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## THE POWER OF LETTERS AND THE FEMALE BODY: FEMALE LITERACY IN BALI

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**Synopsis** — This article explores the meaning of literacy in Bali, with reference to the literature on women and development. It seeks reasons for the low levels of literacy of Balinese women in the articulation of beliefs about the power of letters, and beliefs about fertility and the power of the female body. Precolonial and colonial records are analysed to document the meanings and social distribution of literacy in Bali historically, and the importance of access to texts as a source of power. The Balinese believe in the magic power of letters to affect the well being of society, particularly through sorcery. This is associated with the reproductive power of women coupled with the potential power of women, as witches, to wreak havoc upon the fertility of the land and people. Women were not to be trusted with such powerful weapons. The article concludes that literacy can be gendered, and various and mutable in its meanings and ramifications. The assumptions of contemporary women in development theory—that education and literacy will automatically benefit poor women—are ill founded. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

### INTRODUCTION

There is a widespread belief in the emancipatory effects of education for women in postcolonial societies. “Around the world, research has suggested the overwhelming significance of education for improving the access of women to the paid workforce, to reproductive choices and better health, to awareness of their legal rights, to a fuller cultural life, and even to feminism” (Bulbeck, 1998, p. 196). Development policy advisers argue the value of educating women in terms of the contribution of education to human resource development generally. “Slower population growth has shown quite a strong correlation with faster income growth in the 1980s and better education is probably the key to both. The World Bank now proclaims women’s education as one of the very best investments around, even in economic terms” (Harrison, 1992, p. 25 in Jeffery & Jeffery, 1994, p. 125). Others, mainly demographers working within the “overpopulation” paradigm, claim that, “girls with schooling become mothers who raise healthier chil-

dren” (Floro & Wolf, 1990, p. 56). Given the broad claims, it is important to explore the articulation of female education and literacy with other aspects of women’s lives.

Conventional wisdom of women in development theory, clearly expressed in World Bank documents, causally links rising levels of educational attainment for women with lower fertility, lower child mortality, lower maternal mortality, and AIDS prevention.<sup>1</sup> Changes attributed to the education of women include changes relating to family life and marital relations: later ages at marriage for women, changing family structures (and in particular a shift from extended families to more autonomous nuclear families), declining marriage rates, more companionable relationships between husbands and wives, changes in the value accorded by parents to children, as well as ideas about ideal family size and contraceptive use. The power of education to improve women’s income-earning opportunities and labour force participation is rarely questioned. In other diffuse areas, great advantages are expected to accrue to women once they become literate and schooled. For instance, education is said to enhance self-confidence, making women better able to manage relationships within the family, particularly with in-laws; educated women will be more confident in facing doctors and bureaucrats and more resourceful in finding objective information upon which to make

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new decisions about their own and their families' welfare. In short, educated women will be more able to manipulate their personal environment. It is implied that these more modern attitudes will cleave women from their familial roles—roles which traditionally led to their subordination and exploitation. Female literacy and education will weaken the traditional bonds of culture and patriarchy.

The assumed progression for developing countries is that the mass education of girls will cause a rise in average ages at marriage, reduced infant mortality, reduced family size, increased rates of contraceptive use, and increased participation in the paid labour force.<sup>2</sup> Most demographers and development planners further assume that these new social features will enhance female status and autonomy within the family and society generally in a causal and universal flow-on from the implementation of mass female education.

I would argue that these progressions should not be assumed to be either causal or universal. Neither education nor literacy has a universal meaning and predictable social ramifications. Literacy has different meanings in different times and different cultures; similarly, schooling is an "empty category" (Lindenbaum, 1990, p. 353) with changing implications for different groups and individuals, which may or may not coincide with the conventional development paradigm.

Bali provides an intriguing case study of literacy and education, particularly for women and girls, because it seems to follow a different course in some of the crucial stages of the development flow. Some of the literature suggests that comparatively high levels of female literacy prevailed in precolonial times. However, the colonial era, which dates from the mid-19th century for North Bali and 1908 for South Bali, was characterized by extremely low levels of female schooling. After Indonesia's independence from the Netherlands in 1945, Bali's female school participation rates were among the lowest in the country and remained so at least until 1980, despite a revolution in school enrolments nationwide in that period.

Further, the dramatic fertility decline in Bali preceded mass female education. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in Bali dropped from 5.96% in the period 1967–1970 to 2.8% in the period 1986–1989 (Hull & Jones, 1994, p. 135, Table 3.2) (Table 1).<sup>3</sup> There were very few Balinese women with any education in this period. My research (Parker, 2001a) suggests that it was largely uneducated Balinese women who first adopted contraception.<sup>4</sup> Streatfield (1986, pp. 92–94, 106) found that in Bali, men's educational level appears to have had more impact upon use of family

Table 1  
TFRs in Bali and Indonesia, 1971–1994

1971	Bali	5.955
(1967–1970)	Indonesia	5.605
1980	Bali	3.970
(1976–1979)	Indonesia	4.680
1990	Bali	2.275
(1986–1989)	Indonesia	3.326
1994	Bali	2.14
(IDHS)	Indonesia	2.85

Source: Biro Pusat Statistik Census Data 1971, 1980, 1990 and Indonesian Demographic and Health Survey in Biro Pusat Statistik (2000).

planning, and upon numbers of children ever born, than does women's educational level.

The fertility decline in Bali was partly a response to an aggressive government campaign directed at women; there appears to have been a substantial, unsupplied preexisting demand for contraception; and Balinese women were eager to take advantage of employment opportunities provided by the burgeoning Balinese economy.

Other pieces of evidence from Indonesia also suggest the importance of a more careful delineation of the employment effects of education: unemployment figures for Indonesia in 1987 indicate that women who had attained junior high school level had the lowest labour force participation rate of all (Hull & Jones, 1994, p. 154). Although fieldwork has taught me that government statistics are unreliable—for a host of different measures ranging from school attendance and attainment rates, to contraceptive use and labour force participation rates—the consistency of the statistical relationship between female education and employment over time suggests a real pattern. Since the 1970s, workforce participation rates have shown a continuing pattern: rates have been high among females with no formal schooling, fell among lower secondary graduates, and rose again among upper-secondary- and tertiary-educated women (Manning, 1998, pp. 236–237).

The island of Bali has long been recognized as a special case, being proudly Hindu in a predominantly Moslem nation. Bali has an extremely elaborate, highly stratified and sophisticated society, with ancient traditions of written literature of various genres. Since the First World War, but especially since 1971, Bali has experienced intensive penetration by the Indonesian nation state and by Western cultures and economies, especially through tourism. Compared with much poorer provinces, especially in eastern Indonesia, the province of Bali is one of economic sufficiency and of considerable economic development and industrial-

zation. All these might lead one to expect a high demand for and level of education among the Balinese.

However, levels of education have historically been low in Bali, though rising. By 1980, Balinese boys of all age groups were well above the national average (Oey-Gardiner, 1991, p. 60). Censuses since 1971 show that Balinese girls are significantly undereducated compared with boys, and compared with girls elsewhere in Indonesia, particularly in the higher levels of schooling (Table 2). In 1980, Bali still lagged significantly behind other provinces (Oey-Gardiner, 1991, p. 61).<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I want to avoid the discourses of development and modernity and explore an anterior Balinese world wherein the written word and the female body were invested with magic potency. I begin with a survey of the meaning and social distribution of literacy—simply understood as the ability to read and write—in precolonial Bali, and finally explore the gendered power of letters.

Both indigenous and European historical sources indicate the Balinese preoccupation with the social distribution of literacy, and particularly the issue of access to texts. Access to religious texts was and is a complex and fiercely debated issue in Bali (see Pitana, 1999, pp. 194–195 for contemporary examples), not because of its gender implications but because of its focal point in the great Balinese debates about caste and social status generally.<sup>6</sup>

Bali is often characterized as a caste society, divided into the four great Hindu divisions.<sup>7</sup> The priestly caste (*brahmana*), the royal rulers (*satria*) and traders/administrators (*wesia*) are commonly known as the “three groups” (*triwangsa*) or “insiders” (*wong jero*), and distinguished from the “outsiders” or commoners (*wong jaba* or *sudra*), who comprise perhaps 90% of the population. The *wong jaba* are optionally organized in descent- or title groups. Arguments over caste and status have dominated Balinese public discourse this century, perhaps

as a reaction to the Dutch “freezing” of what was once a more fluid and contestable social structure.<sup>8</sup>

There are some obvious explanations for Bali’s low rate of female literacy and access to education. There is a patrilineal kinship system, such that women are marginal to the core structure of kin groups and residence units. Young women marry out of their natal families and move in with their husbands’ families. Although women are said to control the household purse, they do not participate in most of the decision making that determines the large expenditures, such as temple ceremonies and public works. Men own the land. They inherit riceland from their fathers and are allocated houseyard land by the hamlet upon marriage. Women rarely own this principal means of production. Women do not generally have much say in local government or kin-group decisions. Women and girls are extremely hardworking: they are active in food and wage-good production, trading, animal husbandry, the work of offerings, handcraft production, and are responsible for household maintenance and childcare. All of these social practices conspire to produce good reasons not to educate daughters: daughters are not formally responsible for the support of their parents in old age; they move out of home upon marriage, so their labour is lost to their natal family; girls are more useful than boys around the house and as productive workers; women have no vocational need for literacy, and so on.

