

## Rival Styles of Writing, Rival Styles of Practical Reasoning

**Richard Fox**

Institut für Ethnologie

Heidelberg, den 28. März 2013

### Zitiervorschlag

Richard Fox, Rival Styles of Writing, Rival Styles of Practical Reasoning, Material Text Culture Blog 2013.3.

URI [http://www.materiale-textkulturen.de/mtc\\_blog/2013\\_003\\_Fox.pdf](http://www.materiale-textkulturen.de/mtc_blog/2013_003_Fox.pdf)  
DOI [10.6105/mtk.mtc\\_blog.2013.003.Fox](https://doi.org/10.6105/mtk.mtc_blog.2013.003.Fox)  
ISSN 2195-075X



Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung.) Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des Autors, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/de>

**Rival Styles of Writing,  
Rival Styles of Practical Reasoning**



Richard Fox

rfox@eth.uni-heidelberg.de

*The following paper was read to the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Chicago, IL, on Monday, November 19, 2012, as a contribution to the panel entitled 'New Approaches to Religion in Southeast Asia'; the panel was organized by the Religion and Southeast Asia Group. The primary research for this paper was conducted under the auspices of the Material Text Cultures collaborative research initiative (SFB 933) at Ruprecht-Karls Universität Heidelberg. It also draws on research carried out with the support of a Fulbright Senior Scholar Award in 2010-11.*

This is a paper about media, materiality and practical reasoning. I'm specifically interested in the use of non-typographic script and writing on the Indonesian island of Bali. And the argument that I'd like to present goes something like this. Recent decades have seen a shift in Balinese sensibilities regarding the use of the island's traditional script, and of the texts that are written in that script. And this shift is closely linked to wider-reaching changes in the way people set about embodying and cultivating shared ideals of agency, community and the collective good. That is to say, there appears to be a link between (a) the material practices of script and writing, on the one hand, and (b) broader styles of what I would call *social and practical reasoning*, on the other. As a way into the problem, I'd like to begin by juxtaposing two sets of contemporary practices, each of which is centered on the use of Balinese script in a slightly different way.

### **A Tale of Two Practices**

My first example comes from a wedding ceremony that I attended some two years ago in a semi-rural community where I'd been conducting an ethnographic study of small-scale domestic rites. It was my research assistant who was getting married. And what I'd like to show you now is a video clip from an important part of the ceremony, in which a brahmin priest known as a *padanda*—literally a 'staff-bearer'—inscribed a series of syllables, in honey, on the bodies of the bride and the groom.



*Writing on the tongue; a scene from the video clip shown during the presentation.*

So what was it that we just saw? The bride and groom were seated on the eastern pavilion, or *balé dangin*, of the houseyard compound, where the majority of important life-cycle rites are performed. And, as is now standard practice, a high priest had been specially invited to complete this particular part of the ceremony—including the inscription of the *aksara*, or syllables, on the bodies of the bride and groom: on their hands, shoulders, foreheads and tongue, among other places. The inscription is a comparatively minor part of the ceremony, but no less important for that. And it is worth noting that a similar act of writing on the body is performed during the consecration of priests, and for those wishing to embark on a new field of study. In these latter cases, the inscription is often understood as a physical transfer of knowledge through writing on the tongue—quite literally a gift from *Déwi Saraswati*, Goddess of Learning. But why would one inscribe letters on the body during a marriage rite? What was this inscription meant to accomplish? What was its purpose, or its desired end—what Balinese might call its *tetujon*?

As a first step in trying to answer this question, I'd like to offer you a second example by way of comparison—this time from the newspaper. On Sundays the island's leading paper, the *Bali Post*, carries a section entitled *Bali Orti*, which we might translate as something like 'Balinese News' or 'The News of Bali'. In contrast to the paper as a whole, which is printed in the national language of Indonesian, the *Bali Orti* section is written exclusively in the Balinese language, albeit largely in roman transliteration. In addition to local news articles and short stories inspired by the Indic Epics, *Bali Orti* frequently prints examples of modern Balinese literature addressing topical issues such as environmental pollution, inter-religious marriage and life in the modern city. And, again, these are all generally written in Balinese language that is printed in romanized script.

