

Atua of the Aga: A Comparison of Ancestor Worship in the Highlands of Bali and Polynesia

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to understand the practice of ancestor worship among the Bali Aga village of Sukawana and its relation to how its inhabitants trace their origins. When did their ancestors arrive in Sukawana and where did they come from? Did any of their descendents continue to migrate across Indonesia? And how do the Bali Aga practice ancestor reverence through the use of shrines and temples—tangible evidence—in their villages? The responses to these questions provided a platform for comparison to current anthropological, linguistic, and archaeological theories in order to understand how locally constructed truth in Sukawana related to such hypotheses.

With regard to Polynesia, common characteristics between the two regions were identified, particularly with respect to the concept of who their ancestors were and how and if they became deities. Additionally, the Bali Mula practice of wrapping trees and stones was to be investigated as possible evidence of totemic beliefs parallel to those in Polynesia.

This month-long field study was completed while living with a family in Sukawana and interviewing local elders who knew the history of the village and how its traditions, particularly that of the Pura Bale Agung, came into being. General sets of talking points and open-ended questions structured that interviews and cross-checking between informants was used to formulate a solid opinion. In group settings, most data was extracted through observation and subsequent questioning after the event. In most cases photos taken during a ceremony complemented field notes. Children were not included in this study partially because of their ignorance of village history but mainly because of their status as minors. Data was collected from all ages and both sexes across the village, though admittedly more older men were introduced to me by Pak Made Ardana.

I apologize in advance for any errors made in interpretation or translations as it is my hope to portray the people of Sukawana truthfully. The following ethnography stands as my best understanding.

Chapter 1

HOUSE, VILLAGE, *BANUA*: THE ORIENTATION OF HIGHLAND BALI

The month of November brought me to Sukawana, a village at the highest physical elevation of any human settlement in Bali along the mountainous slopes surrounding Pura Pucak Penulisan, “the temple on the summit of Mt. Penulisan”¹. Known as a Bali Aga, or “mountain Balinese”, village, Sukawana is recognized as one of the oldest and most traditional highland settlements of the Kintamani ridge. Frequently called the descendants of the Bali Mula, the “original Balinese”, the Bali Aga have a different mode of orientation and religious ceremonies in contrast to *Bali Dataran*. Rather than *kaja*, “towards the mountains”, designating Gunung Agung as in lowland Bali, the Bali Aga focus their attention towards Mount Penulisan², home of Pura Pucak Penulisan.

Pura Penulisan has importance not only as the holiest mountain to the Bali Aga but as a central temple common to an alliance of villages, a *banua*. Thomas Reuter, a scholar of the traditions of the central highlands, has termed these “ritual domains”, implying that festivals at Pura Penulisan are attended and performed by a network cooperative of villages. Such obligations are maintained through the belief “in a shared

¹ Reuter, Thomas. *Custodians of the Sacred Mountains: Culture and Society in the Highlands of Bali* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 64.

² The three most important mountains for the Bali Aga are Mount Penulisan, Mount Batur, and Gunung Agung. Each is considered an abode of the gods.

origin, a common source from which it has grown into the larger, more differentiated social reality it is today—the unique result of a unique mytho-historical process”³.

Sukawana, based on Bali Aga origin stories, holds the status as a parent village, that is, the oldest settlement from which newer Bali Aga villages have branched from.

Accordingly, the highest ranking elders in Sukawana, the members of the *Bale Lantang* have the leading duties of major rituals performed at Pura Penulisan, the center temple of the village’s *banua* membership.

As a subsection of the *banua*, villages serve as a more localized form of Bali Aga traditions. While the interdependent relationship between villages becomes evident in *banua* membership, each settlement has its own origin history and set of ancestral temples, particularly those contained within the *Pura Bale Agung*. In Sukawana the *Bale Agung* represents the core of the oldest part of the village, the place where the original founders of the village built the longhouses that support the hegemonic ranking system of elders. As an entity of families with a connected past, Sukawana relies on origin histories and shrines dedicated to ancestors to continue the traditions of the past and maintain a sense of community across the population.

At the most private sphere of life are the individual family compounds where the *sangghah kemulan* and *sangghah pakaja*—two ancestral shrines—are located. Again, the design and deities embodied in such structures are unique to Bali Aga, especially in the use of dapdap trees as the foundation of the *sangghah kemulan*. The house level represents the practice of ancestor worship at its smallest scope; only one family

³ Thomas Reuter, “Banua: Ritual Networks in the Highlands of Bali” (paper presented at the annual conference of the Society for Balinese Studies, Denpasar, Bali, July 13-15, 1995).

maintains its house shrines and the ancestors connected to them reflect recently deceased relatives who the family has a living memory of.

An understanding of these three levels of conceptual organization is not only important for an analysis of Bali Aga ritual life, but its hierarchical division of ancestor shrines. As the series from house, village, and *banua* is followed the shrines become progressively more elaborate and the status of ancestors more sacred. With age comes sanctity.