In the latter half of this paper, I seek deeper reasons for the low rates of female participation in education in beliefs about the power of knowledge, especially written knowledge, and of gendered access to knowledge. In seeking explanation of the culture surrounding literacy, I first map the incidence and meaning of literacy in premodern times. The methodological problems associated with a fragmented and unfocused historical record are such that the links are tenuous. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that Balinese notions concerning the power of letters and the female body contribute to historically low levels of female literacy in Bali.

Table 2

Sex ratios (females per 100 males) in school attendance in Bali and Indonesia, 1971–1990

	1971	1980	1990
<i>Children aged 7–12 years</i>			
Bali	71	88	93
Indonesia	91	94	95
<i>Children aged 16–18 years</i>			
Bali	37	51	71
Indonesia	58	66	84

Sources: Indonesian Censuses, 1971, 1980, and 1990.

## FEMALE LITERACY IN PRECOLONIAL BALI

Reid (1988), in his social history of Southeast Asia, 1450–1680, reported the “exceptionally high rates of female literacy” in Bali, as in Southeast Asia generally (p. 219). European observers, he reported, were surprised by “near-universal literacy” (Reid, 1988, p. 216). Although sufficiently confident to title this fascinating section of his book, “Widespread Literacy?”, Reid questioned the evidence of European observers on the grounds that European visitors

mixed with the upper classes of indigenous society and may have generalized from a very small number of elite families to give a misleading representation of a whole society.<sup>9</sup> Reid (1988) concluded, for island Southeast Asia, though not explicitly for Bali:

Women took up writing as actively as men, to use in exchanging notes and recording debts and other commercial matters which were in the female domain. The transmission of literacy was therefore a domestic matter, largely the responsibility of mothers and older siblings, and had nothing to do with an exclusive priestly class. . . . On this basis we can accept levels of literacy in sixteenth-century Indonesia and the Philippines that were very high by any contemporary standards, and as high as any in the world for women. (pp. 221–222)

Reid also commented suggestively on the possibly detrimental impact of formal religious systems and the colonial experience on girls' access to literacy and schooling. The 1920 census, the first census taken in the Netherlands Indies, seemed to bear this out.<sup>10</sup> It contains data on literacy: in Bali and Lombok, 8.01% of indigenous males over 15 years were recorded as literate, and 0.35% of females (Nederlandsch-Indie, 1922, p. 293, Table IXD).<sup>11</sup> The language of literacy was not defined by the census-takers.<sup>12</sup> Literacy in the Dutch language was a separate category and the figures are much lower than for general literacy. The 1920 census also recorded the number of children attending school at the end of December: 6.78% of boys aged 5–15 years was attending school and only 0.25% of girls (Nederlandsch-Indie, 1922, p. 309, Table B).

These two sources suggested to me that some historical research would allow me to test Reid's hypotheses about an atypically high level of female literacy in a precolonial society and the deleterious effects of colonization on this. There seemed to be several enigmas: possibly high levels of female literacy in precolonial Bali, possibly low levels of female literacy and schooling during colonial times, and certainly low levels of female literacy and schooling up to 1980. Here I examine some of the local and European sources for evidence of the social distribution of literacy up to and at the time of Dutch colonisation.

### *Evidence of Precolonial Literacy in Balinese Literature*

The many stone and bronze inscriptions, beginning in the ninth century, indicate Bali's long tradi-

tion of administrative literacy.<sup>13</sup> There is also a long history of writing on palm leaves (*lontar*, the treated leaves of *Borassus flabellifer*).<sup>14</sup> This written literature in Old Balinese, Sanskrit, Kawi, and Balinese encompasses many genres and coexists with an oral literature transmitted through chanting, dramatic performance, and ritual performance. There is a tradition of reverence for writing and texts, and Balinese society has been characterized as "a society of religious literacy" (Rubinstein, 2000, p. 25ff).<sup>15</sup>

Our picture of literacy in Bali from the Balinese literature is severely circumscribed by the fact that most literature has been produced by and for the courts (*puri*) and priestly houses (*geria*). It is doubtful that we will ever really penetrate beyond this elite world in our mapping of female literacy during the precolonial period, but at least there are some clues that allow entrance into the upper layer of society and letters.

*Kakawin* are the epic poems of Java and Bali, based on the Indian literary model, the *mahakavya*. They depict the adventures of the Indian gods and heroes of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, and the world of princely war, of courtly love, of marriage, and of chivalry. They depict a world in which beautiful, desirable, court women lead lives of virtue and loyalty, and inspire men to wage battle and to write poems. Contrasting with the Indian form, the details of the social and natural world are those of a local environment, and many of the themes are local. In these poems, women embody the ideal of beauty. These poems, as Zoetmulder (1974) has shown, are essentially hymns that celebrate beauty in nature and in human life as a manifestation of the Absolute cosmic unity (pp. 212–214).

There are solid grounds for using *kakawin* as primary sources for the determination of cultural reality in the court worlds of Java and Bali in pre-Islamic and precolonial times, respectively.<sup>16</sup> The Javanese *kakawin* date from the 9th to the 14th centuries, and those from Bali and Lombok from the early 18th century to the present (Creese, 1993, 1996, p. 171). They reveal a social world in which men and women alike were able to read and write, and did so in love letters at the merest hint of a coquettish glance. The reading and writing of poetry in Old Javanese or Kawi were an essential element in the art of the gentleperson. Poetic skill was part of the arsenal in courtship battles (Zoetmulder, 1974, pp. 152–153). One Javanese poem described the agony of a circle of unrequited suitors, who each expressed his love and adoration for the princess, and their distress when she rejected them, in a poem (Zoetmulder, 1974, pp. 152–153). The same poem told of a princess who assessed, ranked, and rewarded

her ladies-in-waiting according to their accomplishments, beauty, and adornments. One who reached the rank of poet (*kawi*) received a special ring, and there were 20 such poets, all accomplished in literary technique (Zoetmulder, 1974, pp. 159–160). In another poem, a palace lady-in-waiting, the former wife of a poet, described how she and her husband competed with each other in poetry writing (Zoetmulder, 1974, p. 141). The *kakawin* document an easy, familiar literacy in which the main characters, male and female, used ephemeral materials such as the flower of the pandanus (*pudak*), which, when inscribed, made a handy slate for a quick passionate epistle. In addition, we find references in the Balinese Parthayajna to Arjuna's visit to a community of nuns perhaps founded by a royal court lady (Zoetmulder, 1974, p. 373); there were hermitages where male and female scholars and religious students went to study and meditate.

Most poignantly, we read in the Javanese Sutasoma of lovewriting gone awry. Queen Marmawati told her husband how, distressed and confused after his battle, she had stayed over at a pleasure garden, copying a *kakawin* to seek solace. Her husband, suspecting her of an illicit affair, "objected very much to this, and his heart became suspicious, as he did not remember sending her a [love] poem on a pandanus flower. The Queen told him that she had copied the poem from [one she had found] in the garden. The king went there [to investigate] but it had vanished, wiped out by water from the roof. This made the king furious, and he ceased to love the queen" (Soewito-Santoso, 1975, p. 442). She repaired to her father's hermitage, and on hearing of her husband's death in battle, determined to prove her faithfulness by following him in death. A nightmare scene followed, in which she and other wives scoured the bloody battlefield for their loved ones. A trusted servant informed her that the king had died a glorious death, that his body had vanished in a burst of flames and that his soul had been liberated. She ordered a pyre and "longed so much to follow the king" that "she stood undismayed with the expression of one victorious in battle" (Soewito-Santoso, p. 450). The Queen was seen to be "united again in love" with her King in the abode of Wisnu (Soewito-Santoso, p. 452).

