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Nature and the Spirit: *Tri Hita Karana*, Sacred Artistic Practices, and Musical Ecology in Bali

Hao Huang¹ and Joti Rockwell²

In July 2019, we visited Bali with our colleagues Melinda Herrold-Menzies and Zhihe Wang as part of an EnviroLab Asia project entitled “Nature and the Spirit: Sacred Artistic Practices and Ecology in Bali and China.”³ For the part of the project involving Bali, we were especially interested in the island’s millennium-old *subak* irrigation system, its music, and how spiritual practices forge connections between art and nature. Bali is notable for the degree to which music, dance, and visual art permeate everyday life— a result of historically rooted and continuously evolving religious philosophies and rituals. With this context in mind, we wondered what role the arts play, and can play, in addressing environmental concerns.

For the two of us, whose professional training is in music performance and scholarship, learning more about Balinese music, history, and culture offered the possibility of moving beyond some of the compartmentalized modes of understanding with which we had grown accustomed. Rather than looking for specialized and isolated solutions to modern environmental problems, we wanted to know more about traditional approaches to life that can connect seemingly disparate things. What does a thousand-year old irrigation system have to do with present-day music? How can religious philosophy provide a framework for environmentalism? How might the creation of art sustain the natural world?

We found it difficult—indeed, practically impossible—to separate the old from the new in Bali. In conversation with artists and members of local communities, we encountered the concept of *tri hita karana*, which appears as an age-old principle but is of a recent vintage. While witnessing and participating in religious ceremonies, we learned about the centrality of water in traditional Balinese life, as well as strains on the island’s current supply as a result of misguided agricultural impositions and mass tourism. And by interacting with old musical friends and teachers as well as meeting new ones, we learned more about the value of the performing arts in an increasingly connected and challenged world.

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³ During this project, we benefitted from institutional support, logistical efforts, knowledgeable suggestions and feedback, and gracious gestures of hospitality and friendship. For these myriad contributions, we would like to thank EnviroLab Asia, Karin Mak, Melinda Herrold-Menzies, Zhihe Wang, the Scripps College Department of Music, the Pomona College Department of Music, the Pomona College Humanities Studio, Bill Alves, Julie Simon, Nyoman Danu, Gusti Komin, Richard Foss, Emiko Susilo, Dewa Berata, Judy Mitoma, Çudamani, Nanik Wenten, Nyoman Wenten, and Char Miller.

In this article, we will provide a synopsis of the principle of *tri hita karana* and its relation to the *subak* system. We consider these concepts in the context of Balinese Hinduism, the dominant religion on the island and the foundation for many of the artistic practices of historical and modern Balinese life. We then ask how this spiritual philosophy and mode of social organization, both of which offer ideas about environmental stewardship, relate to music. As we found, Bali is home to musical ecologies that draw inventive and lasting connections among people, sacred traditions, and nature.

Tri Hita Karana and Subak

In 2012, the World Heritage Committee inscribed “Cultural Landscape of Bali Province: the *Subak* System as a Manifestation of the *Tri Hita Karana* Philosophy,” a revised version of a 2008 proposal, on UNESCO’s World Heritage List. This move designated five Balinese sites, which include temples and rice terraces that have been managed for centuries by farming collectives called *subaks*, to be of global cultural importance. Among the ten criteria the committee considers for inclusion on the World Heritage List, the *subak* cultural landscape satisfied three of them:

- “bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared”
- “be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change”
- “be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.”⁴

The “Statement of Outstanding Universal Value” adopted by the committee gave the following wording for why the first criterion listed above was met: “The cultural tradition that shaped the landscape of Bali, since at least the 12th century, is the ancient philosophical concept of *Tri Hita Karana*.”⁵

⁴ UNESCO, “Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention,” World Heritage Centre (July 2012), 20-21. <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/opguide12-en.pdf>. The criteria as currently worded appear here: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>

⁵ UNESCO, Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 36th Session, WHC-12/36.COM/8B (11 May 2012), 24. <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/2012/whc12-36com-8B-en.pdf>



Pura Taman Ayun, an 18th-century water temple and one of UNESCO's five designated sites (photograph: Joti Rockwell)

In codifying the relationship between *subak* landscapes and *tri hita karana* for a global audience, the 2012 UNESCO inclusion suggests a particular kind of narrative in which an “ancient” religious idea provides a foundation for socio-agricultural practices that hold universal value for the modern world. UNESCO regards cultural heritage as a unique legacy from the past that can be experienced in the present and that ought to be preserved and passed on to future generations. This position has problematic implications and paradoxical effects, since the mass tourism engendered by UNESCO designation threatens that which the designation is attempting to protect. As Andrew McGraw has argued with respect to music, institutions such as UNESCO have the ability to transform the ontological status of cultural expressions “from gift to commodity.”⁶ UNESCO’s global focus on “official heritage” valorizes culture as having an intrinsic universal value that transcends local attachments, and that can potentially be profited from outside of these attachments. Rather than a bounded and commodified concept of official heritage, we lean toward thinking of heritage as a process of interpretation that is ongoing:

⁶ Andrew Clay McGraw, *Radical Traditions: Reimagining Culture in Balinese Contemporary Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 132.