Chapter 2

THE SHRINES OF OUR ANCESTORS

Physical structures dedicated to ancestors represent an importance of kinship in Bali Aga villages, but also the need for a medium of conversing with the deities. By having a shrine to focus one's prayer and offerings, a division between the sacred and profane is enhanced and the presence of holy spaces made more visible. Prayer within the courtyards of the *sangghah* or the terraces of Pura Penulisan require a pakian adat, the traditional Balinese ritual clothing, and arguably a mindset of spiritual communication with the gods. With the tripartite orientation system explained in the previous chapter, a description of ancestor worship at each level will help as a basis for connecting architecture to origin histories.

The domain of each family in Sukawana is regulated within the household compound. Generally simple, one building structures, they are spread out across the many square miles of gardens and in clusters adjacent to the *Pura Bale Agung* complex. In total, there are about 800 households in the village, the majority of which are inherited

through in a patrilineal fashion. Land sales are uncommon as membership in the ritual life of Sukawana is contingent on one's connection to the founders of the town—an outsider has no claims to such a connection. Obligations to family land which in theory “owns’ both the people and their ancestor deities” are further emphasized through the family-specific shrines within the compound, the *sanggah pakaja* and the *sanggah kemulan*⁴. The first of these shrines is located within the house and is a small boxed-shaped platform attached to the wall in the *kaja* direction. Admittedly very simple, it houses the most immediate ancestors of the family and is constantly filled with incense and *canang* from the daily offerings. Outside of this explanation, I received little more data on the purpose and use of the *sanggah pakaja*.

Instead most informants had a stronger knowledge of their *sanggah kemulan*, the small shrine located outside in the *kaja* direction towards Mount Penulisan. In contrast to the stone and concrete *pelinggih*s of Southern Bali, the Bali Aga use dapdap trees to support the three chamber platform. The choice of dapdap lies in its status as sacred and useful in all realms of life, from fertilizer to medicine, and the remarkable ability for an individual branch to take root in the ground. The bamboo-platform is divided into three chambers on a horizontal axis, each designated to male ancestors (*pradana*), female ancestors (*pertiwi*), and the almighty god, Surya, from left to right⁵. Only the area for Surya is uncovered as the other two have an arched bamboo weaving, forming a miniature arcade. In order to support this bamboo structure at least eight dapdap trees are needed, four in front and four in back, and the natural strength of the branches hold it in place.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ I Wayan Daging, personal communication, 17 Nov 2007.

The number of these shrines in the *s. kemulan* depends on the number of married male head of households have passed. For example, in the case of Made Ardana, my homestay father, there was one built upon his marriage and another one next to it from the marriage of his father, Pak Made Kaler. The existence of only these two households implies that previous male generations lived in houses elsewhere in Sukawana—moving to a new house in the village is permissible as long as a new *sangah kemulan* is constructed. Furthermore, the number of shrines within the *kemulan* is usually limited as they are devoted to recently deceased ancestors, or those who the living family still has memory of.

Similar to *sangah kemulan* but established along the wider lens of one patrilineal clan is the *sangah hyang*. Again, the families who descended from this line remember the names of these ancestors, such as a grandfather, but construction is more elaborate as the *sangah hyang* is constructed from stone and wood, with a two-chamber box at the top for the insertion of offerings. These cavities designate the male and female ancestors of recent memory, though a strict knowledge of their names is not kept, nor is it important. The theory across ancestral shrines is that one's deceased family member can only attain deity status through detachment to their living descendants. Whether this means purposefully erasing the memory of a family member from one's mind in a sort of "genealogical amnesia" remains debatable, but the farther removed from the living world or the closer the ancestor is to attaining *moksa*⁶ the more anonymous and consequently, more sacred they become. A mythical aura around ancestor worship makes the practice appear more like prayer to an ancestor god rather than to one's immediate grandfather.

⁶ Detachment to the physical world.

It is this approach one takes when visiting the *sanggah gede*, a shrine courtyard adjacent to the *sanggah hyang*. For Made Ardana, this represented all of his clan's oldest ancestors whose names have long been forgotten. As expected, all of its ±200 members originated from Sukawana and can be traced back through Ardana's male line. Like in *Bali Dataran*, once a man marries his wife she relinquishes her ties to her family's *sanggah kemulan* and adopts that of her husband. While devotion to her original family shrine is allowed, most villagers in Sukawana thought such a practice would be out of the ordinary⁷. Once deceased they would enter the *sanggah* of their husbands and be worshipped by their descendants as evident in the *pertewi* slots of the *sanggah kemulan* and *sanggah hyang*. The *sanggah gede* is one of the few ancestral shrines that coincides with practices in lowland Bali, and it should be noted that ancestor reverence is not limited by any means to the highlands or the Bali Aga—the island as a whole has a religious focus on kinship ties.

At the village level the center of ritual activity in Sukawana occurs in the Pura Bale Agung, a temple complex which contains the characteristic Bali Aga *Bale Lantang* and *Bale Plokayu*. Furthermore, at the *kaja* side stands a small cluster of shrines collectively named the Pura Bendesa and dedicated exclusively to the elite ancestors of Sukawana, the original founders of the village. In many ways the surrounding longhouses attempt to continue the traditions of these founders and in doing so please the ancestor-gods of Sukawana.