### *Evidence of Precolonial Literacy in European Literature*

Evidence of literacy from English sources at the beginning of the 19th century is patchy. Raffles perceived Bali to be a caste society, and reported on

written languages in Bali. Raffles reported that: "In Bali the Kawi is still the language of religion and law; in Java it is only that of poetry and ancient fable. In the former, the knowledge of it is almost exclusively confined to the Brahmana (Bramins) . . ." (Raffles, 1978 [1817], p. 367, vol. I). He also documented the recourse of Brahmans to written legal codes in Balinese courts (Raffles, 1978 [1817], pp. 236–237, vol. II, Appendix K). Raffles commented favourably upon the condition of women: "Their women, in particular . . . are here on a perfect equality with the men. . ." (Raffles, 1978 [1817], pp. 231–232, vol. II, Appendix K).<sup>17</sup>

From the *Singapore Chronicle*, we have a report on Bali, probably by the British missionary, Medhurst, which included the comment:<sup>18</sup>

The persons acquainted with letters are few, owing to the want of places of public instruction, and those who venture to write are still fewer, because they are afraid of incurring the displeasure of the superiors if they form their letters so as to offend against their superstitious prejudices. Their books generally treat of mythological stories, and they have some collections of "*undang-undang*," or laws, to which they refer, and by which they profess to govern their states. (Medhurst & Tomlin, 1968 [1837], p. 94).

Here and elsewhere, Medhurst and Tomlin (1968 [1837]) made notes about Balinese women, but the picture was of their sorry plight: "The women are sadly circumstanced and miserably ill-used in Bali" (p. 90).<sup>19</sup>

Almost all European explorers, traders, and administrators, up to the end of the 19th century, included comment on the Balinese practice of widow—sacrifice, *sati*, or the self-immolation of women on the funeral pyres of husbands, male relatives, or high-ranking noble masters either by burning or stabbing.<sup>20</sup> All European reports condemned the "barbaric" practices, while also expressing amazement at the women's apparent willingness to self-sacrifice and horrified fascination with the (to them) gory spectacle. On this matter, indigenous *kakawin* and the reports of European explorers are quite at odds (Connor, 1996; Creese, 1993; van der Kraan, 1985).

Zollinger, a member of the Dutch Batavian Society, which was dedicated to the collection of scientific knowledge about the Netherlands Indies, observed of Balinese living in neighbouring Lombok in the 1840s: "nearly all Balinese can read and write their language, even the people of the lowest condition, as

well as the greatest part of the women” (Zollinger, 1847, p. 532 in Reid, 1988, p. 216).

Helms, the Danish adventurer who from 1847 to 1849 worked in Kuta at the factory and depot of the Danish trader, Mads Lange, also provided a vivid commentary on the position of women, viz. “the idleness of the men and the amount of work and of responsibility imposed upon the women,” “the leading part taken by the women in all these bustling transactions,” and the “tragedy” of *sati*, which he found “shocking,” “terrible,” and an “awful spectacle” (Helms, 1969 [1882], pp. 27, 42, 57ff). Women traders could amass considerable personal wealth (Helms, 1969 [1882], p. 56), and conducted “all trading,” leading impressive retinues of ponies and slaves, driving livestock and bearing produce and offerings in baskets to market, and bargaining in boisterous manner for the sale of oxen, pigs and poultry (Helms, p. 42ff). Unfortunately, he did not make any mention of female literacy in these transactions.<sup>21</sup>

Evidence of general literacy at the time of the Dutch takeover of North Bali in the mid-19th century is contradictory. Helms reported that Kawi was only a sacred and learned tongue, the language of court; that the majority of the population were ignorant of it; and that court retainers could read the palm-leaf stories and legends (Helms, 1969 [1882], pp. 35, 47). He recorded that the two lower castes did not possess the Vedas (Helms, 1969 [1882], p. 37).

The Sanskrit philologist, Friedrich, also perceived Bali to be a caste society and reported carefully upon the differentiation of Sanskrit and Kawi, and the control of physical texts and literacy in Kawi by the brahmanic priests (*pedanda*). He too failed to mention the literature in the Balinese language (Friedrich, 1959 [1849–1850]. Friedrich wrote:

In Bali . . . [the Puranas] are guarded by the priests like the whole of the holy scriptures, and even hid from the people. In Bali, everything relating to religion is in the hands of the priests, and on the great ignorance of the people in all that is necessary according to the sacred literature for their temporal and celestial happiness, is founded the unlimited power of the priests, who are the organs of the Deity for the blindly believing people. (Friedrich, 1959 [1849–1850])

Van Bloemen Waanders (1859), the Assistant Resident in North Bali, mentioned in 1859 the existence of texts in Kawi, and brahmanic control of them (pp. 147–155). On the other hand, he reported, surprisingly, that half the male population of Bule-

leng (North Bali) and one-fifth or one-sixth of the female population could read and write. We can only surmise that he meant read and write in Balinese, for he went on to say that high-caste people restricted access to literacy, a restriction based on the “hare-brained notion or rather excuse” that an uninitiated, low-caste person would suffer madness or other misfortune as a result of contact with the magic potency of texts.<sup>22</sup>

The Dutch medical doctor, Jacobs, reported that:

almost every adult Balinese can read and write. Most women from the higher classes of Balinese society have also mastered this art . . . The Balinese learn this [writing] from each other in play, and already small toddlers teach each other to read the Balinese alphabet and to write it on *lontar* leaves. (Jacobs, 1883, p. 216 translated in Reid, 1988, p. 218)

Jacobs’ account illustrates the ease with which we may misunderstand these commentators: clearly, to him, “almost every adult Balinese” meant “almost every Balinese man,” not woman.

These two reports on literacy in North Bali seem the most reliable because they were written by government employees with an interest in documenting such things to a colonial government. In turn, this government was notorious for its interest in bureaucracy and the codification of the customs of its subject population (e.g., Vickers, 1989, pp. 78–91, 146–150). The absence of government reports for South Bali, and the contrast of Helms’ report with the above two, suggest that literacy may well have been quite restricted in the far more populous south of Bali, which remained more insular.

In these European sources, the social distribution of literacy and access to texts were most often described in terms of caste/status, not gender. Partly, this is because all reports were by men, who were “gender-blind” according to the norms of the day in Europe,<sup>23</sup> and partly because of the fascination with “caste” and Orientalist visions of the “East Indies.”<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the figures from Van Bloemen Waanders, Jacobs, and the 1920 census indicate that there were significant gender disparities in literacy and access to education in the pre- and early colonial period. I would conclude that gender was important in shaping the distribution of literacy, even if foreign commentators did not exclaim over it. For this reason, it seems worthwhile to see if there are particularly gendered aspects to indigenous beliefs about the nature of knowledge, the meaning of literacy, and the significance of texts.

Before I move on to that, I want to explore the meaning of literacy in the Balinese cultural context.

### THE POWER OF LETTERS

In Bali, as elsewhere in Indonesia, illiteracy does not mean that one cannot obtain access to literature. Oral literature captures higher knowledge and continues to enjoy a high status. Notwithstanding the arguments of Anderson (1983, 1990) and others about the onslaught of print capitalism on social, performed poetic literature, the oral tradition has shown no sign of dying out under the impact of cheap, mass-produced, written literature (Sweeney, 1987 has an extended discussion, e.g., p. 106ff; Derks, 1996). There has been no “sudden enormous silence” (Anderson, 1990, p. 210)—on the contrary. In Bali, the oral tradition creates and transmits higher knowledge, encompassing fields such as epic poetry, history, moral pedagogy, and ethics. It flourishes through dance and drama performance, specialist chanting groups (*sekaha mebebasan/pepaosan*) which meet regularly, government-sponsored chanting competitions, ritual chanting and prayers, television performances, and informal telling of folktales (*satua/dongeng*).<sup>25</sup> In these contexts, with the usual exception of the last, participants may use both oral and written literature, with expert dancers or actors referring to history texts such as *babad* (dynastic chronicles), chanting groups using *kakawin* (epic poems) as the focus of study, and schoolchildren memorizing written poems for recitation. On the other hand, participants in these activities do not have to be literate, in any language, and one can “learn” (meaning memorize) the necessary “text” by repeated listening, oral copying, checking, and so on. It should be noted that written literature, especially the Javanese *kakawin* such as the *Ramayana*, *Bharatayudha*, *Bhomakarya*, *Sutasoma*, and *Arjunawiwaha*, is orally “known” and much loved even today by uneducated and illiterate farmers and other villagers, including women. There is often not a strict realm for written literature, and one can certainly not assume that an illiterate person is a literary ignoramus. From this point of view, it could be argued that literacy is not an important criterion of social value or status.