Heritage... is a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present, and the sites themselves are cultural tools that can facilitate, but are not necessarily vital for, this process.⁷

If one regards the cultural heritage represented by and expressed through Bali's *subak* landscapes as more of a process rather than an officialized object, then the ostensible philosophical source of this process bears investigation. *Tri hita karana* is perhaps best thought of as a syncretic form of "modern" and "traditional" Balinese sensibilities, a cultural-theological manifestation that reflects dynamics of shaping and reshaping ways of life, rather than a timeless and essential Balinese philosophy. *Tri hita karana* draws from the traditional Hindu cosmology of *tri loka*: *swah*, the upper world of deities; *bhuwah*, the intermediate world of human society; and *bhur*, the lower world of demons. These levels of existence converge in daily life, populated by many spirits who must be regularly appeased with ceremony and ritual. The Balinese arts, including painting, dance and music, constitute sacred offerings within this context that make the island safe and balanced for human life.

Sometimes abbreviated in the literature as "THK," *tri hita karana* loosely translates as "the three causes of happiness" (*tri* = three; *hita* = happiness or prosperity; and *karana* = causes or paths). It advocates positive relations on three levels: between humans and deities, among humans, and between humans and the environment. Echoing UNESCO's statement, Thomas Buttery (2012) has somewhat misleadingly explained that "*Tri Hita Karana* is an ancient Balinese philosophy which stands for Three Steps to Prosperity."⁸ This common notion that *Tri Hita Karana* is an age-old Balinese tradition needs to be historically qualified, since the concept as such was proffered roughly a half century ago by an influential Balinese military official who directed the island's main arts academy. Wayan Mertha Sutedja (1934-2016), who led the Indonesian Academy of Dance (ASTI) in Denpasar (now the Indonesian Institute of the Arts, or ISI), is recognized for introducing this conceptual framework at the 1966 conference of the Board for the Struggle of the Balinese Hindu Community (*Badan Perjuangan Umat Hindu Bali*).⁹ This was a period of extreme political upheaval in Indonesia, marked by Cold War factionalism, anti-Communist genocide, and Suharto's ascent to power. The Indonesian government in Jakarta viewed organized religions as a disciplinary means to shape a consolidated national identity. Balinese religious authorities thus needed to

⁷ Laurajane Smith, *The Uses of Heritage* (New York: Routledge 2006), 44.

⁸ Thomas Buttery, "Tri Hita Karana," *CSPA Quarterly*, 7 (2012), 10.

⁹ Sylvine Pickel-Chevalier and Budarma Ketut, "Towards Sustainable Tourism in Bali," *Mondes du Tourisme*, hors-série (2016), 20. See also Cisilia Agustina Siahaan, "Penggagas ISI dan Tri Hita Karana Meninggal Usai Kumpul Bersama Seluruh Keluarga," *Tribun Bali* (17 September, 2016), <https://bali.tribunnews.com/2016/09/17/penggagas-isi-dan-tri-hita-karana-meninggal-usai-kumpul-bersama-seluruh-keluarga>. Pedersen and Dharmiasih (2015) and Roth and Sidana (2015) do not attribute *tri hita karana* specifically to Sutedja, though these and other scholarly sources generally locate its conceptual origins in the 1960s. See Lene Pedersen and Wiwik Dharmiasih, "The Enchantment of Agriculture: State Decentering and Irrigated Rice Production in Bali," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16:2 (2015), 141-156, and Dik Roth and Gede Sedana, "Reframing *Tri Hita Karana*: From 'Balinese Culture' to Politics," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16:2 (2015), 157-175.

assuage any misgivings about *sui generis* animist practices and polytheism in Bali. To protect traditional Balinese culture, leaders emphasized affinities with accepted state religions, specifically Hinduism.¹⁰ *Tri hita karana* emerges from this historical context of Balinese Hindu reform movements and the challenges of adapting to Suharto's emerging "New Order" in the 1960s.

Tri hita karana alludes to the Hindu doctrine of *tri mandala*, which apports space into three realms: *utama mandala*, the holiest inner zone; *madya mandala*, the middle support zone; and *nista mandala* — the outer public zone.¹¹ Drawing upon such established Hindu tripartite schemas, Sutedja explains, "Tri Hita Karana philosophy embodies universal values and represents harmonious and balanced human relationships with the spiritual, social and natural environment to achieve spiritual and physical well-being. That is, between human to god, human to human and human to nature."¹² Sutedja's initial conceptualization coincided with his role in institutionalizing the arts in Bali; hence, the three kinds of human relationships can be detailed as follows:

1. *Parhyangan*, human relationships with gods. Within Balinese Hinduism, the belief that all things in the world are gifts from the gods leads people to oblige with regular *yadnya*, or holy ceremonies. Artistic offerings work within this category of *yadnya*, by helping to negotiate this connection between humans and the divine.
2. *Pawongan*, relationships with other people. Such relationships should be rooted in principles of affection, social harmony, and mutual respect. The arts, when practiced communally as with dance and gamelan music, exemplify the concept of *pawongan* by creating fellowship and trust on deep social and personal levels.
3. *Palemahan*, human relationships with the natural environment. An underlying idea is that if nature is not treated properly, human suffering will occur. Music, dance, and drama serve to ritually purify the natural surroundings, while highlighting the importance of properly managing them.¹³

In 1969, three years after Sutedja's initial discussion of *tri hita karana*, Gusti Ketut Kaler refined the concept at a seminar on Balinese traditional villages at the

¹⁰ Adrian Vickers notes that "Hinduism had to be shown to be a religion of international status in order that it be given full legal standing." Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created*, 2nd ed. (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2012), 229.