⁷ Ni Ketut Suladri, personal communication, 28 Nov 2007. Her responses on the role of women in Sukawana were intriguing in that she laughed at the thought of females having political power in the village. Because it was tradition that women have a supportive role she has never questioned such gender role structures.

The *Bale Lantang* can best be described as a longhouse where the twenty-three highest ranking male elders meet during the full or dark moon sitting in two rows down the left and right sides of the bale. Rank is determined by time of marriage and age, the earlier one weds and the older a man is the higher his rank. The lowest rank, that at the *kelod* end of the bale include four members of the *klion desa* followed by four *jero pengelanan*, four *jero penakehan*, four *jero singgukan*, one *kesetdon*, four *jero bau*, and two *jero kubayan* at the top of the ladder. All of these men have become sacred and purified through their duties to the village, and one cannot retire until one's spouse has died or their last child has wed⁸. Of note is the seating of the two *jero kubayan* facing *kelod* and towards the rest of the members, thus allowing them to lead discussions on village decisions and ritual prayer to the ancestors who are said to take residence in the enclosed area at the tip of the bale. Furthermore, all those sitting on the left side of the bale add the title of "Tengen" to their name while those on the right are "Kiwa" according to their descent based on the original founders of Sukawana⁹.

The wives of these twenty-three men have an important role in the Pura Bale Agung as well for it is they who sit in the *Bale Plokayu* and make large scale offerings for the five main ceremonies of the lunar year: that at Pura Utus¹⁰, Pura Penulisan on *sasih kapat*, Pura Bale Agung on *purnama kelima*, Pura Puseh on *sasih kedasa*, and Pura Kayoan on *sasih kasa*¹¹. Additionally, the *canang* prepared by females are made in theory directed upwards towards the deities while those made by men, such as water

⁸ According to I Wayan Daging, everyone wants to become a member of the *Bale Lantang* because of the respect given to the elders. However, one is obligated to continue their duties while they are "shaking with age" until they are eligible to retire.

⁹ This myth will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁰ This temple is particularly interesting as it shared between the villages of Sukawana and Teja Kula.

¹¹ Ni Ketut Suladri, pc, 28 Nov 2007.

buffalo sacrifices during the rainy season, are directed downwards towards the spirits of the earth. On the whole, it appears that males make most offerings pertaining to food items while women deal with more ornate, though less spiritually powerful preparations. A set of four younger men, that is, those around their thirties, called the *Jero Saya* have the duty of preparing and dividing the ceremonial meals for the men of the *Bale Lantang* and the women of the *Bale Plokayu*. Based on my observations during the full moon meeting of the *Bale Lantang* food, *malang*, for men consists of a solid cube of rice and porosan, a traditional Balinese plant parallel to betel quid, which is accompanied by holy coconut palm wine distributed by the *Jero Saya* into banana leaf cups. Women, on the other hand, have a slightly more complex meal with a cube of rice along with grains of steamed rice, an egg, and beans¹². More peculiar was the absence of the female members of the *Bale Plokayu* during the meeting of the male elders—food was prepared for the women but the men of the *Bale Lantang*, after finishing their own ritual, moved to sit in the *Bale Plokayu*, but this time switched rows so that “Tengen” now sat on the right side of the longhouse. Subsequently, after a ten-minute meeting, the men packed up the meal to bring home to their wives. Apparently this was done as a convenience.

The reason for classifying the *Bale Lantang* and *Bale Plokayu* as ancestral architecture is because of their purpose in continuing the traditions of the founders of Sukawana. As mentioned by a male elder, “I am now on the threshold to the realm of the ancestors, and must look ahead and not backward. I must no longer pay attention to private ambitions, and I don’t”¹³. These longhouses indicate the importance of village

¹² The reasoning behind this difference between the *malang* of each sex was frequently unknown by informants and most satisfactorily explained as a “tradition”.

¹³ Reuter, Thomas. *The House of Our Ancestors: Precedence and Dualism in Highland Balinese Society*. (Leiden, KITLV Press, 2002), 65.

prosperity over personal goals and the essential need to respect the rituals of generations past. Since being a member of either one of these bales yields purification, it is implied that after death one will become deified. Although not used exclusively to pray to ancestors like the *sanggah gede*, these buildings represent the material constructions made by the original people of Sukawana. This characteristic alone qualifies them as artifacts made by present-day ancestor gods.

On the largest interface of the *banua*, Reuter best describes its relation to the *desa* as “co-dependent and mutually constitutive”—the conglomerate that forms the cooperative exists a separate village entities.¹⁴ Likewise, “the origin and status of individual villages and their local temples *vis a vis* the outside world is determined by their positioning within the regional context of a domain”¹⁵. The origin histories of the Kintamani ridge region have an essential role in the obligations of Pura Pucak Penulisan’s member communities; without an agreement on the sequence of settlements across the highlands the Bali Aga would exist as isolated towns. The placement of the temple in the origin narratives of the communities in its *banua* further reinforces the validity of the stories with physical proof of the accomplishments of ancestors.