However, there is a great deal of status and power to be gained from literacy, i.e., from the ability to read the vast, varied, and rich written literature which exists in Bali, mainly housed in the royal and priestly houses (*puri* and *geria*) of the *brahmana* and *satria* castes. The key to this whole vexed question of the social distribution of literacy and access to texts lies in the relation between traditional literacy and social function—mainly caste and occupation. It is the duty

and social function of the three higher castes to maintain harmony and prosperity in the realm and, to this end, to be versed in the sacred scriptures, the *Weda* (*Vedas*).<sup>26</sup> Thus, although the *brahmana*, and especially the consecrated priests, the *pedanda*, were known as the *literati* and the scriptural experts in matters of religion, the other two high-born groups also had a social responsibility to study the scriptures.<sup>27</sup> The high priests and traditional rulers were the principal patrons of history- and poetry writing and of chanting groups (*sekaha mebebasan/pepaosan*), and the courts were the principal sponsors of dance and theatrical performances. The houses of high priests and traditional rulers were the principal repositories of texts, and where I worked in the Klungkung area of east Bali, these houses held almost a monopoly of texts, genealogies, and easy access to higher knowledge. It was difficult for young people outside these circles to acquire knowledge of how to write and read in *Kawi*.

Thus, it was the duty and prerogative of the higher castes to study the scriptures. Their wealth and position of status and power at the apex of the social hierarchy enabled and encouraged the collection of texts, the composition and the performance of texts, and allowed them to control access to many texts. As Forge has pointed out, the superiority of the higher castes was based not just on birth but also on their possession of, and ability to read and understand, these texts (Forge, 1980, p. 222). However, there is nothing in the scriptures that legislates literacy according to caste.

Some low-caste people were literate because their occupation demanded it: for instance, the secular literacy of village and tax officials (*klian* and *bendesa*) in their village and irrigation society (*subak*) administration,<sup>28</sup> and the service literacy of some servants (*parekan*) of the royal and priestly houses. Many vocations, such as architecture and some building trades (*undagi*), some types of healing and other esoteric practices such as witchcraft and astrology (*balian usada* and *balian wariga*), blacksmithing (*pande*) and offering-making (*tukang banten*), required that the practitioner be apprenticed to a *guru*, who passed on secret, specialized textual knowledge to the novice in a series of stages (Rubinstein, 2000, p. 29ff; Zurbuchen, 1987, pp. 24, 44–46). In such cases, literacy was usually only acquired after the novice had decided to specialize.

Such vocational literacy involved a religious approach to textual study (Rubinstein, 1996a, p. 184, n. 19), parallel to the process of becoming a high priest (*pedanda*): ritual purification, many years of study, by stages, of secret texts under the guidance of

the teacher—*pedanda* or *nabe*, live-in service and apprenticeship at the teacher's house, climaxed by ritual all-night death and morning rebirth as a twice-born (*dwijati*). The low-caste (*jaba*) vocational apprentice had to undertake ritual purification (*pawinntenan*) and initiation into the vocation. The apprenticeship had to be undertaken through the mediation of the teacher because the knowledge transmitted was so potent that, if not released in measured doses, the novice may have been afflicted with madness and even death. In dispensing knowledge, the teacher was responsible for the timing and degree of revelation, the choice of text, and for the release of a host of explanatory resources to his student. Once under way, the teacher judged the revelation of knowledge upon the basis of the content and depth of the student's questioning and revealed knowledge.

Was this vocational literacy available to women as well as to men? The Weda with which I am familiar address themselves to a male reader/audience, e.g., the Manawa Dharmasastra (Manu Dharmasastra, *sloka* 11) advises: "A wise person will neither marry a girl who does not have a brother nor a girl whose father does not acknowledge her because he will fear that the girl is adopted in the first case, and, in the second, that her father is guilty of wrongdoing." However, these texts are simply Kawi translations of Indian originals and it is dangerous to assume from this slight evidence that a purely male audience is intended. In any case, the assumption of a male audience and a female object/other is hardly unusual and cannot be assumed to imply the illiteracy of women. Men must be married to become high priests (*pedanda*) but spinster *pedanda* can, theoretically, be consecrated. Female priests (*pedanda isteri*) can and do act on their own as *pedanda*.<sup>29</sup> This singular, but dubious, privilege is something of an anomaly in Balinese public life, wherein virtually all public offices are held by married men, with their wives taking a supporting and complementary role. The whole of the island of Nusa Penida was served by a female priest through the 1970s (Forge, personal communication) and in 1994 I was told there were three unmarried female priests in Bali. On the other hand, those few women who do become *pedanda* remain objects of curiosity and suspicion, so it is hardly surprising that there are so few. There was a *brahmana* woman in Sanur who became a text healer (*balian usada*), only to be renounced by her *pedanda* teacher and ostracized by her family (Lovric, 1986, p. 83). She was thought to be one of the greatest practitioners of black (or "left") magic (*pangwiwa*) of all time.

As with the vocational literacy of men, there is a conjunction of vocational specialization, literacy, and caste status for women, but it is a negative one:

... [W]omen are excluded from studying medical and most other manuscripts. The only category of women who have access to classical texts are the unmarried daughters of high-ranking gentry families for whom there are no spouses of appropriate status. Many of these women function as offering consultants at all major ceremonies. It is interesting to note that of all females these are most likely to be literate, and also the least likely to disperse their skills through marrying out. (Connor, 1983, p. 66)

I corroborate this observation: in the royal and priestly houses where I worked were several unmarried elderly women who had spent their entire lives in their natal homes. Their quiet, introverted lives were enriched by literature and stories of family history, in which they were often expert. An ease and familiarity with literature still permeate the court world, as described by Zoetmulder (1974, pp. 126–186) in *Kalangwan*, and women are an integral part of this world.

Women have, very occasionally, held the throne in Bali. Most famous is Dewa Agung Isteri Kanya of Klungkung. She co-ruled with her brother over a "golden age" of literature and the arts in the 19th century. A poet and patron of the arts, the Babad Ksatriya and the *kakawin* Sakrapajaya liken her to Saraswati, the Goddess of Letters. There is a tradition in Klungkung that during her 35-year reign, reading groups (*pepaosan*) were active every day at court (Vickers, 1982, p. 492).<sup>30</sup>

Low-caste women can become healers (*balian*) of some types, offering specialists (*tukang banten*) and village priests (*pemangku isteri*), though I have not come across a spinster *pemangku*, i.e., a woman who has become a *pemangku* in her own right and not as the wife of a *pemangku*. Women may not become text healers (*balian usada*), astrologers (*balian wariga*), architects (*undagi*), blacksmiths (*pande*), and, with one known contemporary exception, village officials (*klian*, *bendesa*). In the Cakranegara court in 19th century Lombok, we have records of one female scribe (Creese, 1996, p. 156, n. 34). Generally, there are no occupational specializations that enable or allow low-caste women to become literate.

Ritual is generally "women's work" in Bali and women contribute an enormous amount of time, skill, resources, and work to ensure the continuing prosperity and stability of their families and communities,



especially through the making of offerings.<sup>31</sup> In the village where I work, the four male heads of the customary villages (*klian desa adat*) oversee many, if not most, ceremonies in the temples of their communities. However, village women do not usually consult them for directions about the ingredients, shape, and size of the offerings they have to make. More commonly, they drop in on the village priests and their wives (*pemangku/pemangku isteri*) or offering specialists (*tukang banten*) who may have consulted a higher authority such as the *brahmana* priest (*pedanda*) or customary village head (*klian desa adat*) if it were an infrequent or unusual ceremony. In my customary village, the principal offering expert was the female high priest (*pedanda isteri*).

To plumb the depths of the relation between traditional literacy and social function, we must examine the particular nature of the written word and its social and religious significance in Bali. In Bali, a text does not merely transmit meaning and knowledge. Balinese texts, in the form of palm-leaf manuscripts (*lontar*), are also sources of magical or supernatural power. Texts are valuable partly because the most valued knowledge is inscribed onto *lontar*. Further, texts consist of letters or syllables (*aksara*), which are themselves sacred and potent.

Balinese cosmology is an “elaborate mystico-linguistic” field (Zurbuchen, 1987, p. 55) in which the macrocosmos (*buwana agung*) and microcosmos or human body (*buwana alit*) are linked.<sup>32</sup> Crucial elements in this linking are linguistic forms, especially letters and syllables, and verbal manipulations of these. The keystone of this elaborate metaphysical system is Siwa, otherwise known as the Great God Ten Syllables, Sanghyang Dasaksara (*dasa*, 10, and *aksara*, letters). The Ten Syllables correspond to the three-dimensional “rose of the winds” (*nawasanga*) or the four cardinal directions, the four intermediate directional points, and two extreme points on a central axis. The final syllable, the all-encompassing “ONG” or “OM,” is a representation of ultimate and all-encompassing reality. The whole system provides a set of ordering principles for a wide range of social practices such as the laying-out of offerings, the architecture of houses and villages, and seating arrangements. Each syllable has multiple referents and associations such as a particular deity, a weapon, an element, a colour, a direction, and a seat or place of residence in the human body. For instance, the syllable “BA” is associated with the direction of the seaward direction and home of evil spirits (*kelod*), the colour red, fiery elements, scarlet flowers, the liver in the human body — all under the aegis of the god Brahma.

