

## Foreword

"It takes two to speak the truth. One to speak, and another to hear."  
– Henry David Thoreau

What happens when two men sit down to discuss the passion, wealth, righteousness and evolution of the people of their adoptive home? Will they reveal insights or yet more clichés of paradise? What can we learn about and glean from the culture being gazed upon? Would we learn more about human cultural adaptation, or more about the lenses used for looking upon changing human worlds?

As a Balinese, I read through these pages with a mix of awe at the breaking of taboos of discussing certain subjects and horror at the highlighting of some practices I grapple with within my own extended family, yet with a tenderness: Here are two men who are attempting to understand the culture of my people, our idiosyncrasies and contradictions. Here are two observers who are holding up a mirror to Bali. Here are two thinkers who have, in their own way, created a portrait of Balinese society: A snapshot of a woman of a certain age at the cusp of yet another great transformation. The woman may not enjoy seeing her wrinkles bared for the world to see, but it is also hard not to accept the token of love in all this attention.

The conversations in this book do not purport to convey an objective truth. From Lao-tzu to Jacques Derrida, to the more recent Charles Eisenstein, the fallacy of objective meaning has been widely recognized. The truths presented in this book are subjective, and usefully so. Balinese myths are full of subjective truths that are contradictory without being any less conciliatory. Only the initiate is encouraged to attempt understanding; novices are enthralled by the story, accepting that different passions and reasons drive each of us on in life. Our stories are told to keep us in wonder of the infinite possibilities of the world while embracing the fire in our own bellies, harnessing them to power our journey to pursue our own truths.

Growing up in Bali, we are told that things just are the way they are. Don't try to explain them! Understanding is for later. When pressed into the role of a guide to foreign guests from an early age, I often felt the magic of creation when I attempted to explain my world to visitors. As I uttered my explanations, it became so! Fifty years of receiving such magic from his hosts and informants, and almost as many years of weaving them into vignettes in Balinese, English and French, have similarly transformed Jean Couteau. Prompted by the questions of Eric Buvelot, Jean makes sense of the stories he has received.

Eda ngaden awak bisa, depang anake ngadanin, ..."  
(Do not think yourself capable, let others name it, ...)  
– Opening lines in a Balinese folk song

The intensity of the outside world's gaze upon Bali has become familiar. We have come to expect it. Aware of our insularity, we rely on outsiders to tell us what they see: to hold a mirror up for us. Let me reveal an elephant in the room: a tradition-bound Balinese could never have published the observations in this book. Our social taboos against speaking critically of our own are too strong. Jean Couteau has received the encouragement of his Balinese mentors and peers to keep writing precisely because many of these issues need to be aired and brought out into the open. While he draws out a map of his ideas about the Balinese, perhaps he is opening avenues for further discussions among us.

Jean Couteau's long engagement with Balinese society as an observer, curator and commentator is not to be taken lightly. While he does not shy away from revealing the crass humor of the Balinese *warung* typical of Singaraja, his north Bali home, it is pertinent to underline that in recent years he has lived mostly in urban Denpasar, to the south of Bali. While the people of the south tend to be subtle, our northerners are known for being outspoken, like Jean. He is often invited to speak on artistic and cultural topics with both urban and rural-based intellectuals of Bali in public debates as well as private discussions where ideas flow more freely. This book captures Jean's anxieties about the changes presently unfolding in Bali's society as we embrace and navigate a mechanistic material world. Another elephant in the room is that, while being an honored guest, Jean Couteau has never lived under the pressure of the obligations that come with being a member of Balinese societies, be they duties to the customary village (*desa adat*), clan (*kawitan*) or artistic guild (*sekaa*), among other responsibilities that come with membership. Almost all married Balinese face these pressures and more, coloring their everyday decisions.

Organized by the four categories of human pursuits of Catur Purusha *Artha* (*Puruṣārtha* in Sanskrit), this book lays out the many conversations between Jean Couteau and the inquisitive Eric Buvelot within these 'purposes of being human' by starting with the more external action-oriented impulses of passion (*Kama*) and wealth (*Artha*) before observing the more latent inward restraints of virtue (*Dharma*) and enlightenment (*Moksa*). Balinese philosophy sees these four areas as the quadrants of a mandala, where every person is an artist who can focus on the details of a particular quadrant at different stages of their lives, while keeping in balance with the other quadrants in their mind's eye.

In following these conversations and their exploratory tangents, we begin to appreciate the concerns of two speakers observing a culture shifting from myths about their world and themselves towards logic and reason. We may intimate that there is a concern that this shift in worldview is happening without open debate. I agree that many of these discussions need to happen more among the Balinese,

and also find these discussions useful in reflecting upon the greater trajectory of human stories. By the pressure-cooker of modernity, in two to three generations Bali is shifting through cultural milestones Europe underwent over two to three millennia. Read this book reflectively. How do you see the world and the way it is changing? What are your roles in these changes?