¹¹ Jan Hendrik Peters and Wisnu Wardana argue against this spatial conception, since it is limited compared to their more general and universal view of *tri hita karana* as a "life philosophy." Peters and Wardana, *Tri Hita Karana: The Spirit of Bali* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2013), 82.

¹² Mertha Sutedja, quoted in Pickel-Chevalier and Ketut (2016), 10.

¹³ Specific definitions of these three categories vary widely in the literature based on whether *tri hita karana* serves as a religious concept, a practical approach to everyday life, or a means of assessing responsible business development. Such widespread usage prompts Roth and Sedana to note that "*THK*... is the 'in thing,'" (2015, 158). See Pickel-Chevalier and Ketut (2016), 10-11; I Ketut Ardhana, "Religious Teachings on Sustainability in the Context of Hinduism in Bali," *Istanbul Journal of Sociological Studies* 56 (2017), 32-33; Putu Eka Suarmika and Erdi Guna Utama, "Gender Differences (*Purusa Pradana*) and Metacognitive Skills in Bali," *Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar Indonesia* 3:1 (2018), 16; and Anak Agung Gde Raka Dalem, "Achievements and Challenges of Implementation of "Tri Hita Karana" for Creating Sustainable Tourism in Bali-Indonesia: A Case Study in Hotel Sectors" (Denpasar: Udayana University, 2010).

Faculty of Law of Denpasar's Udayana University. Kaler sought to adapt *tri hita karana* to incorporate Balinese ritualism into a Hindu framework, in a way that would be acceptable to the Muslim-dominated Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (IMORA). Kaler framed the idea in terms of social propriety: 1) standards of proper religious behavior that would assure harmonious relations with God (this would include ritual practices such as ceremonial music and dance); 2) standards of proper behavior that would secure harmonious relations with fellow human beings (e.g., customary rules involving marriage and local civic responsibilities); and 3) standards of proper behavior safeguarding harmonious relations with the natural environment.¹⁴ These norms worked in tandem with the Balinese principle of *desa-kala-patra*, which involves awareness of where something is occurring (*desa* = "place"), when something happens (*kala* = "time"), and how social dynamics are to work in a given situation (*patra* = "context" or "circumstance").¹⁵

According to Martin Ramstedt, this modification of *tri hita karana* successfully merged the diverse cosmological and ritual traditions of Balinese local culture with the theological doctrines and practices taken from Indian reform-Hinduism. Kaler's reformulation integrated government "religious" policy with local customs that guided social affairs of villages, activities of village institutions, and required civic duties. These folkways included how communities managed land surrounding the village commons, village temple land, and the agricultural land of *subak* collectives.¹⁶

¹⁴ Martin Ramstedt, "Discordant Temporalities in Bali's New Village Jurisdictions," *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, 46:1 (2014), 65.

¹⁵ Edward Herbst states: "The concept of *désa kala patra* is essential to Balinese artists." *Voices in Bali: Energies and Perceptions in Vocal Music and Dance Theater* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 1.

¹⁶ Ramstedt 2014, 66.



Subak temple below irrigated rice fields (photo: Joti Rockwell)

Subak societies are organized around water temples that govern the schedule of agricultural irrigation and are designed to harmonize with the environment. These temples are not only places for *subak* members to meet; they provide liminal spaces between the divine and temporal. Regular temple ceremonies are coordinated with a ritual calendar. Sacred artistic practices are directly involved in celebrating and following the *subak* cycle of rice harvests, since music and dance are fundamental parts of temple ceremonies. Given the function of the temples as places of worship, the processes of social harmonization within them, and the sustainable management of rice terraces governed by them, the *subak* tradition appears as a manifestation of *tri hita karana*, even if it precedes the concept as such by roughly a millennium.

The rice cultivation cycle of the *subak* is plotted on a calendar called a *tika*. Close examination of the *tika* reveals that the aggregate of all the individual cultivation cycles of the farmers equals the complete *subak* cycle. Similarly, cycles of individual *subaks* combine into the time cycles of regional water temples. As Stephen Lansing has observed, this *subak* concept of a large cycle comprised of many smaller ones relates closely to Balinese gamelan music.¹⁷ The smaller instruments in a gamelan ensemble

¹⁷ J. Stephen Lansing, *Priests and Programmers: Technologies of Power in the Engineered Landscape of Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 67. Nested cycles play an important role in Javanese gamelan music as well; see Judith and Alton Becker, "A Musical Icon: Power and Meaning in Javanese Gamelan Music," in *The Sign in Music and Literature*, ed. Wendy Steiner (Austin: University of Texas

play ornamented forms of the main melody, often by using short repeated patterns (such as interlocking figurations called *kotekan*). Larger instruments operate on a longer time scale, articulating the beginnings and endings of melodic phrases. Traditional Balinese gamelan music operates based on principles of interlocking cyclical patterns, in which the longest time cycles are punctuated by the largest gongs, such as the one pictured below.¹⁸ This multilayered approach to time holds true for gamelan musicians and *subak* members alike, within a variety of ceremonial, ritual, and social contexts. *Tri hita karana*, rather than a static philosophical source for these contexts, functions as an emergent formulation that has grown from and functions to sustain the processes that create them.