Letters (*aksara*) have an internal (i.e., internal to the body) reality and are “brought to life” in verbalizations by a reader or in writing. (The Balinese word *aksara* and Kawi *aksara* derive from Sanskrit *a-ksara*, meaning “imperishable”; Rubinstein, 1984, p. 2.) The central ritual of the brahmanic priest (*pedanda* or *surya sewana*) is the making of holy water (*tirta*). It comprises the mental activation of the 10 letters (*dasaksara*), followed by the revolving of the directions, and the condensing and transformation of the 10 letters. First they become five (the *pancaksara*), then three (the *triaksara*), then the two that are different (*dua-bhinneda*, the universal and indivisible oppositions such as life and death, male and female, micro- and macrocosmos), and finally the all-encompassing unity or ONG (Zurbuchen, 1987, p. 54):

The association of spelling with life and death through the use of these metaphors is more than convention. It signifies a belief . . . which was widespread in traditional Bali — that letters have a divine origin, are invested with supernatural life-force, and are a powerful weapon that can be employed to influence the course of events. (Rubinstein, 1996a, p. 190)

This divinely given truth is transcribed onto palm leaves, usually by brahmanic priests (*pedanda*), text specialists (*balian usada*), poets (*kawi*), or court scribes (*juru tulis*). An author or copyist has the power of life and death, as well as of corruption and manipulation, over these letters. Ida Pedanda Made Sidemen, one of the great literary figures of this century, frequently referred to his writing in the metaphor of battle, in which the letters were “defeated” or “collapsed in battle” through incorrect spelling (Rubinstein, 1996a, p. 190). Therefore, an author or copyist must be a person of spiritual power (*sakti*), able to regulate macrocosmic influence on the functioning of the microcosm through the manipulation of letters and syllables. Brahmanic priests particularly work to affect the macrocosmos through the utterance of letters, and text specialists use texts to “redress the effects of divine and demonic wrath and witchcraft on the human body” in internal corporeal domains, such as the heart, liver, or bile (Rubinstein, 1984, p. 3).

Because letters are sacred and powerful, the actions of reading (in public and in private) and writing carry ritual obligations. As mentioned, a high priest has a complicated procedure of purification and reciting of letters and sacred syllables in his morning ablutions and preparation for his reception of Siwa, who, through him, makes holy water (*tirta*). A con-

ventional preface to history or poetry texts such as *babad* and *kakawin*, is “Ong! May there be no hindrance! Honour and fulfillment!”. This is the expression of the hope that no misfortune will flow from the risky acts of reading and writing. There are *mantra* to be recited and often offerings to be made prior to opening a palm-leaf manuscript, before writing, before writing vowels, before destroying letters or burning manuscripts, before reading, before putting away a manuscript for storage and before chanting (Zurbuchen, 1987, p. 60).

The process of acquiring higher knowledge involves contact with supernatural forces, for which one must be initiated and protected, purified, and gradually strengthened with graduated knowledge. One who has knowledge should keep it contained and secret, like a virus in a bottle, so that its magical efficacy does not get out of control, become diluted, or dispersed (Rubinstein, 2000, p. 35). This is the metaphysical kernel of the famous *aja wera* or *haywa wera* instruction not to open that which is secret, which prefaces many religious and magic texts in Bali (Rubinstein, 2000, pp. 34–35; Zurbuchen, 1987, p. 269). This proscription, an example of which is reproduced below, is an effort to preserve the fragile harmony of the cosmos through the control of texts:

... [A]ll holy people have the right to know it. Don't be indiscriminate! Don't disseminate it! It is truly secret. Don't read it if you're uninitiated or you'll fall prey to grave misfortune! (Swarawyanjana Tutur, R 7, 2a, translated in Rubinstein, 2000, p. 35)

In explanation, many high-caste people told me that this injunction is supposed to restrict reading access to the *brahmana* and *satria* castes because only those of high caste are strong enough to deal with the magic potency of such knowledge as is contained in these texts.

An edict of 1887, by the *satria* ruler of Lombok, and probably Karangasem, Agung Gede Ngurah Karangasem, is pertinent here. Based on his reading of certain texts (such as the *Brahmandapurana* and the *Sarasamuccaya*), this ruler decided to make access to texts dependent upon caste and vocation (Lieftrinck, 1915, pp. 80–91). He conducted a census of all manuscripts in the realm, with all texts to be assessed and impounded if necessary. He stated that his aim was religious: that he sought to maintain cosmic harmony within the realm by matching caste status and text genre. For instance, he decreed that high-caste people (*triwangsa*) could only give *kakawin* and *kidung* (epic poems) to low-caste people (*sudra*), and

forbad members of the *triwangsa*, except for ordained *brahmana*, access to the Weda.

Although this edict does not reveal the actual situation with regards to the social distribution of literacy within his realm, it does indicate many other interesting aspects of literacy: that a Balinese ruler had read various esoteric texts based on Indian texts; that at least some Balinese saw a link between literacy and caste status; that texts were thought to be magically powerful; and that it was conceivable for a king to regulate the reading material of his subjects—to the point of prescribing punishments for those, including high priests, who dared to violate his edict. An interesting addendum is that he expressed the hope that his edict, in safeguarding the sacredness of the Weda, would promote the welfare of his low-caste subjects because the transgression of restricted access would produce divine wrath.

### POTENT LETTERS AND THE FEMALE BODY

Is this esoteric belief system of the supernatural potency of literature and knowledge gendered in any way? Perhaps not explicitly and directly, for we read no proscriptions of the *aja wera* type according to gender. However, the Balinese attitude towards literacy does have a gendered aspect.

Knowledge of letters not only secures harmony and prosperity in the macrocosm, but also can be employed in sorcery to wreak trouble and disaster. The term for sorcery or black magic is “*pangiwa*” from left “*kiwa*.” Its literal meaning is “reading palm-leaf manuscripts from left to right.” The example par excellence of the dangerous connection between literacy and femaleness is the story of the vindictive widow, Rangda.

Rangda is the famous widow-witch of Balinese theatre. She is the complex embodiment of evil. She is a fear-inspiring figure: she has long pendulous, sometimes hairy, breasts; her long, loose, white hair reaches often to the ground; she has fangs and long claw-like fingernails, bulging eyes, and a tongue that lolls to her waist; sometimes entrails of children are draped around her neck; and her body is covered in horizontal black and white stripes of fur. Rangda cannot be killed: she is immortal, destructive, insanely malicious, angry, cavorting and shrieking—and female.

The most memorable appearances of Rangda are in the dramatic Calonarang dance-play, an exorcism of witches or evil spirits (*leak*) (see Bateson & Mead, 1942; Belo, 1949, 1960; Covarrubias, 1972 [1937]; de Zoete & Spies, 1973 [1939]; Suastika 1997). The

dramatization is supposed to be based upon a historical figure, a widow queen.<sup>33</sup> The following summary is based upon that in Hooykaas (1978, pp. 16–18).

The widow had a beautiful daughter who was of marriageable age, but because of the widow's reputation for knowledge of sorcery, there were no suitors for her daughter's hand. Furious, the widow took up her book (*pustaka*), a palm-leaf manuscript of magic invocations, which had been granted her as a boon by the Goddess of Destruction, Durga, and went to a graveyard with her entourage of half a dozen young women. Dancing with her entourage of trainee witches, Rangda asked the Goddess Durga for permission and power to ruin the country and its people. Durga agreed but requested moderation. Rangda and her entourage danced at the crossroads at midnight and shortly afterwards people everywhere fell victim to a contagious illness. Many died. The king sent soldiers to kill her, but she spewed forth fire from her eyes, nostrils, ears and mouth, killing the soldiers. The widow was incensed at the king's actions, and, with her book and followers, she went to the graveyard again. Foreswearing moderation, she danced upon and desecrated the interred bodies, thus pleasing Durga. Widespread destruction followed. The king then called upon the assistance of his priest, Mpu Bharada, who devised a strategy. The only way that the priest could counter the disaster was to obtain and read the widow-witch's palm-leaf book. The priest's pupil, Mpu Bahula, would ask for the widow's daughter in marriage. This was successful. After some time, this son-in-law managed to get his wife to give him Rangda's book of magic invocations. He gave the book to his *guru* priest, Mpu Bharada, who then had the power to control life and death. He found that the manuscript contained only the teachings of good conduct and religion, but that Rangda had subverted these by "going to the left, towards defilement" (Rubinstein, 1984, p. 4). He managed to resurrect the victims of the widow who had not yet decomposed, and he conquered the widow and then revived her, exorcizing and liberating her soul.

