

Regional Autonomy and Cultural Resources: A Balinese Case

Haruya Kagami

Kanazawa University

In the course of mass tourism development in Bali, indigenous cultural elements were playing the crucial role as one of the attractive touristic resources available in Bali. 'Cultural tourism (*pariwisata budaya*)' was the slogan taken by the Bali provincial government to promote the development of both culture and tourism. Accordingly, Balinese cultural elements tended to be seen as commodified objects in the domain of tourism, although many Balinese opinion-leaders continuously criticized such phenomena and the provincial government aimed at the activation of the indigenous culture as a whole.

In this presentation, however, I will discuss the Balinese culture as a system rooted in their social life which shows the highly resilience toward the socio-economic change and could serve as a kind of common resources in adapting the new situation. The focal point of the discussion will be put on the Balinese traditional village (*desa adat*) system which is pronounced as the very base of Balinese culture in the provincial government's official statements.

1. Customary village and regional autonomy policy

Regional autonomy (*otonomi daerah*) is without doubt one of the most important keywords characterizing the political scene of post-Suharto Indonesia. The government's policies of this domain included the reform program of administrative village government, permitting regional governments to adopt local customary traditions into the government village system of the region. Some regions such as the province of Sumatra Barat decided to (re-)establish the traditional *nagari* system as the official village government of the region, while some others including the province of Bali chose to keep the traditional and administrative village systems separate and to preserve both of them.



The changing socio-political situation of post-Suharto era, however, pushed the Bali regional government to reform the traditional village system as well. In response to critical opinions of the remaining institutions of the previous period, the provincial government prepared to revise its policy on Balinese traditional villages, and enacted Bali Provincial Regulation No. 3 2001 on traditional villages (called *desa pakraman*) to replace Provincial Regulation No. 6 1986 on the status, function and roles of traditional villages (called *desa adat* at the time).

The new regulation introduced some significant changes into traditional village organization and management. First, the term for traditional villages was changed from *desa adat* to *desa pakraman*. Since the colonial period, Balinese traditional villages had been referred to as *desa adat* in both official and ordinary use to differentiate them from administrative villages (*desa dinas*). Not only the term *dinas*, originating from the Dutch *dienst* (service), but also *adat* (of Arabic origin), were borrowed words for the Balinese. In daily conversation, villagers referred to, and still refer to, traditional villages simply as *desa*.

The desire to use the term *desa pakraman* to refer to Balinese traditional villages had already been voiced by Hindu intellectuals in the 1990s. For example, I Ketut Wiana, a senior official of the Indonesian Hindu Council, in an op-ed piece in the local newspaper *Bali Post*, explained the historical origin of the word *pakraman* and proposed replacing the term *desa adat* by *desa pakraman*. According to Wiana, the word *pakraman* can be found in Balinese palm leaf documents and means “works” or “behaviour” [Wiana 1997]. Though the word is seldom used in daily conversation nowadays, its root word *krama* is a very common word meaning “member” and is generally used to refer to members of traditional villages. Historical analyses and ordinary use (or lack of use) aside, the word *pakraman* sounds more familiar and indigenous for the Balinese than the word *adat*.

During the provincial council’s preparatory session for the revision of the provincial regulations, a member of the dominant party (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan) proposed an amendment including a change of the term for traditional village, with the support of a professor of law from the state Udayana University in Bali. The debate during the session naturally reflected the political dynamics of the time. The result was the new Regulation No. 3 2001 which aimed to eliminate the top-down style of government intervention in customary affairs, typical of the former period, and to establish Balinese traditional villages as fully independent local indigenous organizations.



Although the former provincial regulation recognized the autonomous status of traditional villages, it still stressed the coordinative role of the regional government. In 1979, the provincial government set up a supervisory committee for local customary organizations (*Majelis Pembina Lembaga Adat*), headed by the chairman of the provincial council, and developed guidelines for the management of customary organizations and the arbitration of customary conflicts [Kagami 2003]. This top-down style policy obviously did not fit well with the political situation of the Reformation Era.

The new regulation includes provisions abolishing supervisory committees and replacing them by coordinating committees (*majelis desa pakraman*) at the provincial, district and sub-district levels in order to coordinate inter-village affairs. These committees are composed of representatives of each traditional village. A similar kind of organization was once tried in the 1990s in Gianyar on the advice of the district head. In some sub-districts, committees called “traditional village head forums” (*forum bendesa adat*) were actually set up. Under the centralized power system of the time, however, these forums existed only as nominal consultative bodies, and did not function effectively in handling inter-village problems.