There is, however, one marked exception to this tendency. And this is a feature that centers on a brief literary passage that is printed in Balinese script, under which a roman transliteration appears, often together with a translation into vernacular Balinese, or into the national language of Indonesian. The question, once again, is *why*? What purpose is served by this juxtaposition of Balinese script, roman transliteration and (sometimes) Indonesian translation?

Kidung Gaguritan Burayut	
Kaasuh olih I Gusti Madé Sutjaja	
Ri tepengan mangkin anggé galah nembang miwah muruk nyurat basa Bali; mawit saking Perpustakaan Lontar Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Udayana.	
bulun matané marabu.	Bulun matané marabu.
alis tajep mabengad.	Alis tajep mabengad.
sing raras anggénnya asin.	Sing raras anggénnya asin.
manglaliyer.	Manglaliyer.
tan péndah bintang kartika.	Tan péndah bintang kartika.
46. Nyamannyané né cenikan.	46. Nyamannyané né cenikan.
pat-pat pada hangkit-bangkit.	Pat-pat pada hangkit-bangkit.
lamiad-lamiad pada meros.	lamiad-lamiad pada meros.
lanjar-lanjar ramping-ramping.	Lanjar-lanjar ramping-ramping.
ules masawang gading.	Ules masawang gading.
nyambang nyampuah putih	Nyambang nyampuah putih

An image from the Bali Orti ('Balinese News') section of the Sunday edition of the Bali Post newspaper; the left column contains Balinese script, on the right is its roman transliteration.

Here it is worth a wider look at the newspaper itself. Perusing the *Bali Post*, one often finds letters to the editor and op-ed essays lamenting the demise of Balinese language and literature. With the rise of state education and new media—such as television, but also Facebook and Twitter—as well as the growing number of non-Balinese Indonesians who are now living on the island, there has understandably been a shift toward the use of the national language (*Bahasa Indonesia*) in many forms of daily interaction. In the Provincial capital of Denpasar, for instance, it is not uncommon for Balinese children to grow up with little or no familiarity with what is notionally their mother tongue. It is against the backdrop of such developments that we find the Sunday feature in *Bali Orti* as a call to tradition—that is, to encourage readers to continue using and studying Balinese language, literature and script. On this account, Balinese characters would figure as a self-conscious articulation of religio-cultural identity. And, I might add, this fits well with what we know of the broader agenda of the publisher, Satria Naradha and his Bali Post Media Group—something I'd be happy to discuss further if anyone is interested.

For present purposes, I would like to focus instead on what we can learn from a comparison of these two uses of Balinese script. On the one hand, we have a ceremonial inscription on the body; on the other, a self-conscious call to tradition. *And it is my contention that these two sets of practices are grounded respectively in quite different understandings media, materiality and what I will for now simply call conceptions of the collective good.* And, to clarify what I mean by this, we must now return to the example of writing on the body.

### **Traditional Script: It is Alive!**

You will recall that we had a brahmin priest inscribing the bodies of bride and groom with a series of syllables. And the question I had asked was *why?* What purpose might this inscription have served? And how was it thought to work? To date I have been unable to locate a clear explanation for this practice in the traditional literature. And most of those with whom I've discussed the rite are either reticent or unable to provide what I—or even they, for that matter—would consider a satisfactory answer. (In passing, I should note there are good reasons besides ignorance for this reticence—again, something I'd be happy to discuss further.)

So, in the absence of a readily available explanation, I would suggest we take a slightly different tack, and look to another traditional practice that makes use of Balinese letters—namely, the little cloth amulets, known as *ulap-ulap*, that one finds affixed to newly constructed buildings and shrines. Go into almost any Balinese home, and you'll find these small white sheets of cloth inscribed with various combinations of characters and images. And this is because affixing the *ulap-ulap* is an integral part of the rites that must be performed before any new structure may be inhabited. The rites themselves are meant to accomplish three things—namely, the *purification*, *fortification* and *animation* of the building itself. And it is to the latter that I would like especially to draw your attention—that is, to the idea of *animating* a building.



Photo: A script-bearing cloth amulet (*ulap-ulap*) affixed to the *pamedal* aperture in the outermost 'front-facing' houseyard wall.