The play climaxes when massed men attack Rangda with daggers (*kris*) and she reverses the power so that they turn their *kris* on themselves. Then the Barong, a male, dragon-like figure, counters her magic with his own, hardening the skin of the chests of her entranced attackers so that despite their frenzied efforts, the *kris* points do not penetrate. Rangda collapses, her power contained but never destroyed, and the Barong departs.

Rangda is the principal source of power/knowledge for those wishing to learn the arts of black magic (*pangiwa*, the "left" knowledge). While both

men and women can practise magic and sorcery and wield magical power (*sakti*), the Balinese think that women are particularly well suited to it. One becomes a witch/evil spirit (*leak*) by consuming one of the "four siblings" (*Kanda Mpat*) that accompany each human baby at birth, i.e., the amniotic fluid, the blood of childbirth, the umbilical cord, and the placenta.<sup>34</sup> At night, the novices gather at the graveyard, having left their bodies at home in bed. Under the tutelage of Rangda, they transform themselves into old hags, dine on the rotting corpses and decorate themselves with intestines, then go out to do a night's work, appearing as fearful visions, wreaking havoc in dreams, and generally causing illness and death.

The significance of belief in magic and sorcery cannot be overstated for everyday life in Bali. Rangda and sorcerers in general are believed to cause miscarriages and to feed on newborn babies. Obviously, women have comparatively free access to the principal food and tools of the sorcerers' art. The identification of the byproducts of childbirth with sorcery is probably the major reason traditional midwives in Bali were men. Also, birth is an event that attracts evil spirits, and men are thought to be stronger than women in warding off attacks by these spirits (see the paintings reproduced in Geertz, 1994, pp. 69, 70).

In the medical literature on childbirth in Bali, it is not the normal birth process which is of interest: focus is on the abnormal, the normal gone awry or reversed, the failed, and the unnatural. The childbirth manual, the *Usada Manak* (Teaching of Childbirth), for instance, concerns itself with infertility, misconception, miscarriage, stillbirth, infant and maternal death (Lovric, 1987, p. 105), and how to prevent or reverse such disasters. This manual should only be read by male initiates: allowing female access to such a text would be asking for trouble.

The simple ritual performed at birth consists of the burial of the "four siblings" (*Kanda Mpat*) by the new father. The precious remnants of birth are placed in a hollowed-out coconut shell wrapped in white cloth, along with various symbolic foods and spices. A small hole is dug in the earth in the houseyard near the entrance to the parents' sleeping quarters on the right side of the doorway (seen from inside the house) for male babies and on the left side for female babies. The father or male midwife writes some magical letters upon a small piece of white cloth or palm-leaf (*pipil*), says a *mantra*, buries the white bundle, and marks the spot with a pandanus leaf or black riverstone.

In the quotidian life of Bali, "black magic" and sorcery are almost tangible: if a baby sickens, if someone falls off their motorbike, loses their official papers, or their rambutan tree dies, a host of witches,

sorcerers, and spirits are available for blame. If a neighbour comes in to a house to visit, suspicions are roused; if a bobbing light is seen in the distance at night, it is sure to be a spirit (*leak*). It is difficult to overstate the frequency and omnipresence of sorcery in Balinese life. Incidents of sorcery cluster around transitional life events such as menstruation, stillbirth and birth, miscarriage, sickness and death:

Many of the hazards to life inherent in pregnancy and childbirth, and the realities of neo-natal and maternal deaths and high infant morbidity and mortality, are cast in the idiom of witchcraft. (Lovric, 1987, p. 246)

Women straddle the zones of ambiguity and of death and life—still-birth and live-birth, misconception and conception, miscarriage and parturition, barrenness and fecundity, menopause and menarche. . . (Lovric, 1987, p. 255)

By their occupation of these zones of transition, women become *sebel*, i.e., in a state of ritual pollution. Mary Douglas' (1966) idea of pollution—as disorder, danger and power—is applicable to the state of *sebel* in Bali. As daughters, wives, mothers, and widows, women are more likely than men to be rendered ritually impure (*sebel*)—hence to be vulnerable to bewitchment, and to wield ambiguous power. Women not only have reproductive powers, they are also far more subject to transformative change than men—through menstruation, fertility or infertility, conception, parturition, and menopause. Women may not read or have access to texts at these transitional times, e.g., when menstruating their mobility is severely restricted and their ritual work ceases, for they would defile and may have no truck with otherworldly beings at such dangerous times. Through their bodily functions, women have easy access to the means of sorcery, by which they can be instrumental in the social world. Women interact with natural and supernatural forces—sometimes controlling them but also being subject to them. Through reproduction, sustenance, and destruction, women are both powerful and dangerous.

## CONCLUSION

Archaic notions of danger that adhere to the female body have restricted female access to texts and perhaps to broader educational opportunities in Bali. The documentation for female literacy in precolonial Bali is confusing, but there is considerable evidence to show that elite, high-caste women enjoyed an easy

intimacy with high literature. More conjecturally, the majority of women were illiterate, being excluded from access to letters by caste and lack of vocational choice. Written and vocalised letters and syllables were charged with supernatural potency. Letters could be used as weapons, wielded in eternal battle by the forces of good and evil. Only certain individuals were equipped to withstand and manipulate the power of letters. The gendered aspect of this belief was that women were not to be trusted with such powerful weapons. Women's bodies were a source of ambiguous power: they were auspicious sites of fertility but also suspect zones of transformation and autochthonous powers. It is in their reproductive capabilities that women are different from men, and this is their source of power.

The double standard by which aristocratic and high-caste women were allowed access to courtly literature and low-caste commoner women was excluded from literacy can be seen in operation today. In Bali today, observation of the modern nursing profession reveals that it is dominated by women. This is a new feature: traditionally, all healing professions, including midwifery practice, were dominated by men. During fieldwork in clinics and hospitals, I observed that women of high-caste status dominate the ranks of nurses and midwives. Their physical contact with dangerous, polluting bodily wastes does not preclude them from following nursing occupations; in fact, this pollution/danger is never mentioned in modern biomedical contexts.<sup>35</sup> The reason for their domination of these vocations is partly that service occupations are thought to be suitable for women and partly that it is mainly elite girls who have had access to the comparatively long years of training (12–15 years of education).

Recent work on the history of the nursing profession in the Netherlands Indies indicates that hospital nursing began as a male profession and became a female province: the presence of Dutch women as sisters in hospitals “added lustre” to the occupation, and once indigenous female education levels improved, native middle-class girls saw nursing and midwifery as one of the few respectable occupations open to them (Sciortino, 1996, pp. 39–41). The colonial project of Ethical Enlightenment<sup>36</sup> turned the colonised elite away from the ancient superstitions of childbirth and towards a rational and enlightened practice of modern obstetrics. Anterior discourses of the danger of the female body and the suspicious byproducts of birth, the Four Siblings (Kanda Mpat), provided a harmonious counterpoint with beliefs about the potency of letters. This magic harmony has been rendered almost mute by dis-

courses of development and modernity, yet it serves to remind that the meanings of literacy are both various and mutable.

Modernization theory of the 1960s and women in development theory of the 1990s assume that education and literacy are beneficial and modernizing and that access to schooling and acquisition of literacy will automatically benefit the poor and powerless of the world. The information presented in this paper suggests that such assumptions are not warranted. Literacy and schooling are only acquired in specific cultural and historical contexts, and these shape the flow-on effects of education. This is not to argue, once again, that culture is an inhibitor of development. Rather, it is to suggest that we should not look at the education of girls as an efficient way to induce development. As the meaning and effects of literacy and education cannot be presumed, the education of girls should be argued for simply on the grounds of common humanity and basic gender equity.

In this paper, we have travelled many centuries and leapt into an exotic culture populated by fearsome witches and letters marching into battle—a time when, as the Balinese say, “the world was steady” (*dugas gumine enteg*). What is the connection between this magic, premodern world and prosaic, contemporary Bali? In this paper, I am not advancing a solution to the problem of undereducated girls, nor am I advocating that we abandon female education because of the “obstacle” of patriarchal “culture” or “tradition.” I have sought to explain some of the reasons for the low level of literacy among Balinese girls historically, but I do not see these forces as specific, active agents working against the schooling of girls in contemporary Bali. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 21st century, we should not be surprised if preindustrial and highly localised beliefs intrude into the globalising discourses of development, modernity, and progress, particularly given circumstances of great political upheaval and economic stringency.

