sup>23</sup>

In the second part of the same performance, the performers interpreted *ajeg* as regional (Balinese) unity. The theme was that the absence of discrimination and a commitment to ‘brotherhood’ could make Bali *ajeg*. A final song reinforced this idea, mentioning the necessity of keeping alive the Balinese language, the mother language.

A third example of the use of *ajeg* in performance context comes from a *topeng* group from Singaraja coordinated by Nyoman Durpa. This group is particularly popular: it performs nearly every day and it is requested all over the island, in Java (especially Jakarta) and overseas. The necessity of making Bali *ajeg* has been expressed by the different performers of the group on a number of occasions. In particular we discuss here a *topeng Sidhakarya* performed in Singaraja on 15 November 2004, on the occasion of ceremonies related to a cremation.

One of the performers wearing a *bondres* mask characterising a young Rasta-like fellow first explained how the fact of having a ceremony was helping to make Bali *ajeg*. Soon afterwards the same character complained about the fact that his interlocutor, the *penasar*, was using a coarse language that was not the *ajeg* attitude. He then invited those present to use *Om Suaswtyastu* as a greeting, in proper *ajeg* Bali style. The message was that the formal gesture is a very important marker of being *ajeg*, of being Balinese.<sup>24</sup>

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23 Interview with Carmencita Palermo, 31 October 2004.

24 Ironically, the fact that people have to be taught to use this greeting is because the Balinese have not always used it. In the past it was only used on special occasions, but more recently it seems that Balinese living in Jakarta adopted and spread it as a counterpart to the Muslim greetings.

During separate conversations with two performers from this group, they explained that *ajeg* Bali is a government project and *topeng*, like other media such as television programmes and other type of performances, contributes to the dissemination of information on *ajeg* Bali. Nyoman Durpa in particular explained that the government did not explicitly request the group to do so, rather as Balinese, they felt it their duty to give information about *ajeg* Bali in order to avoid the destruction of Bali.<sup>25</sup>

The idea of a ‘nationalistic’ *ajeg* with universal values was reiterated in a seminar organised on 4 June 2004 by Universitas Hindu Indonesia, which has organised a number of seminars to define *ajeg*. The aim of the June seminar was to establish whether *ajeg* could be a tool of peace. In his paper I.B. Radendra (2004) stressed the importance of an enduring Balinese identity with a duty to be an integral part of Indonesia (*Yang diikuti konsep nasional bangsa sendiri dan Bali adalah bagian integral dari Indonesia*).

Such centralist thinking is unusual in the current climate; as we have seen above what is more common is a discourse based on cultural protection, the necessity of being more Balinese than ever through traditional values, expressed either through the ‘old’ language or the new *ajeg* discourse.

### ***Ajeg* as political weapon**

The protection of Bali assumed a keener edge in the recent controversy surrounding a proposed geothermal power project in Tabanan. I Nyoman Gelebet (2004), representing an environmental NGO opposed to the project because of its potential to destroy protected forest and water resources as well as farming activities, threatened to set up what he called ‘*ajeg*

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Carmencita Palermo, 16 November 2004.

troops' (*laskar ajeg*) to put a stop to the project. The word *laskar* has overtly militaristic connotations; its use in conjunction with the purportedly peaceful goal of *ajeg* may seem contradictory, but is in fact a reminder that, in the absence of a precise definition, *ajeg* can be invoked for many purposes.

### ***Ajeg* heroes**

Two recent initiatives in the promulgation of *ajeg Bali*, both run by the *Bali Post*, are competitions to select *guru ajeg Bali* (*ajeg Bali* teachers) and for the best essay on *ajeg Bali*. Already the *guru ajeg Bali* quest has its own acronym – GAB – and in December 2004 five teachers from across the education spectrum were awarded the title (*Bali Post* 2004c). One of them, Drs A. A. Dalem Mahendra, attributed his success to his efforts to

preserve all forms of traditional activities of the Balinese people, covering many aspects of life, including issues pertaining to religion, customs, art and culture and other means of livelihood, which have been handed down from generation to generation and which contain values that are both unimpaired, firm and time tested, as well as being dynamic.<sup>26</sup>

