

10-31-2014

J. Stephen Lansing, Perfect order; Recognizing complexity in Bali.

Dick van der Meij

Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatulah Jakarta, dickvdm2005@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/wacana>

Recommended Citation

van der Meij, Dick (2014) "J. Stephen Lansing, Perfect order; Recognizing complexity in Bali," *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia*: Vol. 15: No. 2, Article 13.

DOI: 10.17510/wacana.v15i2.411

Available at: <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/wacana/vol15/iss2/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty of Humanities at UI Scholars Hub. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia by an authorized editor of UI Scholars Hub.

ideas that support the preservation and protection of Indonesian value and culture on the one hand and the thoughts that support universal ideas about secular humanism and democracy on the other.

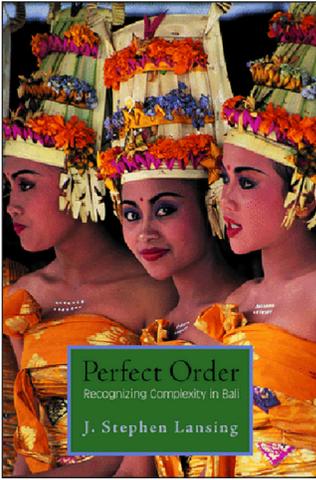
Van Heeren's *Contemporary Indonesian film* has successfully captured the enduring search for national identity in post-New Order Indonesia through the movie lens and complex political, social, and cultural discourses associated with it. But cultural discourses about modern media in Indonesia, including film, shift quickly. A very recent phenomenon, which seems to have received little attention in this book, is the rise of local sentiments in regards to the derogatory representation of particular ethnic groups in some Indonesian films, as reflected in the protests of the Minangkabau people against the producer of *Cinta tapi beda*, Hanung Bramantyo, because he is seen as insulting the Minangkabau Islam-based ethnic group by presenting a female figure who embraces a Christian in the film. Similar protests by the Minangkabau people were directed toward Soraya Film, the producer of *Tenggelamnya kapal Van der Wijck*, which was an adaptation of the famous novel under same title written by Hamka, an Indonesia leading author and ulama from Minangkabau. The posters of the film show the female protagonist Hayati, a Minangkabau girl, wearing a sexy outfit. The protesters claim that Soraya Film degraded the quality of Hamka's novel and misrepresented the Minangkabau Muslims.

In sum, it can be said that the Indonesian film world is a cultural site through which one can perceive the Indonesian everlasting struggle to find its own national identity. Needless to say that such opposite thoughts pejoratively epitomize the divided identity that has been the legacy of the Indonesian post-colonialism nation since its independence. But its historical trait can be traced back to the past, when in the late decades of nineteenth century, Western modernity, as a consequence of the spread of modern European technologies to Asia, touched the societies in the Dutch East Indies. However, far beyond the post-colonial nation's cultural identity, it essentially represents the principal difference between West and East. It seems that what the British poet Joseph Rudyard Kipling said is true. Alas, "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."

J. Stephen Lansing, *Perfect order; Recognizing complexity in Bali*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012, xii + 225 pages. Fourth printing. ISBN 978-0-691-15626-2. Price: USD 24.95 (soft cover).

Dick van der Meij

Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture
Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta
Dickvdm2005@yahoo.com



This is an amazing book. It won the 2007 Julian Steward Book Award in the Anthropology and Environmental Section of the American Anthropological Association. The reward was indeed justly deserved! The book is part of the Princeton Studies in Complexity series, and complex it is.

The book is mainly concerned with the *subak*, a unique Balinese organization that deals with irrigation water management in all its physical, social, political, religious, ritual and legal facets. All Balinese rice paddy owners are members of a *subak* and individual *subak* are members of higher-level *subak* in order to maintain an integrated system of water management crucial for rice cultivation. *Subak* has existed for many centuries and although once seen by the World Bank and other modern, international organizations as being outdated because they are not geared to the one objective of modern times, the largest and most frequent harvests, luckily they have survived the onslaught of foreign and domestic modernisation.

If we walk around the Balinese landscape, we cannot but wonder how it is possible that the rice paddies on the top of a hill contain just as much water as places far below the same hill. Where does the water come from? The water of rivers and springs of Bali are diverted by an ingenious and elaborate system of tunnels, aqueducts and other means, sometimes as far as kilometres away from the original water source. It does not need much imagination to see that this is a fragile system and therefore in need of sophisticated means of maintenance and maintenance organization. At all *subak*-related waterways in Bali and at each place where a water system is diverted we find a *subak* temple. The *subak* water temples thus give an indication of the number of *subak* and *subak* members. How *subak* are organized and how their successes or failures come about are described in great detail in the present book.