#### ENDNOTES

1. For instance, Cochrane (1979), Cochrane, O’Hara, and Leslie (1982) and Summers (1994), in widely quoted World Bank studies, concluded that there is an inverse relationship between level of education and fertility and population control, and that the relationship is stronger for women than for men. Similarly, Floro and Wolf (1990) summarise in their USAID Report, “Recent findings leave little doubt that women’s education does have a powerful social impact. That impact has been measured primarily in terms of women’s reproductive roles, focusing upon correlations between girls’ education and decreased fertility, increased child health, and decreased child mortality” (p. 6).
2. For instance, Psacharopoulos and Woodhall (1985) write: “...with a better qualified female population, national development is likely to be fostered through the changes that can be expected in the nature of labour force participation and through the gains in family welfare, family planning, and health and child care” (p. 245).
3. The most dramatic decline in the TFR in Bali, as measured in the national censuses, occurred between 1971 and 1980.
4. Fieldwork was conducted mainly in Eastern Bali intermittently between 1980 and 1999, including long periods totalling almost 2 years in 1980–1981 and 1992.
5. In 1980, Bali lay fourth from the bottom in a list of sex ratios in primary school attendance in the 27 provinces of Indonesia, and second from the bottom (second only to Irian Jaya/Papua) for senior high school attendance (Oey-Gardiner, 1991, p. 61).
6. This statement should be qualified for the period 1923–1939. In this period of radical social discourse, one of the key issues was the social distribution of texts. Indeed, the motto of the new social organisation, Surya Kanta, was “Disseminator of traditional books and promoter of public progress” (*Penjebat kitab-kitab poesaka dan sesoeloh kemadjoean oemoem*). Surya Kanta’s objective was “to improve and protect the fate of the *jaba*,” the lower-caste mass of the population (Statuten, 1925, *Surya Kanta*). It aimed to achieve the progress of the lower orders through Western-style education, which would enable *jaba* Balinese to improve themselves and escape the bonds of caste. In this period, there was a great deal of interest in girls’ education, as evidenced by the establishment of girls’ community schools and in the radical journals of the day such as *Surya Kanta* and *Djatjajoe* (see Parker, 2001b). This has been called an early “women’s movement” in Bali (Sukiada, 1990). However, for the women, it was access to Western-style education which was at issue, not access to sacred texts.
7. However, there are some groups, notably the Bali-Mula or Bali-Aga, which reject the caste system or consider themselves outside the caste system. These elements constitute a small minority of the population.
8. A useful recent survey is Picard (1999); see also Vickers (1989). See also footnote 24.
9. Apart from noting this reservation, Reid’s principal explanation for the assumed high level of female literacy is the final sentence: “...[A]lthough the writing system must originally have been introduced from India in the first Christian millennium to serve a sacred literature, it spread to many parts of Sumatra, South Sulawesi, and the Philippines for quite different, everyday purposes. Prior to the 16th-century expansion of Islam and Christianity, writing was being adopted by largely animist cultures where women were more commercially and socially active than in other parts of the world” (Reid, 1988, pp. 221–222).
10. Southern Bali had only been colonised for 12 years, so perhaps the results cannot be taken as an indication of the effects of colonisation on literacy. However, the Netherlands Indies government representative, Resident Caron, reported that by 1929, after a major government and community push to expand schooling, schools in Bali (all of them primary level) numbered only 128. These were attended by 14,372 students (Caron, 1929, pp. 94–97). Girls comprised 10.45% of this figure.

11. Children in the third grade or above at school were automatically recorded as literate (Reid, 1988, p. 217).
12. Reid, rather controversially, seems to follow Van der Plas, a governor of East Java, in suggesting that the census-takers did not recognize as literate those who could read and write in non-Roman scripts (Reid, 1988, p. 217; Van der Plas in Djajadiningrat, 1942, p. 65). For the purposes of the census, literacy was defined as the ability to write a brief letter on everyday affairs and to read such a letter in any language. Reid suggests that the inability of the census-takers to read local languages may account for the reports of very low levels of literacy in those areas (Java, Bali, and southern Sulawesi) where traditional literacy was in a language and script not taught at school. Van der Plas hypothesized that the growth of modern government schools had not, prior to the 1930 census, kept pace with the decline in existing religious forms of schooling. "Paradoxically therefore the creation of modern education increased the number of illiterates" (Van der Plas in Djajadiningrat, 1942, p. 65). Van der Plas was operating in East Java, a stronghold of Islam and of Islamic schools, so this observation, even if it were accurate for East Java, cannot be assumed to hold for Bali.
13. The language of the earliest inscriptions is Sanskrit. The oldest inscription in Old Balinese is dated at 882 AD. Old Balinese dominated the written record for the next two centuries. The first record in Old Javanese or Kawi is dated 838 AD, and for some time Old Balinese and Old Javanese coexisted, with the latter dominating numerically (Ardika, 1994; Goris, 1936).
14. See Rubinstein (1996b) for a useful survey of the history, types of palm-leaf (*lontar*) manuscript, and content of different types of texts, reading practices, the process of *lontar* production, ritual associated with their production, and reading and discussion of their contemporary position in Bali.
15. Duff-Cooper (1993) is a most useful source on the position of higher knowledge and its practitioners in society, the methods by which young men acquire higher knowledge, the uses of knowledge and learning, and the differences between "modern" knowledge and higher mystical (cosmological, theological, medical) knowledge. Although his fieldwork was among Balinese of western Lombok, his findings "rang true" for the Balinese of eastern Bali among whom I worked.
16. See Creese (1996), Robson (1995), Supomo (1977, pp. 49–68), and Zoetmulder (1974, pp. 126–214). Creese notes that Balinese courts from the 16th century onwards were consciously modelled on the Javanese (Majapahit) model, and that "it seems probable that the cultural and social world of *kakawin* poets of twelfth or thirteenth century Java and of eighteenth and nineteenth century Bali was quite similar in many respects... Neither Javanese nor Balinese culture remained static over this vast period of time, and the diversity of detail within the *kakawin* works attest (sic) to the evolution of social practice. Nevertheless... it is both the wealth of detail and the variety within it that suggest the reality of the cultural institutions depicted" (Creese, 1996, pp. 8–9).
17. He went on: "... and not required to perform many of the severe and degrading labours imposed upon them in Java, are frank and unreserved. In their domestic relations, their manners are amicable, respectful, and decorous. The female character, indeed, seems to have acquired among them more relative dignity and esteem than it could have been expected to have attained where polygamy has been long established" (Raffles, 1978 [1817], pp. 231–232, vol. II, Appendix K).
18. Although the 1968 reprint of the book, *Notices of the Indian Archipelago, and Adjacent Countries*, does not indicate the name(s) of the author(s) of this article, an anonymous reviewer suggested it was by the missionary Medhurst. Vickers (1994, pp. 162–171) provides excerpts and attributes it to Dr. Walter H. Medhurst (1797–1857) and his assistant Rev. Tomlin.
19. They continued: "... if left orphans when young ... They become immediately the property of the rajah, to use or abuse, hire or sell as he thinks proper. When marriageable ... they are ravished and stolen away, by their brutal lovers, who sometimes surprise them alone or overpower them by the way, and carry them off with deshelled hair and tattered garments to the woods. When brought back from thence, and reconciliation is effected with enraged friends, the poor female becomes the slave of her rough lover, by a certain compensation—price being paid to her relatives. She must now work for the support of her partner, mind the house, cook the food, attend the market, carrying the wares and produce most frequently herself, and to see to it, that she brings home gain enough to support the family, and maintain the intemperance and extravagance of her husband. Added to which, she must take care of the young family, and if she has no sons, can expect no other, than if rich to be burned, and if poor to be sold and prostituted at her husband's death. Hard indeed is their lot, and severe the burden put upon them by the other sex" (Medhurst & Tomlin, 1968 [1837], 90).  
Crawfurd (1820), the British Resident in Java at about the same time, included in his accounts scattered comments about the languages in use in Bali—he is disparaging about the "rude, simple and peculiar dialect" (pp. 69–70), the virtually unchanged nature of Kawi in Bali over four centuries (Crawfurd, 1971, p. 196), the absence of inscriptions in Sanskrit, etc. (Crawfurd, 1971, pp. 29–30)—but I was unable to find reference to the social distribution of literacy.
20. Usually the women killed were low-caste wives and concubines whose surviving male relatives were recompensed with land and buffaloes (van der Kraan, 1985). *Kakawin* record that loyal mothers also followed their sons in death, and that faithful servants followed their mistresses. Intending self-immolators were feted as goddesses in the days prior to the cremation, and there is some evidence that intending suiciders experienced a drug-induced state of reduced consciousness. Those who suffered from failure of nerve were usually pushed into the flames or stabbed by their male kin. Nevertheless, the *kakawin* describe the sorrow of wives who lamented that they could not follow their husbands in death because they were pregnant (Creese, 1993).
21. Similar descriptions of female traders can be found in Schulte Nordholt (1996, pp. 282–283).
22. The high level of literacy reported by Van Bloemen Waanders for North Bali requires explanation. Rubinstein described the stark difference between the membership of reading groups in North and South Bali in pre-World War II Bali: in South Bali, her enquiries into the caste distribution of literacy aroused conflicting and heated responses, but in North Bali, her questions elicited clear answers to the effect that *wong jaba* (low-caste or *sudra* people) had been literate and active

