A "Ethnography", writing about the others, has until recently been a genre which is supposed to throw light on anthropological investigations. Ever since its ‘post-colonial turn’, however, ethnography has become quite different from what went before, as we have now realized that we cannot assume other cultures are absolutely different and detached from those of the anthropologist’s. As a result, we have been condemned for having eroticized other cultures as commodities for Western consumption, it follows that ethnography, in a conventional sense, is simply impossible. What is meant by the ethnography of Balinese adat (custom), however, is not writing about the Balinese traditional way of life, but about how Balinese people interpret their way of life in terms of its historical background.

The End of Ethnography?

By Kiyoshi Nakamura

The requirement to have faith in the only God is stated in the first article of Indonesia’s Five National Principles, Pancasila, which the New Order regime exalted as the sole foundation of the nation (Pancasatrus). This not only was it officially sanctioned, it is also imposed on every Indonesian citizen, thus making it obligatory to be a follower of one of the religions approved by the government. Religion, in view of this legislation, is also a state-recognized social institution, thus making religious beliefs and practices part of the state apparatus. Religion in Bali was in a precarious position directly after the Reformasi and Balinese Hindu intellectuals had to strive for official recognition of Balinese Hinduism. In order to convince the Ministry of Religion of the fact that Balinese religious beliefs should be recognized as a separate religion, in 1988, they had to present the official name of the religion, its holy book, its rituals, and its philosophy to the Ministry. Having established the Hindu organization Pusaka Hindu Dharmawangsa Indonesia (The Indonesian Council of Hinduism: PHDI), and using it as their principal agency, Balinese Hindu intellectuals had been making various attempts to rationalize Balinese Hinduism. To take a recent example, in the 1991 PHDI congress held in Surakarta, it was decided that every Indonesian Hindu should perform a worship called trisandhya (a three-times-a-day worship). It should be noted that this very fact that such a decision was made, suggests that the three-times-a-day prayer had rarely (or even never) been carried out before. I myself have never seen the Balinese villagers perform it.

The classification of rituals into five categories, called puncak yadnya, seems to be another of the intellectuals’ efforts at rationalizing ‘religion’. Various books have inadequate the public with their own version of puncak yadnya. On the other hand, some rituals are rarely, if ever, mentioned under the rubric of agama (religion) as Balinese Hindu intellectuals dismiss certain rituals as adat. In the fieldwork, I noticed that there are three different types of rituals in villages in the Western Karangasem region. Private rituals that only concern individuals or families include celebrating the anniversaries of family or clan temples and the ceremonies of the life cycle such as marriages, funerals, and other rites of passage. Village or communal rituals comprise the rituals in the village temple (including both temple festivals and agrarian rites) and rites for the purification of the village territory. The religious rituals are characterized as more or less part-Balinese and sanctioned by authorities such as the PDHI, governmental agencies, and leading Balinese intellectuals.

Challenges for adat

Religious rituals must be construed to modern religion while other customs and practices are excluded in adat. This has serious consequences, although it is quite understandable considering the Balinese struggle to obtain the official recognition of their religion. Its official recognition has been made in the form of Balinese Hinduism more as a part of state apparatus than a belief. Whereas the Balinese understand their culture as an integral unity of Hinduism (agama) and custom (adat) Hinduism and sanctioned by authorities such as the PDHI, governmental agencies, and leading Balinese intellectuals.

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References


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