Here it is important to understand that Balinese buildings are alive—they *maurip*, as one says in Balinese. We find, for instance, that in order to begin work on a wooden house, one must first kill a tree. And in the act of construction, then, one is working with dead tree matter. So it is, I've been told, for this reason, that to inhabit a building prior to its rite of *reanimation*—that is, prior to affixing an *ulap-ulap*—would be like sleeping under a corpse. A dead building is inert, and so it is incapable of defending itself—it is, in effect, open to all comers. While, by contrast, it is thought that a living building can repel attack, much as a living tree can defend itself with its bark, or even its thorns; and then, of course, repair itself, if harmed, through its inherent capacity for growth and self-transformation. The question, then, is where do these little script-bearing amulets—these *ulap-ulap*—fit into all of this? And, in turn, what might this tell us about the purposes of writing on the body?



Image of an ulap-ulap affixed to a modern garage, with detail on right.

Well, the name of these little cloth amulets gives us our first clue. The root word, *ulap*, has many uses. We find, for example, that to *ngulapin* is to call someone over—‘to invite’ or ‘to beckon’. The movement is one of waving in a downward motion toward the body—much the same gesture one uses to call a taxi in much of Southeast Asia. Along similar lines, there is a set of rites called *(pa)ngulapan*, also derived from the root word *ulap*, in which one’s spirit is called back either to the body, in the event of illness, or into a coconut, in the case of death—where the coconut then becomes the vessel for transporting the soul of the deceased. Here too the movement is one of *waving in* toward the body—a procedure Balinese call *natab*—which I might note, in passing, is not only the name of the marriage-related rite that we saw in the video, but also one of its defining features. That is to say, both before and after the letters were inscribed on the body, the bride and the groom were instructed to make the gesture known as *natab*—seemingly a sort of *waving* or *wafting-in*.

So, returning to the rite of animation for a new building, it appears that it may be the *ulap-ulap* that does the beckoning—quite literally ‘calling in’ the forces that will bring the building ‘back to life’. An old priest once told me these small script-bearing amulets work more or less like a satellite dish, channeling energy ‘in from up above’. The physical manipulation of written script, he said, is a bit like ‘*tuning* the television’. Use one set of syllables to reanimate the kitchen; use another for activating one’s ancestral shrine. Changing the arrangement of the characters, then, is rather like changing the channel on the TV. Different channel, different program. Different syllables, different energy.

With respect to my opening example, it would appear that it is the *transfer of energy* that is the key. By having a series of syllables placed at specific points on the body, one absorbs their

energy, much as the *ulap-ulap* help to channel the forces of animation that bring a newly-built house 'back to life'.

If much of this is left unstated elsewhere, it is made quite explicit in traditional accounts of literary composition, where Balinese letters not only *channel* energy, but are themselves said to be *alive*—much like trees, human beings, and buildings. That is to say, they have the power to transform both themselves and the world around them. And this may help to explain why Balinese children—in previous generations, at least—were warned to be careful when they wrote. They were told that to study these characters without the requisite preparation would render them emotionally unstable, and could make them stupid—*bisa belong*. It might even drive them crazy—*buduh ing sastra*. Perhaps it's rather like giving a child a chainsaw. To be sure, it's a useful tool if one happens to be a lumberjack. But, when mishandled, Balinese characters—much like the chainsaw—can cause serious damage. And this is why only *certain* kinds of people are capable of safely and effectively handling the ambivalently potent configurations of script that can animate buildings and confer energy on people during life-cycle rites, such as the one we saw in the video clip.

Here it is crucial to note that the person most commonly consulted for this purpose—that is, for the handling of letters—is the high priest (generally, though not always) from a brahmin house to whom one's family owes fealty, through a patron-client relation that usually extends back several generations. Traditional healers, or *balian*, are also adept in the handling of script; and, in calling on their assistance, one is potentially entering into a relationship not easily ended.