The organizing procedure for the new committees was clearly a bottom-up style. In the Gianyar district, for example, the district government arranged the first meetings at the sub-district level and asked each traditional village to send the traditional village head (*bendesa*) and one more representative. At these meetings, the chairman and managing staff were elected from among the participants. Then, each sub-district committee sent representatives to the district level meeting, electing a chairman and managing staff of the district committee. These procedures were conducted outside of the supervision of the regional government. The old supervising committees and their district branches were finally abolished in 2002 and the new district-level coordinating committees were set up in 2003. The provincial level committee has not yet been organized (as of the beginning of 2004).

Although these committees are organized from the bottom up, there still remain doubts whether they will be effective in arbitrating and resolving inter-village conflicts, because they have no other authority than to discuss and advise. It will take a few more years before we can evaluate their effectiveness.



The revised provincial regulations include some new prescriptions on the structure and composition of traditional villages. One deals with guest membership, especially for non-Hindu residents. The Balinese traditional village essentially was, and still is, a Hindu organization based on religious activities, with no room for non-Hindu residents. Its main activities are organizing village temple festivals and managing the village cemetery, where only village members are allowed to bury family members and conduct funeral rituals. At present, however, an increasing number of non-Hindu residents actually live within the boundaries of traditional villages, especially in town areas and tourist spots. The new prescription regarding guest membership was intended to adapt traditional villages to the contemporary situation. In practice, the provincial government has urged traditional villages to register non-Hindu residents as quasi-members (*krama tamiu*) who are exempted from religious duties but are expected to participate in communal work and to pay some portion of the annual village fee. In this way, the regional government in Bali expects traditional villages to play a role of surveillance over the increasing number of newcomers.

Another prescription concerns the setting up of village security forces called *pacalang*. This measure perhaps reflected common communal responses to socio-political disturbance in other regions of the country during the early stage of the Reformation Era. In the face of decreasing power of surveillance by the police and army, many local communities set up local forces to maintain communal security. Under the new provincial regulation, village guards are responsible for maintaining security and order during customary and religious events. Generally, they are in charge of traffic control at temple festivals and customary rituals. However, I observed an unusual case in one village where these guards not only handled traffic jams, which were common at the village's main road where popular restaurants were located, but also managed the roadside parking and collected parking fees. This arrangement was approved by the district's transportation agency, which has jurisdiction over public parking, in order to compensate for the shortage of official traffic controllers. According to the traditional village head, the collected fees were given to the village guards as reward. Whatever the reason may be, this case shows that the borderline between the customary and governmental sphere has become blurred in contemporary Bali.

In addition to revising the regulations, the provincial government has offered different kinds of financial support to traditional villages in recent years. In 2001, for example, it loaned one motorcycle at no charge and began to give a monthly reward of 75,000 rupiah to each



traditional village head throughout the province. At the same time, it decided to provide annual funds to each traditional village, amounting to 10 million rupiah in 2001 and 25 million rupiah in 2004.

In parallel with the new provincial government policy, some resource-rich districts also started to offer financial support to traditional villages. The Gianyar district government, for example, decided to distribute 15 percent of its hotel and restaurant tax revenue to traditional villages in the district in 2000. In 2001, this percentage was raised to 25 percent, and in 2002 to 30 percent, which amounts to roughly 15-20 million rupiah for each traditional village per year.

Behind these governmental policies lies a common feeling among Balinese that the success of tourism development depends on lively activities in the traditional villages which sustain tourist attractions such as performing arts and rituals. From this point of view, the regional government's financial support of traditional villages seems quite reasonable. As a result, traditional villages have much larger financial funds than administrative villages. As is the case with the development funds of administrative villages, however, traditional villages tend to use these funds for the construction and renovation of village facilities such as temples and meeting halls. Thus, one traditional village in Gianyar district spent the funds from the district government in 2000 for the construction of a new storehouse at the central village temple (*pura puseh*), and those from both the provincial and district governments in 2001 for the renovation of the village meeting hall (*wantilan*).

As indicated by these recent policies of the regional government, the Balinese traditional village has changed significantly in response to the changing socio-political dynamics of the Reformation Era. While the local communal organizations receive a considerable amount of financial support from the regional government, they have to play some role in government administration. Although they are clearly segregated from administrative villages in the ideological domain, in practice they share an administrative role with administrative village governments



2. Internal change of traditional village management

In response to the changing socio-political circumstances, not only the structure and composition but also the management of traditional villages has gone through some striking changes. This trend seems to be related not so much with the post-Suharto reformative atmosphere as with the general process of “modernization.”