The 'catchall' nature of *ajeg Bali* was also reflected in comments by other finalists and participants in the competition. One school principal stressed the need for *ajeg* to begin with agriculture, another saw education as the key and a third stressed the need for all sectors to

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26 Pelestarian segala bentuk aktivitas tradisional masyarakat Bali, yang meliputi berbagai aspek kehidupan, baik menyangkut masalah

Agama, Adat, Budaya Seni dan mata pencaharian lainnya, yang diwarisi secara turun temurun, yang memiliki nilai utuh, kokoh dan

bermanfaat sepanjang zaman dan bersifat dinamis. <<http://www.denpasar.go.id/new/main.php?act=news&kd=1194>> Accessed 6 January

2005

work together. Yet another urged the GAB to lobby their local government to ban the building of *rumah sangat sederhana* (low income housing), which he regarded as detrimental to Bali.

In keeping with the broadly expressed theme of appreciating and valuing ‘traditional’ Balinese culture, I Gede Titah Pratyaksa, a winner in the *ajeg Bali* essay competition, wrote his essay on the role of the Tabuh Sekar Mas Studio in inculcating in its students a love of Balinese art and culture, ‘which is appropriate with the concept of Ajeg Bali.’<sup>27</sup>

### **Dissenting voices**

A number of Balinese have responded sceptically to the notion of *ajeg* as constituting continuity from the past, the source of true, pure culture.<sup>28</sup> For them, going back to the past *ipso facto* implies denying the trappings of modernity – modern building materials, cooking gas, or hygiene facilities, for example. The question they ask is: ‘Do Balinese want to go back to that past?’ They point out that preservation is not practical.

A similar disquiet regarding the uses to which *ajeg* is put is evident in an editorial in the Hindu magazine *Sarad* (April 2003: 9-10), which denounced the massive building and restoration of temples done in the name of ‘cultural *ajegness*’ (*keajegan budaya*), suggesting

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27 <<http://www.bali-travelnews.com/Batrav/Batrav144/people.htm>> Accessed 6 January 2005

28 Such nostalgia for the past has been present in the discourse of Jaga Bali: keep / maintain / preserve / guard Bali. Putu Setia (2004: 335-38) interprets Jaga Bali as an appeal to protect the image of Bali before ‘overseas eyes’ (overseas is here intended as non-Balinese, including people from the rest of Indonesia). He considers that the image of Bali has been contaminated by pornographic videos such ‘Gadis Baliku’ or by the well-known Balinese habit of cockfighting. As in other articles on *ajeg* Bali, Putu Setia expresses the necessity for a Balinese leader to be able to understand how to protect ‘Bali, its spirit and culture whose life is based on Hinduism’ (Bali dengan roh dan budaya yang bernapaskan Hindu).

the existence of a hidden agenda to transform such *adat* places into tourist objects, thus facilitating an income to the regency, without regard to the wishes of the local people.

Degung Santikarma, a Balinese anthropologist working on violence in Bali, reads in the term *ajeg* an aggressive, masculine and militaristic connotation. In his view, the term has been promoted by the conservative *Bali Post*, exploiting the Bali bombings to erect new boundaries between cultures and religions and to spark a new form of fundamentalism as a response to fundamentalisms elsewhere in Indonesia and around the world (Santikarma 2003a).

While 'erect' is the only translation of *ajeg* that Santikarma proposes in the English version of his article, he gives a broader interpretation of the term in the Indonesian version published in *Kompas* a month later (Santikarma 2003b). The article in English by Santikarma stresses the masculine, macho and fundamentalist connotations of *ajeg* but the Indonesian version also stresses the local political and economic dimensions of the discourse. He asserts that this discourse, created by bureaucrats and media, aims to legitimise the power of the traditional elites (such as Brahmans and aristocrats) and to eliminate foreign competitors who have invested in the island throughout the years. While the English version evokes an unambiguous denunciation of Hindu fundamentalism, in the *Kompas* article the author focuses more on economic and political power dynamics. Perhaps, writing in *Kompas* (a national Catholic newspaper) Santikarma feels the need to avoid contentious religious issues.