The point to be taken is that the power of writing—and the transformative potency of letters—are closely linked both to their *materiality* and to a *localized* sense of place. I would moreover suggest that this linkage of matter, place and power only makes sense in the context of a very specific kind of social relation—such as those we find in Bali's overlapping networks of patrons and clients, clans and wards, temple congregations and extended families. These are relations of but loosely calculated giving and receiving that are sustained through time. But they are also, significantly, relations that are closely tied to specific places and objects—such as rice land, rivers and trees, but also temples, palm-leaf manuscripts, cloth amulets and heirloom daggers. These objects, like the letters that may be inscribed on them, are very much alive—which is to say *they can effect change in the world*—and this potency is inseparable from their material being, and so both their location and the forms of social organization through which they are controlled and deployed.



A *lontar* (palm-leaf manuscript) containing formulae and amulet-drawings used for healing and sorcery

## Read it in the Sunday Papers

I would argue that it is on precisely these three points—namely, those of matter, locality and social relation—that the practice of writing on the body may be contrasted with what we saw in the Sunday newspaper, where the power of script seemed not so much to be immanent in its materiality. But, rather, its power—if indeed it had any—consisted in its ability to point beyond itself.

The Balinese characters appearing in the special feature on the *Bali Orti* page ‘stood for’—as opposed to embodied—an ideal of cultural identity and tradition. And, crucially, this broadly cultural ideal transcends any one of its material instantiations. That is to say, unlike an *ulap-ulap*, the newspaper can be printed over and over and over again, and yet still remain ‘the same newspaper’—something that cannot be said for these small script-bearing amulets with their aura of singularity.

So it seems we’re dealing with two quite different sensibilities regarding Balinese script. One is resolutely immanent. The other representational.

And, by way of conclusion I’d like to reflect very briefly on the conditions of possibility for the latter—namely the use of Balinese script as we saw it in the newspaper.

The Indonesian island of Bali is home to some four million people, approximately ninety percent of whom are registered as adherents to the state-sanctioned form of Hinduism known as *Agama Hindu*. Albeit a majority on their own island, Balinese Hindus are nationally a minority, making up less than 2% of Indonesia’s population of some 240 million. In the early years of the Republic—by which I mean the early to mid-1950s—it was in part this sense of numerical disadvantage that drove certain among the urban intellectual elite to seek formal state recognition for Hinduism. It was feared that, without state recognition, Balinese would be seen as backward tribalists, who had ‘not yet’ embraced a World Religion. And they would therefore become legitimate targets for proselytization and conversion at the hands of the numerically superior communities of Indonesian Islam and Christianity. To qualify for state recognition, the Ministry of Religion had stipulated certain criteria—namely a belief in One God, the testimony of a prophet, the possession of a holy text, and a community of adherents that extended beyond the boundaries of a single ethnic group.



An ordained *sengguhu* priest (*rsi bhujangga*) inscribing the syllables associated with the nine directions (*nawasanga*) on a *paso tatandingan*, one of the ritual instruments (*upakara*) used in a major ‘purification ceremony’ (*caru*).





Two styles of writing: ulap-ulap (top, left) and inscription on the tongue (bottom, left), and the Bali Orti section of the newspaper (right).

As we have seen, traditional uses of Balinese script—such as the *ulap-ulap* and writing on the body—are rooted in both matter and in place, but also within a series of long-established social relations. They are unremittingly local. By contrast, the need to constitute a religious community extending not only beyond the immediate locale, but indeed beyond Bali itself, required an account of community that transcended the sort of localized solidarities characteristic of the island’s traditional forms of social organization. The requirement for a canon of sacred scripture further called for an account of ‘the text’ that, unlike older ideas of script and writing—transcended the bounds of matter and its physical presence. What we have, in effect, are two parallel sets of relations. On one side, a materially immanent theory of writing and power linked to a localized form of social organization; on the other, a displaced and dematerialized theory of writing linked to trans-local forms of solidarity associated with the postcolonial nation state.

Put another way, as I indicated at the outset: there appears to be a link between (a) the material practices of script and writing, on the one hand, and (b) broader styles of social and practical reasoning, on the other. And now I wish to end—by *opening*, as opposed to *concluding*. And I wish to do so by suggesting that our recognition of this link—between media, materiality and styles of reasoning—raises afresh a rather old question: namely that of *determination*. Do material practices, such as writing, have a determinant effect on consciousness? Is it the other way around? Or does the dichotomy itself—that of mind and body, culture and nature, medium and message—*presuppose* precisely what we set out to explain in the first place? Namely, why and how a specific *medium matters*.