The most commonly observed change in management is the taking of minutes at village meetings and the release of financial reports. Recently, some more “modern” traditional villages have begun to document the proceedings and decisions of village meetings and to circulate them among the villagers. Annual or seasonal balance sheets are presented at meetings for discussion and confirmation by the villagers. The goal of this innovation is not just procedural efficiency but also to ensure the legitimacy of decisions and agreements. At one village meeting of a traditional village in Gianyar district, which I observed, the seasonal balance sheet of the traditional village presented by the traditional village head was criticized by the villagers in attendance as being too general and not well recorded. Though the head responded by giving a detailed explanation of the items of payment and thus avoided condemnation, he surely seemed to have lost the trust of the villagers. As indicated in this case, documentation in traditional village management is part of improving accuracy and procedural transparency.

Another innovational management method was adopted by the same traditional village head. In 2000, he activated the traditional village council (*sabha desa*), which was mentioned in the guidelines prescribed by the former provincial regulation No. 6 1986 but had never been actually set up in the village. He proposed the idea at a village meeting and asked each of the village subunits (*banjar*) to select three or four representatives. The council was composed of these subunit representatives as well as subunit heads (*kelihan banjar*) and of representatives of the village youth organization. This composition closely resembled, and even preceded, that of the newly organized administrative village council. Those selected were relatively young people who often voiced their opinions at village meetings. The village head’s idea was to manage customary affairs mainly through council meetings in order to reduce the length and frequency of whole village meetings. The council was set up in 2002 and remained active for almost one and a half year, but its activities declined toward the time of the new village head election. I observed a council meeting in 2002, and was impressed by the frank and



lively atmosphere of the discussion. The decline of the council's activities may have resulted from the decreasing trust of the village head, caused by his opaque financial management.

These reforms, which were aimed at modernizing traditional village management, can be partly explained by the village head's career. The village head mentioned above was a retired government official, and it is quite possible that he obtained his ideas on reform from his experiences at his government office. Recruiting traditional village heads and managerial staff from among people with experience working at modern institutions such as government offices, schools and private companies is common practice in contemporary Bali. This practice surely promotes the tendency toward a modernized style of management in Balinese traditional villages.

Despite this modernization, traditional elements often remain in local communities, namely the power relationship among residents based on social rank of birth. While this has been outspokenly criticized as a feudal legacy in Bali and in Indonesia as a whole since the independence of the Republic of Indonesia, hierarchical social norms still persist in the daily behavior of villagers and especially in customary affairs. Whether and to what extent the villagers can free themselves of this hierarchical system depends on the political and economic power which traditional village lords can demonstrate.

For example, the traditional village head mentioned above is a member of a prestigious noble family in the village, which owns about two hectares of rice land but has no other economic resources nor socio-politically influential positions. He was nominated as a candidate for the position of traditional village head because of his career at the government office, being praised for his efficient managing style but criticized for the lack of transparency in his financial management. In short, he was valued as a traditional village head not because of his family background but because of his management ability. Nevertheless, he once told me that his duty as traditional village head was to maintain and revitalize customary norms. He mentioned the recent trend among villagers to have their children wear ceremonial costumes at ritual occasions, and explained it as a sign of increasing religious piety among villagers, adding that in the old days, villagers used to wear such costumes when they went to visit the homes of nobles as well. Although he did not state this directly, he seemed to think that the revitalization of customary norms would be accompanied by one of feudalistic social norms.



The more powerful noble families still have a dominant voice in customary affairs. The most conspicuous case is that of the former royal families in another traditional village in Gianyar district. They have large rice land holdings and control the tourism industry, and also because of their generous financial patronage of rituals, they still maintain a high prestige and social status not only among the villagers themselves but also among the residents of the surrounding villages which were once ruled by the same royal family [MacRae 1999].

The post of traditional village head has been held continuously by members of the royal families. The traditional village secretary, himself a nephew of the village head, once explained to me that the task of the traditional village head these days covers a wide range of matters. The daily offerings placed by villagers on the pavement in front of the house gate, for example, may obstruct the flow of rainwater. The head has to instruct the villagers about the proper way to place the offerings, and also has to conduct negotiations with the government about the desirable form and shape of village pavements. In ritual matters, too, the religious requirements must be adapted to the modern circumstances of the village. Thus, the height of a funeral tower should not exceed the height of the electric wires that cross the village roads. These examples show that the traditional village head functions as a kind of negotiator between customary affairs and the modern world.