The large gong in Pomona College's gamelan ensemble¹⁹ (photo: Joti Rockwell)

Press, 1981), 203-16. See also Michael Tenzer, *Gamelan Gong Kebyar: The Art of Twentieth-Century Balinese Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 73-76.

¹⁸ For an introduction to Balinese gamelan music, see Michael Tenzer, *Balinese Music* (Berkeley: Periplus Editions, 1991), and Lisa Gold, *Music in Bali: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ This gong is part of a set of instruments that ethnomusicologist Katherine Hagedorn arranged to have commissioned and brought to Pomona College in 1995.

Balinese Hinduism and Sacred Artistic Practices

What is the role of the arts in the cosmological balance that Balinese Hindus seek to maintain by making offerings and ceremonies? Evidence is found in the palm leaf manuscript *Çudamani*, which translates literally to “Pure Diamond” and can refer to the third eye of Hinduism.

Once upon a time, the God Siwa (Shiva) was lonely, having cursed his wife, the goddess Parwati, to live in the form of a demoness, Durga, in a cemetery. Overpowered by sexual longing for Parwati, Siwa transformed into the terrible demon Kala Rudra. Sex with Durga in his demon form spawned a myriad of demons that carry pestilence throughout the world. The demons enter human beings who do not guard against the six internal enemies (*sad ripu*)—lust, greed, anger, confusion, drunkenness, and jealousy...

To restore security to the world, the Hindu trinity (*sanghyang tri semaya*) of Brahma, Wisnu, and Iswara transformed themselves into priests who performed *wayang* puppet theatre. Iswara (a form of Siwa the destroyer) became the priest Lotatia, the *dalang* (puppet master) who undertakes the first performance of the *wayang* shadow theatre. Brahma (the creator) became the priest Tapowangkeng who served as the *dalang*'s right-hand assistant. Wisnu (Vishnu, the preserver) became the priest Salukat and served as the *dalang*'s left-hand assistant. The guardian gods of the four directions (*sanghyang catur loka phala*) changed into the first musicians who played the four *gendér* (metallic percussion instruments) that accompany a *wayang* performance...

Reminded of their divine origins and calmed by the *wayang* theatre of the *dalang* Lotatia, Kala Rudra transforms back to Siwa, and Durga back to the goddess Parwati. As their demonic spirits are pacified by the *dalang*, pestilence vanishes and human welfare is restored.²⁰

In this mythological Balinese tale, divine artists help to save humanity from destruction. This type of story testifies to the importance of sacred music in Bali, since ritual performances give opportunities to make offerings to the forces that threaten human security with chaos. The experience of making offerings to the divine allows people to create and share symbols of faith. This is a way not only to make sense of and give spiritual meaning to individual lives, but also to foster a community of people.

Balinese Hinduism is a rich amalgamation of animism, Austronesian cosmology, ancestor worship, multiple strands of Hinduism, and Buddhism.²¹ Balinese animism

²⁰ Paraphrased from I Nyoman Sedana, “Theatre in a Time of Terrorism: Renewing Natural Harmony after the Bali Bombing via *Wayang Kontemporer*,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 22:1 (Spring 2005), 80-81. Sedana describes how a contemporary production of this story by the *dalang* Made Sidia was staged after the 2002 terrorist attacks in order to psychologically heal and to restore a sense of harmony.

²¹ Especially prior to consolidation under the world-religion umbrella of Hinduism in the second half of the twentieth century, sacred practices in Bali took the form of various ritual processes rather than a consistent belief system—what Clifford Geertz referred to as “orthopraxy, not orthodoxy.” Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 177.

associates spirits with objects and features of the natural landscape, acknowledging that they can assist or thwart human purposes on Earth.²² Balinese Hinduism seeks to sustain the equilibrium of the universe (*bhuana agung*) by negotiating a balance between the ordering force incarnate in the gods (*dharma*), and the disordering force embodied by demons (*adharma*).²³ Great attention is paid to cultivating positive relations between humans and the gods, which translates to harmony among humans and the natural world. Sacred ritual negotiates these relationships and actions between manifold aspects of the universe.