Pura Pucak Penulisan has been called a variety of names in the past, including Pura Sukawana, a clear indication of its connection to the surrounding village and Bale Aga heritage¹⁶. Dated around the year 933 Saka, the temple represents an older style of pura layout in three distinct terraces: *jabaan*, *jaba tengah*, and *jeroaan* at the *kaja-kangin*

¹⁴ Ibid, 41.

¹⁵ Ibid, 41.

¹⁶ Kempers, Bernet. *Monumental Bali: Introduction to Balinese Archaeology & Guide to the Monuments* (Singapore: Periplus, 1991), 165.

direction on the top of the mountain¹⁷. The first is designated as a place for sacred dances and informal gathering, while the second includes the kitchen area and the *bale gongs* of the forty-eight member villages of the temple's *banua* network, the foremost of which are Sukawana, Kintamani, Selulung, and Bantang. The assignment of the main duties to these four communities is based on their precedence as the first Bali Aga settlements in the area; the older the village the greater its responsibilities. Finally, at the top level lies the most sacred enclosure which serves as an outdoor museum for the dozens of stone statues. As conveyed to me by the workers of Pura Penulisan, the temple was built by the Bali Kuna, or "ancient Balinese", and the remnants of their religious activity is present in the wrapping of stones in white cloth and a cemara tree in poleng. The statues are dated to the period of the sculptor of Empu Bega¹⁸ with an inscription of his name and the year 804 Saka on one of the linggas. In general, the artifacts of the upper terrace are dated from 800-1100 CE and grouped according to representation; the linggas and occasional yonis to the kauh side while representations of ancient kings and queens are located under bales to the kangin. The same height of the royal couples signals an equal distribution of power to the sexes, and according to Reuter they align with personages of the "Warmadewa and later dynasties of Balinese kings"¹⁹. Like the founders of Sukawana, these ancient rulers have become deified ancestral spirits, proof of which can be found in inscriptions at Pura Penulisan. White cloth wrappings put on by the Jero Pengalanan of Sukawana cover the carvings during every major ceremony of the year, the practice of which indicates the holy nature of the objects. Pura Penulisan,

¹⁷ There are more than three physical terraces but they are grouped into these three categories. I Wayan Daging, pc, 17 Nov 2007.

¹⁸ It is probable that not all statues were made by Empu Bega based on stylistic carving differences seen in the statues of royalty.

¹⁹ (Reuter 2002, *House of Our Ancestors*, 9).

through the persistence of traditional rituals and the honoring of ancient statues of ancestor-gods illustrates the importance of origins and kinship at the highest level of Bali Aga society, the *banua*.

With a grasp of the shrines of the house, village, and *banua* of Sukawana, it will be useful to further understand the history behind their construction through a review of origin narratives put forth by many of my informants.

Chapter 3

ORIGIN STORIES AND THEIR RELATION TO SHRINE ARCHITECTURE

Part of the life of a shrine is based on what it represents to the society and its situation within local history. In the case of Sukawana, origin stories are inseparable from shrine architecture as explain who built them and why. Ancestral architecture not only implies that ancestors made a structure but that their present-day descendants worship them through them, using a shrine as a medium for communication.

The first story I heard from Pak Gede Suma, a sixty-two year old farmer in the valley of Sukawana. In the past he explained that two brothers and one woman—the older sibling's wife—came to Bali from the Majapahit dynasty in Java in order to deliver onions and garlic to Dalem Balingkang as a gift. On their journey they stopped where Sukawana's current *Bale Agung* stands and fell asleep. Upon waking up they continued on their way to Dalem Balingkang and came to Pura Buungan before realizing that they had forgotten the onion and garlic where they had fallen asleep. When they returned to the spot they found that the onion and garlic had already started growing. Too scared see the king of Balingkang without their gift, the three stayed in the area for three months

before harvesting the plants. At last when they met the king he asked if the onions were from Java, to which they responded no, that they came from a forest in Bali.

Subsequently the king told the three that they must live where the onions were cultivated and build a house there called the *tebakauh* building in West Sukawana. While living there the younger brother saw a cloud of smoke and stumbled upon an orphan Bali Aga woman who, with the permission of his brother, he wed and settled with in Banjar Tanah Daha. Additionally, the land from which the Bali Aga woman was from was named Banjar Jero and located in the west part of the valley. The two couples had children who started the lineages known as kraman tuaan from the older brother and kraman nyomanan from the younger brother. Accordingly, this determines one's seating in the *Bale Lantang* as all tuaan members sit on the left while nyomanan descendants sit down the right side. Thus, all members of Sukawana claim origin along one of these lines. Pak Made Ardana, for example, classifies himself as tuaan while Pak Gede Suma is part of the nyomanan family.