The traditional village head also has the authority to carry out negotiations in inter-village affairs. The secretary mentioned a recent case in which young men from a neighboring village had injured a villager after a quarrel on a trivial matter. The assailant had surrendered to the police on the spot. In order to ensure that antagonism would not spread between the villages, the village head called both village subdivision heads and urged them to calm their residents. He also asked the head of the assailant's subdivision to hold a purification ritual to cleanse the ritual pollution of the village caused by the shedding of the blood of the victim. This kind of settlement was possible because both villages were once ruled by the same royal family, and the villagers today still recognize their power in the region. "The words of the traditional village head are still respected by the villagers. If he says 'shut up!' the villagers won't dare to speak," said the secretary.

As illustrated by these cases, the revitalization of customary norms involves a fundamental dilemma. The more obediently they are followed, the more easily intra- and inter-village matters can be settled properly and effectively. On the other hand, this may also lead to a



revitalization of old feudal power and prestige. While the management methods of traditional villages can be, and actually have gradually been, modernized in recent years, the power structure in local communities may not be. To realize true autonomy and democracy at the local community level, there is a need to grapple with the inveterate habit of hierarchical social relationships that are maintained under the name of local customs.

3. Whose resource is culture?

As is shown in the discussion above, the Balinese traditional village system functions not only as a basic social unit but also as a kind of tools by which they adapt their social life to a new condition. Through the invention of guest membership and posts of village guard, the system is expected to keep its heterogeneous residents under observation and to maintain social stability. While various aspects of village management procedure are modernized to meet democratic demands, traditional social norms still play an important role in settling village matters. We may call the traditional village system as one of the available Balinese cultural resources.

When we consider it as one of resources, however, then arises a question: whose resource is it? Is it owned exclusively by the Balinese? Isn't it part of Indonesian national culture, as the New Order regime once claimed? But the New Order regime's rhetoric on the cultural hegemony of the state seems to be invalid in the era of regional autonomy. If it is one of the Balinese own resources, then is the ownership held evenly among the Balinese, or do some claim the prerogative position in its management than others?

The same question can be applied to materialized cultural products such as Hindu temples, dances and dramas, works of art and craft, and so on. These are boasted as the finest examples of the Balinese cultural tradition and are exploited and served foremost in the Balinese tourism industry. While the ownership of a particular temple or the authorship of a piece of art can easily be specified, it seems more difficult to find out the exact owner of an architectural tradition or a dance style. So, too, is the case of traditional village system. While a particular village organization or a set of customary regulation is obviously owned by its own village members, the ownership of the village system is more vaguely held by the whole Balinese. It could only be said as a product of common view and knowledge of social interaction inherited among the Balinese.



My aim here is not to find out the exact owner of the Balinese traditional village system but to suggest that the contemporary Balinese (and Indonesian in general) socio-political dynamics evolves around the question of the ownership of cultural tradition. The increasing migrants to Bali are supposed by the Balinese to be a threat to their culture. The setting up of guest membership within the traditional village organization is a response to it. To treat the migrants as “guests” indicates the Balinese attitude to intensify cultural distinction. The setting up of village guards is another response. The main target is the threat from outside of the village, including foreign criminals. The village guards often act as private police in the name of the guardian of communal tradition [see Connor & Vickers 2003]. The modernization of village administrative procedure is disguised to be an internal innovation within their own cultural tradition by using local terms such as *perarem* to “regulation”, *sabha desa* to “village council”, and so on. And finally, some noble families’ aspiration to revitalize customary norms indicates a struggle for cultural hegemony among the Balinese themselves.

The increasing awareness of their own cultural tradition is not a new phenomenon among the Balinese. It was nurtured by the Dutch colonial policies, the independence of multi-ethnic Indonesia, and by the developing tourism. Above all it is further accelerated by the socio-political situation of Regional Autonomy era.

The attitude to preserve Bali-ness against the inflow of foreign socio-cultural elements is also a familiar one among the Balinese. This attitude was repeatedly appealed by the Balinese opinion leaders since the beginning of tourism development. The newest slogan is “*ajeg Bali* (to preserve Bali)”, which is often referred to by the Balinese government officials, politicians and intellectuals in these several years.

I will emphasize that these awareness and attitude evoke the keen sense of ownership of their own culture. The cases discussed above are the products of this sense. It tends to assert the exclusive ownership of their own culture and to leave no room for a sense of co-sharing of it with others. The spread of this sense seems inevitably result in cultural antagonism.



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