### ***Ajeg as pepesan kosong?***

Other dissenting voices regard the elusive meaning of *ajeg* as grounds to dismiss it as being mere *pepesan kosong* (empty rhetoric). Writing for the Institute for Research and Empowerment, Ari Dwipayana, for example, suggests that, even if the word ever had a real meaning, it has now the been reduced to a meaningless slogan, by virtue of its



commodification through appearing on T-shirts and stickers and through being a compulsory utterance at any community meeting. Dwipayana goes on to say that, rather like the state ideology of *Pancasila*, the term has become doctrine and there is no longer any space to publicly debate its meaning.

The notion that *ajeg* can be as meaningful or as meaningless as you want it to be is a sentiment that was repeated often during discussions by the authors with writers, artists and performers. The writer and *Bali Post* journalist Mas Ruscitadewi, for example, while stressing that *ajeg*'s main aim is harmony, pointed out that, as a catchy journalistic slogan, it can be interpreted in many ways, leading to the risk of fanaticism.<sup>29</sup> As Suryawan (2004) says, it can be, and has been, used to 'comment on anything at all' (*mengomentari apa saja*). As such, it can be entirely innocuous – jargon for the bureaucrats, or it can be very powerful – a weapon for the disgruntled.

## **Conclusion**

*Ajeg* discourse is undeniably reminiscent of the New Order slogan *melestarikan membina dan mengembangkan kebudayaan Bali* ('preserve, create and develop Balinese culture'). The question is whether *ajeg Bali* represents something special or markedly different from that old discourse, or whether the term is used with the same connotation as the 'old' *lestari* (preservation).<sup>30</sup> Another issue that needs further research is the intersection between *ajeg Bali* and regional autonomy legislation in Indonesia which, since 1 January 2001, has devolved to the regions powers and responsibilities previously held by central government.

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29 Interview with Carmencita Palermo, 2 November 2004

30 See Helen Creese (2004).

Some preliminary research suggests that this has led to heightened notions of regional identity and to a revitalisation of regional cultural traditions.<sup>31</sup>

We conclude this paper with an anecdote that highlights the anomalies and tensions infusing the discourse of *ajeg* Bali. On 23 January 2004 at the Pura Dalem Desa Adat Yangbatu temple in Denpasar, the police intercepted and shut down a *tajen* (cock fight). The *tajen* is an important part of Balinese Hindu traditions, but it is also a form of gambling forbidden by law. In spite of the prohibition this practice is widespread and partially tolerated by the police. The police action in Denpasar on this occasion was unusually vigorous and created a violent protest by the people involved in the event, leading to some casualties. What was behind the crackdown by the police? An article in the *Bali Post* explained that the police were on an *ajeg* ‘safari’, aiming to get rid of *tajen* from public places.<sup>32</sup> But there was considerable public protest, because *tajen* is an age-old Balinese tradition.<sup>33</sup> As Mas Ruscitadewi commented, some people considered *tajen* as being synonymous with *ajeg Bali*, and were so convinced that they wanted the *Bali Post* defend their rights to *tajen* gambling.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, however, several articles were written condemning *tajen* as being an outside ritual that was anti-*ajeg* Bali. Where, one wonders, does *ajeg* begin and end?

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31 Barbara Hatley is currently undertaking research on this on Yogyakarta, for example.

32 *Bali Post*, 26 January 2004.

33 See article on Indosiar website: ‘Tajen, antara Judi dan Tradisi’, 17 February 2004.

<[http://www.indosiar.com/v2/news/news\\_read.htm?id=17968](http://www.indosiar.com/v2/news/news_read.htm?id=17968)>

34 Private communication with Carmencita Palermo, 2 November 2004.

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