Other informants validated that that Java had a strong influence in Bali, not only through the importation of Majapahit customs, but through geographical orientation as well. For instance, Made Kaler mentioned that many temples in Bali used to represent mountains in Java as Mount Penulisan used to be seen as Gunung Kahuripan. In the eyes of Sabaraka, a priest and teacher in Sukawana, Java does have a presence in Balinese history as it is through there that the first people of Bali, the Bali Mula, arrived from southeastern China when it was connected to Indonesia. The Bali Mula existed separately from the Bali Aga, the people Sabaraka claims arrived in Bali and intermarried with the Bali Mula, bringing with them a more advanced form of civilization and the

tradition of ancestor worship. Additionally, he knew of a story similar to that of Gede Suma in which a woman and three male siblings started the village of Sukawana and who now reside in the Pura Bendesa²⁰ as ancestor spirits. A theory of the term “Bali Aga” was also explained as “Bali” meaning “original” and “Ga” meaning “gone or foreign”²¹ Consequently, the amalgamation of a local indigenous people and a newcomer is implied in the name Bali Aga. Should the story of the Bali Mula intermixing with the strangers from Java, this may have validity indeed.

History according to Mangku Ngidep, another resident of Sukawana, also includes Dalem Gelgel who, in the past, were related to the Bali Mula of the Kintamani ridge region. As two cultural entities at odds, the leaders of each party decided to unite in celebrating their common ancestral heritage, thus ending the war between them. In fact, the *pasikan* shrine in Sukawana’s Pura Bendesa stands as a reminder of this uniting of the Bali Mula with the Gelgels, further implying that the descendants of Ida Dalem, the Gelgel king, intermarried with the people of Sukawana. Some of my informants, like Jaya, a college student, noted the Gelgel tribe as his ancestors and that they too joined the pantheon of ancestor-gods in Sukawana’s Pura Bendesa.

In each origin story I listened to a common theme could be extracted—the insistence on kinship ties forming the society of Sukawana and influencing the traditions of the village. From the *tuaan* and *nyomanan* labels translating into seating positions in the *Bale Agung* to the intermingling of locals with outsiders in forming the *Pura Bendesa*, each ancestral shrine has a complex story surrounding its history. At the house level the *tuaan* and *nyomanan* distinction is still made in the *sanggah kemulan* and the

²⁰ The image of lineage if created through this name as “Benda” means “rope” and “sa” means “belief”. Sabaraka, pc, 18 Nov 2007.

²¹ Ibid

sangghah gede helps to reinforce branching from the *Pura Bendesa*. The *sangghah hyang* also follows such lineage patterns, but its origins are unknown as it is a fairly new addition to Bali Aga society²². Across all interviews Pura Penulisan was seen as a monumental achievement of their ancestors, the Bali Mula, and the carvings, linggas, and stone and tree wrappings confirm this belief. A *candra sangkala* inscription at Pura Penulisan may even point to the complex's construction from 825-830CE.

However, how much of these origin narratives is fiction? Although a story is a myth, can it still be adopted as a fact and construed as the truth? Does it matter? Understanding how local history is constructed may point to an answer.

Chapter 4

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST'S PERSPECTIVE: THE AUSTRONESIAN CHARACTER OF THE BALI AGA

As the origin stories of Sukawana have shown, a great deal of cultural amalgamation has occurred in the highlands of Bali. The logistics of village traditions depend on a cohesive belief in historical events, and there is a blurred line between what constitutes fact and fiction. Local truth, especially regarding kinship ties, heavily influences how the Bali Aga position themselves within the context of Balinese history and in connection with the Bali Mula. With these hegemonic factors in place, should one point out the flaws in their stories, thereby questioning their beliefs?

Probably not. While Gede Suma's insistence on his ancestors coming from Majapahit Java does not align with the inscriptions and statues—objects allegedly made by his ancestors—found at Pura Penulisan, my duty is not to interfere with their lives, but

²²Mangku Ngidep, personal communication, 26 Nov 2007.

rather listen to their stories. After all, his description of what is factual to him still constitutes valuable data. A more useful approach might lie in not disqualifying his beliefs but rather understanding what has led him to have these ideas, to see how truth in Sukawana is locally constructed. As Clifford Geertz comments, ethnographical research “has become curious (or dubious, or exploitative, or oppressive, or brutal—the adjectives escalate) because most anthropologists now writing find themselves in a profession that was largely formed in an historical context—the Colonial Encounter—of which they have no experience and want none”²³ As an outsider to the village of Sukawana, I attempt to stray from projecting judgments upon the culture studied; questioning the history and origin narratives of my informants would only further continue the “Colonial Encounter” Geertz mentions. My presence certainly has an impact on the village and they will most likely remember me as the American university student asking about origin stories and ancestor worship, but ideally I should not interfere with the traditions in place or confront villagers.