In the pages of this book, perhaps you are about to encounter what you have learned to perceive as ‘the other’. Let me share with you the nuance in two Balinese words used to describe the human ‘other’ when we encounter them. The first, which Jean and Eric have internalized by now, would be the word *tamu*, which means guest or visitor. The *other* is an honored passerby, walking among us temporarily. Give them a wide berth to stumble upon things of interest. When we speak of the opinions of others, we use the word *anak* or child. Children are listened to in Bali, because in their newness and innocence they make pronouncements that are pure and insightful. Take delight, and allow the delight to open up perceptions for reflection.

– Kadek Krishna Adidharma, Waitarere, 19 October 2020

## Translator's Note

When two Frenchmen sit down to talk about serious matters, the language is likely to soar. Listening in on this can be a delight when the language is still French. But when it is translated into English, the sensation of flight may turn to vertigo. In the Anglophone world, simplicity is prized, and the fewer syllables the better. But to transform the very French conversation of this book into plain journalistic English would be an injustice to the character of the two men involved – Eric Buvelot: at once generous and meticulous; and Jean Couteau: jovial, ardent, and inclined to oratory. So the translation process was one of trying to balance the sound of the conversation with the editorial need to turn it into something comfortable for the reader.

But there was more to it than that. As these interviews show, the little island of Bali is an extremely complicated place. Bali 50 years ago was rather like it was a thousand years ago, and it was unlike anywhere else on earth. It was like an heirloom tapestry – whole, beautiful, full of intricate tales and details, incomprehensible and yet coherent. This made it fascinating, and, as this book explains, that fascination has left big thumbprints all over Bali's landscape and its psyche. Where Bali was once inscrutable, it has become almost illegible. Thus, the courage of the authors to explore Balinese reality and the changes it has suffered (or enjoyed) over the past 50 years. And thus, too, the fact that, as the anthropologists put it, everything in Bali is contested.

Resolving contested issues is not easy. Widespread literacy in Bali dates only from the 1970s, as Jean Couteau tells us, about the time he first settled here. Thus, it's hard to find the sort of facts in Bali that you find in industrialized societies, such as statistics, a shared historiography, and so forth. Whatever rules and laws there are – and there are many, all sorts, everywhere – are a work in progress.

One contested area that affected this translation is the spelling of Balinese terms. The Balinese language is written in its own script, which is derived from Javanese and ultimately Sanskrit. This script does not correspond exactly to the Latin alphabet, and there has always been debate among interested people (they are very few) about how Balinese should be spelled in Latin script. Perhaps the closest thing to an official standard may be found in the dictionary *Kamus Bali-Indonesia Tahun 1993*, edited by I Wayan Warna. Although it is neither perfect nor complete, I have used this as my source for the spelling of Balinese words and terms here.

But not without argument! In Bali there is currently a movement of cultural longing for the glamour of Old Java and Old India, as if the light were brighter in those days. One way to express that nostalgia is, surprisingly, in spelling –

specifically, to add an 'h' where none is called for, in order to make Balinese words look more like Javanese or Sanskrit words. For example, a priest-puppeteer in Balinese is a *dalang*, whereas in Javanese he is a *dhalang*. The basic Balinese alphabet, unlike the Javanese, does not have a character for 'dh'. Also, the spelling of the (most common) Balinese name for the Supreme Deity is 'Sang Hyang Widi Wasa.' And yet, Balinese authors of books and blogs passionately write 'Widhi' instead of 'Widi'. In the production of this book, Jean Couteau argued in favor of the most current spelling; I argued in favor of adhering to the *Warna* dictionary in order to have an objective standard. (He eventually conceded.) But the *Warna* dictionary is itself contested. Purists, like Michel Picard, often cited in this book, point out that the prefixes of certain Balinese words in the dictionary have been Indonesianized, rather than respecting the orthography of the original script – for example, 'pedanda' instead of 'padanda'. These hybrid spellings have become so common as to be effectively correct. Perhaps the lesson here is that, in Bali, everything is a bit true.

Meanwhile, the translation of *50 ans de changements* into English means that more Balinese are likely to read it, a wish that Kadek Krishna Adidharma expresses in his Foreword, even as he notes its critical character. The Balinese people have a genius for tact, and it would be painful to inadvertently offend them with the wrong choice of a word. This was a consideration in the course of translating, not only to me but also to Eric and Jean.

One of the pleasures of this project was working with these two thoughtful people. Another was the many readings it required, and the opportunity each time to think about things that normally linger just beyond one's awareness when you live in Bali. Reality, always equivocal, is especially difficult to discern in Bali, because it is further obscured by being part magical and part folie de grandeur. Add to this 50 years of the encroachment of the modern world with all its unexpected disruptions, and the picture requires a very particular observer to make sense of it. Eric Buvelot and Jean Couteau have done that in detail.

– Diana Darling, Ubud, Bali