How do Balinese sacred concepts relate to the arts? Balinese music scholar Wayan Sudirana (2013) asserts that the concepts of art, ritual, life, and sacredness “are understood in essentially the same way by all Balinese.”²⁴ As an example, consider how ritual arts signify the Hindu cosmological principle of *sanga mandala*. This principle divides space into nine zones corresponding to the eight main cardinal directions (North, South, East, West, Northeast, Southeast, Northwest, Southwest) around a center. Sue Carole DeVale and Wayan Dibia identify *sanga mandala*, along with related tripartite systems, as primary concepts that underlie meaning in gamelan music.²⁵ As another example, such cosmological principles are localized in physical space by the ritual practice of the *nyangjangang* ceremony in Tenganan, during which three sacred archaic gamelan orchestras (*selonding*) are brought through the village in clockwise and counterclockwise directions. This ceremony serves to purify the community through ritual movement and musical engagement with Tenganan’s sacred layout.²⁶ While artistic practices can be part of religious traditions, they can also be construed in popular accounts as homologous to them: Peters and Wardana suggest that dancing resembles *mudra*, the rhythmic movement of the priest’s hand; gamelan music suggests the *genta*, the priest’s bell; and *kidung* (singing) maps onto the intoned mantras of a priest.²⁷

²² I Madé Bandem identifies animism as a potential source of Balinese dances, including the *barong* dance, which is meant to protect people from illness. Bandem, “Barong Dance,” *The World of Music* 18:3 (1976), 45-52. Maisie Sum highlights several Balinese musical compositions, some old and some more recent, that are inspired by nature. Sum, “Inspiration, Imitation, and Creation in the Music of Bali, Indonesia,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 33:2 (2015): 251-260.

²³ Fred B. Eiseman, *Bali: Sekala & Niskala Volume I: Essays on Religion, Ritual, and Art* (Singapore: Periplus Editions, 1989), 12. For a discussion of the concept of *bhuana agung* with regard to the Hindu Dharma movement, see Hildred Geertz, *The Life of a Balinese Temple: Artistry, Imagination, and History in a Peasant Village* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 38-41.

²⁴ I Wayan Sudirana, “*Gamelan Gong Luang*: Ritual, Time, Place, Music, and Change in a Balinese Sacred Ensemble.” PhD Dissertation, University of British Columbia (2013), 18.

²⁵ Sue Carole DeVale and I Wayan Dibia, “Sekar Anyar: An Exploration of Meaning in Balinese Gamelan,” *The World of Music* 33:1 (1991), 9-10.

²⁶ Angela François-Simbürger, “‘Politics of the Center’ in Bali’s Cultural Periphery: Transformations of Power in an Old-Balinese ‘Village Mandala,’” PhD Dissertation, City University of New York (1998), 71-72. Tenganan is known for its *Bali aga* (“old Bali”) culture, which precedes Majahapit influence and has ties to early Austronesian cosmology.

²⁷ Jan Hendrik Peters and Wisnu Wardana Peters and Wardana, *Tri Hita Karana: The Spirit of Bali* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2013), 105.

Examples such as these attest to the role of arts in Bali as a means of enacting ideas about, and connecting to, the divine.

Early evidence for the relationship between sacred concepts and artistic practices exists in a twelfth-century inscription by the Balinese king Anak Wungu: “all beings comprised of Bhuta witness this seeing far and near, day and night.”²⁸ The idea of *bhuta* refers to a dualistic cosmos that connects the outer universe and the inner world of subjective experience. Understanding and controlling *bhuta* is required for any productive human purpose, from composing of music or poetry to ruling a kingdom, since such undertakings involve soul searching as well as decisive action. Metaphysical texts can provide instructions, but this lesson is more directly communicated by myth, ritual and art. Although all beings are composed of *bhuta*, only humans and gods are capable of organizing *bhuta* into coherent structures. Somewhat like entropy, *bhuta* naturally decomposes into chaos—for example, overgrown landscapes, disordered music, or crude minds led by insatiable desires. All productive human activities participate in an eternal struggle to maintain a state of existence free from pollution, spiritual and otherwise.²⁹

I Wayan Sudirana has suggested that from a Hindu perspective “all of God’s creation is beautiful and artistic, meaning that it is a product with value and significance for every being.”³⁰ The divine creation of a world that can be appreciated as an artistic object by all is itself a sacred act, a sacred offering. Hence, all artistic creation involves sacrifice and is linked to sacred ritual. Dance and gamelan music have been performed to welcome the deities present at temple ceremonies; visual arts have developed as ways to forge a spiritual bond between human and divine worlds. These activities were not merely for people’s entertainment; they constituted a religious obligation for all people in a community. Thus, the work of farmers and tradesmen included making music, dancing, and creating art objects to propitiate the gods. Young girls learned to dance by mimicking older women; young boys accompanied fathers to nightly music rehearsals, where they learned to play the gamelan by watching and doing.³¹ The regularly shared practice of the arts has forged communal links through active cooperation in fulfilling devotional commitments together.

²⁸ From a 1998 transcription and translation by I Wayan Ardika and Ni Luh Sutjiati Beratha, quoted in J. Stephen Lansing, *Perfect Order: Recognizing Complexity in Bali* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 130.

²⁹ Lansing, *Perfect Order*, 30-31. Lansing notes that “retaining some measure of control over the *bhutakala* [the forces that bring chaos and illness] becomes the central problem of human existence.”