One of the questions answered in the book is: why do the farmers uphill allow people downhill the use of the water? Why do they not simply keep it and let the people downhill fend for themselves? It appears that the *subak* regulate not only the water, but through their water management, they also contain pests that might threaten rice harvests. By coordinating the flooding or drying of their paddies, the *subak* members ensure that pests are controlled. It appears from the book that the moment a *subak* is threatened pests take over, placing the harvest and thus the livelihood of the people at risk. In other words, if the uphill people disallow the people downhill the use of water, they are themselves vulnerable to pest attacks and thus the best distribution of water ensures the best harvests for both parties.

Of course, *subak* are threatened and these democratically ruled organizations are mostly in danger of what in essence threatens the democratic

part of the system: people who steal water, overambitious *subak* leaders and other individuals who, because of their individual aspirations, threaten the democratic course of the *subak*'s workings. The research revealed that all the *subak* studied were prone to suffer from the same defects. In short, apparently people are everywhere the same. The book provides interesting examples of ways these problems are either solved – ensuring the survival of the *subak* – or left unresolved, causing harvests to fail. The causes for discord between *subak* members could be due to personality factors but also to the ever-present problem of sorcery and witchcraft, which the book also addresses at length. Why, however, especially Balinese “water mountain” villages should be “obsessed with hierarchy”, is unfortunately not explained. I think that the entire Balinese society is hierarchy obsessed and not only water mountain villages.

The second major question in the book is why *subak* were and are not controlled by the Balinese kings. Why did the kings allow simple farmers to decide on *subak* matters and accordingly on the food supply of their kingdoms. It appears that *subak* are regulated from the bottom up rather than the top down. There is no organization at a top that regulates the *subak* under it. Rather, *subak* react to neighbouring *subak* and as the circle of reaction to events broadens, the entire *subak* system of a “water mountain” becomes affected and settles into the next most propitious equilibrium for all. No central authority can manage a water mountain's *subak* system and thus the kings were not at the top of its hierarchical system. It would seem that the *subak* water systems are so complicated and local natural conditions in Bali vary so much that no centralized, non-specialist power can deal with it.

The research for the book started with a computer model for *subak* to predict what happens when circumstances like the amount of rainfall or the duration of the dry season change. The model did not work satisfactorily because it did not take into account that most irregular variable of all, the human factor. This human factor proved the most important but at the same time the most elusive factor in understanding the *subak* system. It is precisely at this juncture that anthropology enters the field.

The failures of the social sciences, preoccupied as they are with modernity, and of the Indonesian government who listened to them almost caused the total collapse of the *subak* system and therefore of a large part of the Balinese rice supply. Letting individual farmers decide when to plant, and the introduction of insecticides and fertilizers were all detrimental to the *subak* system. Ultimately, they caused more problems than they solved and nearly caused the system to fail. Harvests were neither more frequent nor larger, and hence the rice supply did not increase. The Green Revolution, which was externally imposed on Bali, came close to causing a complete breakdown of its time-honoured rice growing systems and threatened the island with hunger. For me it is amazing that outside organizations think they know best. As if the Balinese had not tried to find the best system for their rice production over the centuries and knew quite well how to go about rice cultivation. The book consists of seven chapters and it traces the origins of the *subak* back to ancient

times through the study of royal inscriptions and archaeological remains. The notion of “water mountain” is introduced and an in-depth study is made of the social elements of Balinese society in order to place the *subak* in its Balinese environment. The role of caste, or rather absence of caste in *subak* matters is dealt with in detail. The book also includes a lengthy study of the Pura Ulun Danu Batur in Kintamani and tries to explain its specific role in the social and religious aspects of water management and the entire socio-religious make-up of Bali. This temple is unique because although royalty and caste play no roles, it is the only water temple whose rituals are visited by representatives of the royal houses. The history and the workings of the temple and its rituals are described at great length in such a way that it makes one want to ask for more. The book is also interesting because it gives a very good idea of the research methodology and does not shy away from expressing doubt in its own findings. Many *subak* meetings over a long period of time were videotaped and subsequently analysed. This was done with a large number of *subak* in order to discover *subak*-specific elements. It transpired that basically the human dynamics within the *subak* were everywhere the same. The role of modern politics, the abortive 1965 coup in Jakarta and its aftermath, the role of literature and changes in landownership and many more related subjects are dealt with in impressive detail. The fact that the author is an anthropologist-cum-ecologist makes the book unique. It expertly shows that using one discipline is insufficient in order to grasp a multifaceted phenomenon like the *subak* system in Bali. It is impossible to summarize the contents of the book. It is densely written and not for the faint hearted. Some prior knowledge of Bali is required as a book of only 225 pages cannot explain everything. It is especially a must-read for policy makers so that they may think twice before they meddle with existing traditions of food supply! That a book like this saw four reprints in only five years is a milestone. It is worthy of many more reprintings. Future editions would be improved by including additional material that would be of great interest to Bali researchers, with an index compiled by a Bali specialist and an updated bibliography. For example, the text of the *Gaguritan Purwa Sanghara* discussed in the book may be consulted in IBG Agastia’s *Cokorda Mantuk ring Rana; Pemimpin yang nyastra*, Yayasan Dharma Sastra, 2006, pp. 115-296.