Nonetheless, outside of the field it should be noted how local history compares with current anthropological thought. All informants believed that their ancestors came from Java, and some even had knowledge of the Austronesian expansion out of Taiwan and into the Indonesian archipelago and to Bali by way of Java. This fact alone supports all of the origin stories of Sukawana—it is the details of why they came and what they did that remains debatable. The ambiguous nature of past events is what allows myths to exist, and the more fantastical the story the more mystical history becomes and the

²³ Geertz, Clifford. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 134.

greater the divide between the time of the ancestor-gods and their present-day descendants. With this in mind, what can be said of the prehistory of Bali?

Linguistic and archaeological research points to Bali being settled by Austonesian peoples who first migrated out of Southeast Asia to Taiwan and the Philippines before a tripartite split into Western Indonesia, Eastern Indonesia, and Oceania around 4000-5000BP²⁴. Linguistically, Balinese falls into the category of Western Malayo-Polynesian languages. It is this common link of ancestral heritage that serves as the departure point for the second part of this paper—the comparison of ancestor worship and totemism in Bali and Polynesia. The similarities are striking, and the mutual cultural and genealogical background may be reason why.

Chapter 5

ATUA OF THE AGA: ANCESTOR-GODS IN CONCEPT

Entering Sukawana I wondered how much of a Bali Mula culture still persisted and how, if at all, ancestor worship in the central highlands compared to that of Polynesia. Polynesia encompasses a vast expanse of the Pacific forming a triangular region from Fiji in the West to Hawai'i in the North and New Zealand in the South. While the shrine architecture of the *Pura Bale Agung* or the *sanggah kemulan* does not exist in Polynesia, the practice of praying to one's predecessors certainly does through the concept of *atua*. Furthermore, the Bali Mula tradition—which survives across the island—of wrapping sacred trees in *poleng* and stones in white cloth parallels the wrapping of spiritually powerful, or *tapu* objects in Polynesia.

²⁴ Angela Hobart, Urs Ramseyer and Albert Leemann, *The Peoples of Bali* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 17.

In the past the definition of *atua* has been glossed over by Polynesian anthropologists, like those of the “Colonial Encounter”, as the indigenous word for “gods”. Linguistically it has been proposed that the derivation of *atua* comes from “tua”, the common Oceanic word meaning “old” “with the addition of the prefixed *a*, the ‘Personal Article’”²⁵. In the Indonesian language a similar meaning can be extracted as “tua” again refers to older generations, particularly in the term for parents, *orang-tua*. Furthermore, it is possible that it has a “connection with the adjectival form *matua*, which means elder, ripe, ancient, and which, with qualifying words in Polynesian languages, means parent, uncle, aunt, etc.”²⁶. On the whole, the linguistic breakdown of *atua* implies that the word implies “family” and “old”, which together can be summed up as “ancestor”.

In practice the word can be interpreted as the charged term “gods” if interpreted from a Western lens, but more appropriate definitions include “ancestor”, “ghost”, and “spirit”. As A.M. Hocart notes, “*atua* is a dead man” and parallel in meaning to the Fijian word, *kalou*, which Basil Thompson defines as “Ancestor-Gods” due to their connection with deities who once existed on Earth in human form²⁷. Judging from ethnographical data from Polynesia, *atua* has a strong connection with the ancestors of the Polynesians who settled the islands across the Eastern Pacific. Like the Bali Aga of Sukawana, Polynesians have a cultural memory of their founders traveling from their original homeland in the West, *Hawaiki*. While the Balinese do not, to my knowledge, have a name for the origins of their ancestors, it has been shown that they remember

²⁵ Walter G. Ivens, “The Polynesian Word *Atua*: Its Derivation and Use,” *Man* 24 (1924):115.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 115

²⁷ Basil H. Thomson, “The *Kalou-Ve* (Ancestor-Gods) of the Fijians,” *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 24 (1895):340.

migration to Bali by way of the Austronesians through Java. It is my belief that the *atua* of Polynesia are the equivalent of deified ancestors found in Sukawana based on its etymological connection with ancestors and use to refer to spirits or ghosts. Conceptually the family gods to whom the Bali Aga and Polynesians pray are similar because of the implication that after a person has died they will eventually cross the threshold into becoming a god. As Hocart argues “Men that excelled in their lifetime and principally the chiefs . . . died and became some of the *atua*”²⁸ In Sukawana this may mean a soul transferring from the *sanggha gede* to the *Pura Bendesa* through a symbolic cremation ceremony while in Polynesia it can refer to the time one’s soul enters *Hawaiki*. The process of evolving into an ancestral spirit and the way in which they are worshipped differs between these two regions, but practices aside the definition of *atua* aligns with the deified ancestors of the Bali Aga.

Of note is the ability for *atua* to enter any physical medium, including those of animals, plants, and stones. These mediums “appear actually to have been substitutes for a person, to represent the god . . .but the image becomes a symbol in a way the person cannot: the Matquesan images are definitely phallic symbols, as is appropriate in a cult in which the Progenitor is primarily thought of as procreator”²⁹. This may explain a dual purpose in the wrappings of linggas at Pura Penulisan both as symbols of Siva and phallic objects connection to the fertility of one’s ancestors in producing descendants. It was explained by Sabaraka that the statues of Empu Bega were made to represent royal couples after their death in order to worship them as ancestor deities³⁰. As a result, it is possible to consider the statues of the upper terrace as mediums for ancestors to enter, a

²⁸ A.M. Hocart, “Spirit Animals,” *Man* 15 (1915) 148.