³⁰ Sudirana, “*Gamelan Gong Luang*,” 18.

³¹ Balinese gamelan music, though historically performed by men, has featured more women performers in recent decades. See Emiko Saraswati Susilo, *Gamelan Wanita: A Study of Women’s Gamelan in Bali* (Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), and Sonja Lynn Downing, *Gamelan Girls: Gender, Childhood, and Politics in Balinese Music Ensembles* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019).



Baris gde dancers at a temple ceremony in Nyuh Kuning (photo: Joti Rockwell)

Ritual offerings in Bali are known as *banten* and are symbolic sacrifices to the divine. They represent gifts created to give thanks to the Gods, and to keep malevolent spirits from disturbing the harmony of life. It is important to recognize that the collective production of larger *banten* for community ceremonies serves to unite village groups, since many people participate in their construction and it takes cooperation and communal work (*gotong royong*) to achieve a common goal. These processes strengthen a community's sense of belonging, and they create social bonds by reaffirming communal goals and interests.³²

As Sudirana states, "Almost every kind of religious ceremony [in Bali] requires the presence of the performing arts."³³ There are performances to welcome gods and ancestors such as *pendet* and *baris gde* dances; to purify spaces from evil spirits such as the *calonarang* drama or *barong* dance; to complete religious ritual ceremonies such as with *gambuh* music; to remember philosophical knowledge in the *lontar* or other holy texts, as with *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet theatre); or to facilitate the journey of the spirits of the dead, as with gamelan *gambang*. Since sacred ritual is an aspect of everyday life, the arts are as well. This deep connection, and its difference from aspects of Western culture in the twentieth century, helps to explain comments from earlier ethnographers

³² Sudirana, "Gamelan Gong Luang," 19-20.

³³ Sudirana, "Gamelan Gong Luang," 20.

such as “everybody in Bali seems to be an artist” (Miguel Covarrubias) and “the air was never empty of music” (Margaret Mead).³⁴ While the cultural differences rendered by visitors such as Covarrubias, Mead, Colin McPhee, and Clifford Geertz are no longer as stark—Bali has been increasingly recognized by and connected to the rest of the world over the past century—art remains a central part of spiritual life on the island.³⁵

It is thus not so much the case that Balinese Hinduism contains a variety of sacred artistic practices. Rather, for those following it, artistic practice is sacred, and ultimately inseparable from other aspects of life. In Wayan Dibia’s description of an *odalan*, or anniversary ceremony of a Balinese Hindu temple, he emphasizes its multidimensionality as a holy day filled with prayer, a sociable gathering marked by collective contributions, and an artistic presentation enjoyed by those who attend.³⁶ Hence, art as sacred ritual and art as entertainment are commensurable. What would be designated in English-language terminology as “music,” “dance,” “visual art,” and “theatre” are, in this context, part of the same connected enterprise that can be called “the arts,” which is itself connected to religious observance and living together with others. As with *tri hita karana* and *subak* practices, religious philosophy may have a regulating influence on artistic practices, though it grows out of the social processes as much as it serves as a source for them.

Ecologies of Music in Bali

Speaking with Emiko Saraswati Susilo and Dewa Putu Berata, directors of Gamelan Çudamani, in Pengosekan, Bali, it was hard for us not to notice the construction sounds around us. Just south of Ubud, the village of Pengosekan is both supported by and worryingly encroached upon by this seemingly ever-growing epicenter of Bali’s cultural tourism. It was a moment in which two opposing forms of *tri hita karana* in common parlance—an intangible aspect of traditional Balinese cultural heritage on the one hand, and a certifiable means of ceaseless economic development on the other—were difficult to reconcile. *Subak*, as a literal path to prosperity through agricultural production, had long since faded to the background in Bali compared to tourism, whose demands upon the island threaten not just traditional approaches to making a living but also the physical island itself.³⁷ We had experienced some ways in which music acts as a form of sustenance for spiritual and social life. How could it address broad questions about sustaining the environment?

³⁴ Quoted in Sudirana, “*Gamelan Gong Luang*,” 21.

³⁵ See McGraw, *Radical Traditions* (2013), 38-39, for a critical discussion of “Balinese art” and its “relegation” by ethnographic and touristic accounts to functional and ritual contexts. Such circumscription relates to the historiography of the terms *seni* (“art”) and *agama* (“religion”) entering the Indonesian language, and as McGraw argues, it limits possibilities for contemporary Balinese artists.

³⁶ I Wayan Dibia, “*Odalan* of Hindu Bali: A Religious Festival, A Social Occasion, and a Theatrical Event,” *Asian Theater Journal* 2:1 (1985), 61-65.