- and sometimes proactive in chanting activities (*pepaosan*) (Rubinstein, 1993, p. 91). The whole character of chanting groups in North Bali contrasts with my experience of *sekaha mebebasan* in South Bali: where I worked in Klungkung, *sekaha* were usually attached to royal and priestly houses (*puri* and *geria*) and were the restricted preserve of elderly, high-caste men who gathered in sober, studious nighttime groups. In Singaraja in North Bali, by all accounts, chanting groups were mixed-gender, mixed-caste, free-form, interactive groups redolent of a jazz band (Miles, personal communication; Rubinstein, *Ibid*). This greater egalitarianism seems to go some way towards explaining Van Bloemen Waanders' high figures for literacy in North Bali in the mid-19th century (i.e., that half the male population of Buleleng and one-fifth or one-sixth of the female population could read and write).
23. A reviewer has suggested that the "gender blindness" of these Europeans is puzzling as the second half of the 19th century was the period of rapid expansion of female education in the Netherlands. In the Indies, however, it was not until well into the 20th century, particularly after the publication of Kartini's letters in 1911, that the education of "Indonesian" girls received significant attention from the colonial government. There was a widespread belief in government circles that local, and especially Islamic, mores, required that girls stay home, that girls not mixed with boys at school, that girls were not required to earn a living, and that girls married young. To these perceptions of "native" inhibitions could be added the Dutch motive in educating locals, which was originally to staff the lower reaches of the civil service—female Indonesian civil servants were not employed, and for this reason girls had no need to attend the Dutch Native Schools (HIS) established principally to enable Indonesians to learn Dutch. The difference between the enrolments for European and Indonesian girls can be seen in the MULO schools: between 1912 and 1920, European girls always far outnumbered European boys, e.g., there were 741 European girls and 558 European boys in 1920, while there were only 196 Indonesian girls and 936 Indonesian boys in 1920 (Nasution, 1967, p. 385).
  24. The Dutch classified and counted the population according to caste—for instance, they reported that in Badung, *brahmana* constituted 3.64% of the total population, *satria* 7.72%, *wesia* 12.36%, and *jaba* 76.28% (Ardhana, 1993, p. 36 n. 18). In 1927, regulations tightened the 1910 marriage decrees, prohibiting marriage between a man of lower (non-*brahmana*) caste rank and a woman of *brahmana* rank (called *asu punding* in Balinese), and marriage between a man of *wesia* or *sudra/jaba* rank and a woman of *satria* rank (called *alangkah* *karang hulu* in Balinese) (Pitana, 1994, pp. 5–6; Putra & Anak, 1974, p. 67). The Dutch began to sell certificates for the right to use the title *Gusti*; and in 1929, they legislated to assign different titles to the different regents (former kings). Thus, the caste system apparently became more rigid and permanent under the Dutch than the previous hotly contested, flexible, and fluctuating system. The study of Balinese historical sources reveals a looseness and flexibility in title use according to context, the possibility of changing status, for instance, as a result of a royal boon and other means by which the Balinese expressed their preoccupation with power and status while maintaining flexibility. In 1951, one of the first actions of the new regional parliament was to rescind various colonial regulations which prohibited intercaste marriage (Dewan Perwakilan Rakjat Bali, 1951, Peringatan 1 tahun Dewan Perwakilan Rakjat Daerah Bali, 31).
  25. Although the oral tradition continues in the face of the ubiquitous print and electronic media, the palm-leaf writing tradition is "just one of the many casualties" (151) of economic and touristic development and, as Rubinstein (1996b) notes, is "in a transitional state, closer to its obliteration than to its heyday" (pp. 153–154).
  26. According to the Sarasamuccaya, the *brahmana* are to study the Weda, to perform and lead rituals, to give alms, make pilgrimage to pure places, teach religion, and to receive alms; it is the obligation (*dharma*) of the *satria* to study the Weda, to guard the state, to know the society under them to the level of families, and to give alms; the *wesia* are to learn from the *brahmana* and *satria*, give alms and honour the god Agni. It is the duty and social function of the majority fourth caste, the *wong jaba*, to help and serve the *triwangsa* (Sarasamuccaya, 1981, *sloka* (paragraphs) 56, 58, and 60). Similarly, see the Manawa Dharmasastra, Book X, paragraphs 1–6. The notes to *sloka* 4 comment: "The Sudra are called once-born (*ekajati*) because since the time of the Brahmana, this group have (sic) been excluded from the responsibility to study ... because of their weak socioeconomic situation" (Sarasamuccaya, 1981, p. 619, n.4, my translation). This contradicts the finding of Rubinstein (1984, p. 2): "only *brahmana* may become *pedanda* and it is these ordained *brahmana* who have exclusive rights to Weda (sacred Sanskrit formulas)." In one of the *geria* (brahmanic houses) with which I was familiar, various sons of the senior male were familiar with the Weda, while stating that only their father, the *walaka* (candidate for the priesthood), was permitted to study them. As one of the anonymous reviewers pointed out, the problem is partly due to the use of the term "Weda," which in Bali is traditionally loosely used to mean sacred writings, but in stricter contexts refers to the Sanskrit Vedas.
  27. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer of this article who pointed out also that access to texts was partly a matter of genre. Thus, the poetic genres *kakawin* and *kidung* were widely disseminated while other texts were restricted to initiates.
  28. However, the literacy of village heads cannot be assumed for Dutch-controlled Netherlands East Indies. An 1892–1893 report on education noted that of the 51,464 village heads on Java, 23,286 could read their own characters but only 3964 could read Roman characters. Village heads in the Outer Islands numbered 9775, of whom 3083 could read their own script but only 720 could read Roman characters (Nasution, 1967, p. 199).
  29. The word "*isteri*" in Balinese denotes "of the female sex," not "wife" as in Indonesian.
  30. An anonymous reviewer has informed me that one of the princesses of Karangasem has also had authorship of traditional poems attributed to her. See also Schulte Nordholt (1996, p. 87ff) and Wiener (1995, pp. 18–19, 139–140, 392, n. 6) on female rulers.
  31. I calculate that nonspecialist village women spend up to an average of 60% of their time engaged in making offerings, i.e., in collecting materials, preparing materi-

- als, and assembling offerings. This work is very seasonal—sometimes, for months on end during an extended ritual cycle, women may give up all forms of income-producing activity and devote themselves to making offerings. There are also quiet times. On the other hand, many women working in the modern sector do not know how to make even simple offerings and just assign the work to another or buy offerings at the market.
32. Walter Ong's comments are pertinent here. He claims that sound is the prime means of communication between humans: "Because the spoken word moves from interior to interior, encounter between man and man (sic) is achieved largely through voice" (Ong, 1967, pp. 122–125).
  33. Belo reported that she is Queen Mahendradatta, mother of King Airlangga, the Balinese prince who became king of Java in 1019 (1949, p. 18). Others report her as the widow Calon Arang of Girah (also known as Jirah or Dirah) (see Bandem & deBoer, 1995, p. 112ff; Covarrubias, 1972 [1937], p. 354; de Zoete & Spies, 1973 [1939], p. 116).
  34. A continuing puzzle is the fact that some scholarly sources, such as Mershon (1971) and Weck (1976), and some of my informants state that the umbilical cord is one of the siblings; some of my informants state that the *vermix caseosa* is intended. Hooykaas (1974) also notes this conflict (8n).
  35. My fieldwork indicates that in village Bali today, births are most commonly attended by modern midwives (usually female). Formerly, most women gave birth rather publicly in their husband's houseyard, attended by their in-laws and sometimes the local traditional birth attendant (*balian manak*). Patronage of traditional birth attendants (often male) is on the decline. Village women say they prefer to give birth in more neutral, cleaner, and safer surroundings such as the village subclinic attended by a medically trained midwife.
  36. "Ethical" here refers to the turn-of-the-century change in Dutch colonial policy advocated by the Ethici, a group of social reformers in the Netherlands concerned at the findings of various socio-economic surveys of the well being of the "inlander" or Indonesian population. The surveys documented declining life expectancies and decreases in body weight for some populations, indicating the real suffering experienced by the locals due to the exploitative practices of the colonists. Reform programmes involving educational and health programmes were instituted in the Indies, but in Bali, the taxation system was among the most rapacious in the archipelago and, particularly in the 1930s, poverty and hunger were rife. Robinson (1995) suggests that the reports on "intolerable conditions" were actually a justification for the interventions of a "civilized" state, which would responsibly collect revenues from its constituents, ensure the security of persons and property, guarantee "*rust en orde*," and distribute revenues for the public good (pp. 26, 55–59).
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