²⁹ Craighill Handy, “Perspectives in Polynesian Religion,” *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 49 (?): 318.

³⁰ Sabaraka, personal communication, 18 Nov 2007.

medium so to speak, during a visitor's prayer. Through offerings and prayer the statue becomes more than a carved piece of stone, it becomes enlivened and filled with the spirit of the *atua*, or ancestor god, to whom the ritual is directed.

Given that the natural objects of stones and plants have a sacred power across Bali, it is little surprise that the Bali Mula practiced nature worship. According to Sabaraka, the original Balinese had a dualist pantheon consisting of Father Akasa, or Sky Father, and Earth Mother who were worshipped via totems of trees and stones. In Polynesia as well, this concept existed as Rangi and Papa (Sky Father and Earth Mother, respectively) in New Zealand and Wakea and Papa in Hawai'i. The overlapping of ancestor worship and parent deities of the world is certainly more than a coincidence; the Austronesian culture of Bali and Polynesia must explain why. The argument that these practices naturally developed in each region must be disqualified. Rather, the common link between the Bali Mula and original Polynesians in ancestral heritage should point to a culture which was brought with their migrations and put into practice. Depending on the local environment and the ideas of village leaders, the culture then evolved to adapt to its environment. For example, wet-rice agriculture in Bali has strong connections to Dewi Sri while in Polynesia, where rice farming cannot exist, tubers such as taro have a sacred significance as the primary form of subsistence. In essence, the Austronesians brought with them the framework for their deities in nature worship and applied them to their newly settled land.

In both regions it appears that ancestor gods exist as a combination of "hero and totem" as it is the leadership and integrity of past generations that allows them to be venerated as deities. In combination with sacred statues and stones, they may take form

in whatever medium they choose, a medium which is subsequently designated as sacred by the worshipper. How? By wrapping them in *poleng* and white cloth.

Chapter 6

THE WRAPPING OF *TAPU*: ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN PRACTICE

Tapu has traditionally been defined as inherent spiritual power, and “persons, things, and places that are either sacred or psychically corrupt . . . are *tapu* or indicted”³¹ Thus, it can refer to power that has a positive or negative connotation, the menstruation of women being the most frequently cited example of impure *tapu*. Blood in any sense has notions of pollution in Bali and Polynesia, and as a consequence it is contained by prohibiting women from entering temples during their period or preventing them from entering holy or public spaces. However, *tapu* in a positive light can be found within spiritually powerful objects, including the staffs of chiefs, artistic representations of gods, trees, and rocks. As noted in the discussion on totemism, these media allow the once human ancestor gods, or *atua*, to enter them and embody the characteristics of the medium. However this *tapu* is dangerous if not contained, and stories of illness as a result of uncontained *tapu* are prevalent in Polynesia³².

So how can one control *tapu*? The theory of Alfred Gell that wrappings or enclosure of objects thought to be spiritually powerful allows their energy to be contained. In Polynesia this usually exists as cloth coverings of anthropomorphic images of gods or objects used by *atua* during their human life. In Bali Mula practice, these

³¹ (Handy ?, 319)

³² Ibid.

cloth wrappings of sacred *banyan* trees and stones serve the same purpose as it is believed that they espouse a magical character and should not be disturbed. Today this survives as a remnant of the original Bali Mula culture, and it can be found in temples across the island. In Pura Penulisan, for example, a large cemara tree near the kitchen is wrapped in a meter-wide *poleng* behind an altar of stones wrapped in white cloth. Furthermore, the Jero Pengalanan or Sukawana has the duty to dress each of the statues in the upper terrace in white cloth, thus giving them what appears to be a white sarong, but also marking them as holy. Cloth coverings take away the ability of an object to be seen by the worshipper, but also prevents the inherent power from escaping—the cloth is like a impermeable barrier for *tapu*. Not being able to see the entire sacred object yields an a mystical aura around them for it means full exposure is kept from the viewer—there is an element of the unknown in wondering what lies below the cloth. Consequently, more power is awarded to the spirit medium as it not only has the dangerous characteristic of *tapu* but also the ability to shroud itself from the viewer through wrappings. Though the coverings serve to protect humans from the ills of *tapu*, they also add to the magical essence of the object through making them unseen.

CONCLUSION

This ethnography of ancestral architecture in Sukawana provided me with insight on how physical shrines function within the conceptual framework of ancestor worship and kinship ties within the Bali Aga community. Through divisions made at the house, village, and *banua* level, the people of Sukawana have knowledge of their genealogical origins and understand that each domain is interrelated with another, creating a sense of

common predecessors across the Bali Aga community of the Kintamani Ridge region. Origin narratives play an important role in constructing local history and the fantastical nature of the founders of Sukawana. Through mention of architecture still standing in the village today, like the Pura Bale Agung, these stories gain credibility in connecting past and present through artifacts and archaeological remains.