³⁷ See Hao Huang in this journal for a description of environmental challenges faced in Bali: Huang, “Nature and the Spirit: Ritual, Environment, and the Subak in Bali,” *EnviroLab Asia* 3:2 (2019), <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/envirolabasia/vol3/iss2/1/>

In conversation with friends and new acquaintances in Bali, we learned about musicians who have been creatively navigating the relationship between people and the natural world.³⁸ Emiko Susilo and Dewa Berata, who in addition to leading the *Çudamani* ensemble, lead educational programs involving arts, culture, and the environment, conveyed several stories to us attesting to the role of artists on the island. Since, as discussed above, music and dance are integral to Balinese Hinduism, artists are trusted people who travel around the island to participate in life's most important events: ceremonies for babies, weddings, funerals, and temple rituals. Artists serve as a connection between localized *subak* groups in that they can transfer environmental knowledge from one community to another. In the village of Pagi, for instance, some farmers had returned to earlier and more sustainable practices, such as resting fields, despite the fact that it was at one point against the law to do so. Traveling musicians, having witnessed their success, conveyed the benefits of these practices to members of other *subaks*, who soon converted thereafter.³⁹



Emiko Saraswati Susilo, with two members of *Çudamani* (photo: Judy Mitoma)

Balinese composers are constantly finding new sources of inspiration and insight while also drawing upon established approaches. The result is art that can work within a

³⁸ The people mentioned in the following paragraphs are part of an international community dedicated to creating, performing, and teaching Balinese arts. Many split time between Bali and elsewhere, and have ties to institutions such as ours at the Claremont Colleges. They have played an important role in the global recognition of Balinese music and dance, while also mediating the relations among artists on the island, visitors from outside of it, and purveyors of Balinese gamelan abroad.

³⁹ Personal interview, Pengosekan, Bali, July 13, 2019.

variety of contexts, from the more sacred and traditional to the more secular and modern. New music in Bali can thus both be strikingly innovative and maintain enduring connections between music and nature. The composer and performer Gusti Komin, for example, recorded music in a rice paddy of a friend of his who is part of a local *subak*. Komin's album *Pidan Jani: Then and Now* features six of these recordings, which were mainly done at night when insects reclaim the soundscape from motorbikes. Though this setting evokes an earlier Bali, Komin states in the liner notes: "Most people would distinguish between traditional and contemporary music, but I think the only distinction we can make in *gender* is that a piece was created then or now." While he composed for and recorded with *gender*, instruments traditionally used for *wayang kulit* shadow theater, he used multitrack recording and virtuosically played all of the parts to most of the pieces himself. When we visited with him in July 2019, he was performing and teaching with an electric-blue, spray-painted, 11-key, custom-tuned set of *gender* (*gender* usually each have 10 keys). Such innovations balance ideas of preservation and renewal—ideas that, in *Pidan Jani: Then and Now*, extend to the *subak* landscape.

Though very little disciplinary scholarship addresses both *subak* and music, musicians we interacted with and learned of in Bali portrayed a sense of connectedness between arts and environmental issues. During the academic year, Nyoman Wenten is the music director for Pomona College's Balinese gamelan ensemble (Giri Kusuma) and other gamelan groups in the Los Angeles area, including Gamelan Burat Wangi at California Institute of the Arts. In the summer, he directs Bharata Muni, his hometown or village gamelan, in Sading, near Denpasar. He spoke with us about how inextricably connected farming, environmental concerns, and the arts are in Bali, and his commentary illustrated how *subak* and gamelan are linked in some literal ways. Noting that his father and grandfather were both farmers as well as musicians, and that many members of Bharata Muni are still active farmers, he emphasized that music and environmental issues are "always intertwined." The pressures of the modern economy apply to both, since musicians used to play in ceremonies related to harvesting cycles that have been disrupted by modern agriculture. The dominance of tourism, while generating waste and taxing natural resources, interferes with sacred rituals in which people have traditionally sustained each other through offerings of food and artistic performance.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Personal interview, Sading, Bali, July 12, 2019.



Bharata Muni in Sading, Bali, I Nyoman Wenten, center (photo: Joti Rockwell)

Wenten's ideas relate to what Peter Dunbar-Hall has discussed regarding a kind of musical ecology in Bali that involves the sustainability of the performing arts. Dunbar-Hall references a view of Balinese performing arts as "a site of ongoing development, adaptation, challenges, and conceptual engagement."⁴¹ Musicians in Bali are not only community role models but are creators of culture and community bonds through musical production, teaching, and rehearsal—a kind of creation that not only draws connections with the natural environment but also serves as a resourceful environment itself. This dynamic recalls Jeff Titon's framing of an "ecology of music" that involves worlds of music pertaining to individuals, populations, and communities. His principles of musical ecology include "diversity" in genres, practices, and performers that enhances possibilities of cultural survival, while honoring cultural equity; "limits to growth," accomplished by investing resources to sustain traditional forms despite the overwhelming pressures of cultural and economic development; "interconnectivity" that values how musics and performers interact with one another; and "stewardship," which involves reinvesting resources back into individuals and communities in order to sustain heritage ensembles and contemporary performers.⁴²

⁴¹ Peter Dunbar-Hall, "Balinese Gamelan: Continual Innovation, Community Engagement, and Links to Spirituality as Drivers for Sustainability," in *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures: An Ecological Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 162.