With anthropological research pointing to an Austronesian past of Bali and Polynesia, overlapping characteristics in ancestor worship and the tracing of origins may be explained as a result of a common cultural heritage before the linguistic split in the Philippines. Origin stories or myths can also demonstrate how migration patterns play a role in local history and belief of the original homeland of one's ancestors. Not to be disqualified immediately as myth, it is instead worth the effort to understand discrepancies in origin stories and understand how the oral tradition has evolved over many generations, thus revising itself into the most plausible scenario. It is similar to natural selection as seen through the oral tradition—only the best, more believable qualities survive into the present-day.

In the same fashion the Bali Mula practice of wrapping spiritually powerful trees, rocks, and statues connects to the Polynesian concept of *atua*, or family ancestral spirits, taking residence in inanimate objects as a medium for worship. Furthermore, the cloth coverings signal a need to contain the *tapu*, or inherent power, in these objects and in doing so create an element of the unknown of what lies within the bounded media. In taking a stance that cross-cultural comparisons of Austronesian societies—albeit their great physical separation—I have argued that similar practices of ancestor worship, the role of genealogical heroes in origin stories, and wrappings of sacred objects reflects

more than a coincidental evolution. Balinese and Polynesian society have linguistic and genetic ties, factors which must have played a role in how local history and belief systems developed. Cultures exist in the present as living things, continuously adapting to new environments and adopting the ideas of outside influences; to ignore the similarities between two regions of the world would be to deny their participation in cultural exchange and label them as isolated examples.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

It should be clear that I support cross-cultural studies, even among two distinctly different areas of the globe. With regard to this ethnography, looking at the early culture of Austronesians in Taiwan may support the theory that Balinese and Polynesian similarities depart from this common heritage. Additionally, how is ancestor worship and the tracing of origins performed in Micronesia and Melanesia—the Pacific Islands between Indonesia and Polynesia? Polynesians certainly passed through this area during their Eastward journey, perhaps parts of their culture were adopted by lowland New Guinea.

Review of the true history of Bali certainly must be done to validate the truth of the details of the origin stories told above. A further investigation of the relationship between fact and myth in may lead to a better understanding of the construction of local history. Additionally, the adoption of Hindu beliefs in Sukawana and their adaptation to Bali Aga beliefs would be a profitable study.

APPENDICES



Figure 1: The oldest part of the Bali Aga village of Sukawana perched on the slopes of Pura Pucak Penulisan. On clear mornings I could see Singaraja and the mountain tops of Lombok.



Figure 2: The *Bale Lantang* located within the Pura Bale Agung of Sukawana. The 23 highest ranking male elders meet here every full and dark moon.



Figure 3: The *sanggah kemulan* of Pak Made Ardana. The dapdap trees support the three chamber platform designating male ancestors, female ancestors, and Surya (uncovered) from left to right.



Figure 4: The *poleng* wrapping of a cemara tree in Pura Pucak Penulisan. This practice may help contain the spiritual power of the tree and mark it as sacred.



Figure 5: The ritual meals for the 23 elders of Sukawana's *Bale Lintang* before a full moon meeting. Each portion is sized according to rank.



Figure 6: The *sanggah hyang* of Pak Made Ardana. It enshrines the ancestors of his clan whose names are still remembered.



Figure7: Statues of royal king and queens found in the upper terrace of Pura Penulisan. Ancestral deities may enter these as a medium during prayer.



Figure 8: The view from my house in Sukawana. Looking to the East, Mt. Batur, Mt. Abang, and Gunung Agung align. Unlike *Bali Dataran*, the Bali Aga community orients *kaja* as towards Mt. Penulisan, not Gunung Agung.

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GLOSSARY

- Atua—ancestral family spirits commonly found in Polynesia, they can use inanimate objects as a medium during a worshipper's prayer.
- Bali Dataran—refers to lowland Bali and its society which reflects influence from the Majapahit Kingdom of Java
- Bale Agung—temple complex in the heart of the oldest part of Sukawana, it includes the ritual longhouses used by the highest ranking elders of the village
- Bale Lantang—longhouse in Bali Aga villages used for full and dark moon meetings of the highest ranking male elders. Seating is divided down two rows along the left and right side according to rank.
- Bale Plokayu—longhouse in Bali Aga villages used by the wives of the men in the *Bale Lantang* as a meeting place primarily used to make offerings.
- Banua—a regional alliance of Bali Aga village who cooperate during rituals around a central temple and claim common ancestral heritage.
- Mount Penulisan—site of Pura Pucak Penulisan, the holiest temple for Sukawana, and the mountain which represents *kaja*, or “towards the mountains”, in the Bali Aga communities of the Kintamani Ridge.
- Poleng—black and white checkered cloth used for sacred tree wrappings which embodies the Balines dualistic concept of *rwa bhineda*.
- Tapu—spiritual power inherent in sacred or polluted objects found in Polynesia. Usually contained by cloth wrappings and/or tattoos.