⁴² Jeff Todd Titon, "Music and Sustainability: An Ecological Viewpoint," in *The World of Music*

In addition to addressing sacred concerns, Balinese musicians and artists negotiate issues of cultural heritage in their creative lives. Their challenge is to engage in cultural production that is relevant to the present, but that also respects past traditions. Invoking Tilton's fourfold scheme and the threat of extinction as conceptualized in the biological sciences, Made Mantle Hood argues for sustainability in musical ecologies rather than preservation and conservation.⁴³ Within this perspective, it is critical for musicians as performers and composers to produce new forms of expression, new genres, and new styles. The relationship between contemporary performing arts and Hindu-Balinese ritual cannot be frozen in time as rote repetition of past cultural memories. Instead, traditions need to be invented and reinvented to suit the needs of the present.⁴⁴

Aspects of traditional culture in Bali have evolved to become a valuable economic and political resource for both the province of Bali and the Indonesian nation-state. Local culture has become "touristic culture," in which ceremonial performances such as *barong* dance also function as tourist attractions. Although cultural tourism in Bali may come across simply as a case of supporting local cultural resources, the verdict is mixed, as the UNESCO case mentioned at the beginning of this article illustrates. While cultural tourism has provided Balinese people with economic opportunity, its cash value as performance spectacle moves its practice beyond its local relevance. This is a paradox of cultural praxis and profit, and one that requires a sensitively balanced approach in order to sustain Bali's various musical environments. Kendra Stepputat has spoken directly to this challenge: "Why is *kecak ramayana* not attractive to a Balinese audience?... The *kecak ramayana* does not attract Balinese audiences because it is seen as something that one performs for tourists in order to raise money for the community—it is work. The *kecak ramayana* is by definition—in the eyes of Balinese *kecak* performers and other locals alike—a genre that is *traditionally* staged for tourists and has always been such.... The *kecak ramayana* is not considered a performing arts genre that is interesting to watch....It is very understandable that what one does for income several times a week is not very desirable as leisure consumption."⁴⁵

Cultural practice fatigue is not the only challenge that current Balinese musicians must cope with. Investigating changes in cultural practice in Bali leads to a recognition of a marked aesthetic difference between tourist-driven entertainment and traditional village ceremonies, and hence something of a fissure in historical connections between music and the natural environment. For instance, *wayang kulit* shadow plays are now often performed in truncated, readily digestible tourist versions of an hour promptly after sundown, whereas they traditionally start later in the evening and carry on into the night. Compared to earlier shadow plays, modern versions use faster tempi, employ less *Kawi*,

51:1 (2009), 123-124.

⁴³ Made Mantle Hood, "Sustainability Strategies Among Balinese Heritage Ensembles," *Malaysian Music Journal* 3:2 (2014), 11.

⁴⁴ Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁴⁵ Kendra Stepputat, "Performing *Kecak*: A Balinese Dance Tradition between Daily Routine and Creative Art," trans. Rudi Samapati, *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 44 (2012): 66.

the sacred literary language, and often interpolate colloquial Balinese and English phrases, sometimes for the benefit of tourists. Shorter versions begin earlier in the evening to accommodate the busy work schedules of contemporary Balinese. Formerly, *gender wayang* players might work in the rice fields in the daytime and perform at night. It is now more difficult to farm and perform music in order to support oneself.⁴⁶

The idea of an ecology of music, and the challenges therein, harkens back to *subak*, more precisely, *subak awig awig*. *Subak awig awig* is generally defined as mutually agreed-upon codes for behavior or regulations that establish order that sustain productive agricultural function. *Awig awig* codes also apply to non-*subak* Balinese village community policy. In the villages of Jasan and Sebatu, *awig-awig* guidelines ensure that heritage *gamelan gong gede* music is sustained as required elements of sacred temple ceremonies. As in the *subaks*, gamelan leaders face the challenge of resolving inter-generational conflicts over change and tradition. They do so in part by rotating players on the *trompong* (a lead melodic instrument), which minimizes personal jealousies and arranges for younger and older musicians to interact in ritual performances to promote group solidarity.⁴⁷ Such musical strategies play a crucial role in maintaining social harmony, and they are closely connected to those intended to maintain harmony with nature.

We would like to conclude with the concept of balance, sometimes framed in Balinese Hinduism as *rha bhinewa*, or “complementary opposites.” The *subak* system and the idea of *tri hita karana* have emerged and adapted as collective ways of negotiating oppositions, whether between the greater universe and the inner self, or between globalization and localization. Likewise, Balinese arts have maintained a balance, often similarly contested, between tradition and modernity, and between self-reliance and outside interaction. We have traced, in turn, some of the concepts that connect people in Bali to the divine, some of the artistic practices that create social bonds, and some of the musical inventions and challenges that relate to the environment. A connecting theme, and a fulcrum for the various balances to maintain, is the idea of beauty, which can profoundly manifest whether one is visiting Bali or has grown up immersed in its sacred traditions. Collaboration, both within communities in Bali and across its more global networks, proves to be crucial in sustaining and renewing this beauty. In this sense, arguments for environmental protection and stewardship apply to, and can draw from, the arts as well.

⁴⁶ Brita Renee Heimarck, *Balinese Discourses on Music and Modernization: Village Voices and Urban Views* (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2014), 10.

⁴⁷ Hood, “Sustainability Strategies,” 12.