The Potent Dead. Ancestors, Saints and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia, Henri Chambert-Loir & Anthony Reid (eds.)

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Cette orientation est mieux justifiée par l’argument additionnel d’une collaboration franco-vietnamienne obligée de passer par Hanoi et des possibilités plus limitées accordées par les autorités vietnamiennes aux chercheurs français souhaitant travailler sur le Sud du pays.


*By Robert WESSING*

When, in *Man and Superman*, George Bernard Shaw had Don Juan claim that “the death of […] even those we liked best was always mingled with a certain satisfaction at being finally done with them,” he could not have been thinking of Indonesia. To the contrary, death in the societies discussed in this book does not end the involvement of the deceased with those left behind, but is often a first step toward his or her gaining greater power, either as an ancestor or a founder-spirit, an object of concern to the survivors and, frequently, a source of inspiration, if not legitimacy, for those seeking or holding office. The welfare and prosperity of the community are said to depend on the disposition of these spirits, and their anger is thought to bring decline and dissolution: In other words, these spirits are seen as having the power of agency.

In their informative introduction, the editors note a report that former president Abdurrahman Wahid had prayed at the tomb of a Muslim spiritual leader, there gaining confidence and resolve, commenting that “all Indonesians understand this behaviour, even if they do not approve of it.” Even stricter adherents of world religions “believe that these powerful dead connect Indonesians to their local place and to their past” and the respect shown these deceased “borders on the supernatural” (p. xvi).

Only some forebears, however, become ancestors while others fade into oblivion. Ancestorhood sometimes depends on characteristics of the person while alive – e.g., a spiritual leader or the founder of a community – but may also be bestowed due to “things” (traits, events) attributed to his spirit after death. Being an ancestor, therefore, is a social construction and not merely a genealogical fact. As ancestors, such entities keep company with other supernatural entities, although they seem to exist independently of these, each kind having its powers and functions: Ancestors are a source of protection and benefits to the community and punish only offences against themselves.

Other categories of “potent dead” are heroes and saints, the latter being a problematical and, in principle, very restricted category. Yet, there are many sacred graves in the Muslim world, and Indonesia, where village founders are included among them; their worship “can be regarded as a characteristic of Islamic praxis” (p. xxii). Saints and ancestors differ in their social role: Ancestors can fulfill personal requests, while saints deal more with social issues and spiritual perfection. National heroes are figures that have been installed by the state as national forebears, the rituals and sites associated with them being the object of a national cult. They are a “collective group of the dead whose potency was called into being by the state as an aspect of its legitimacy” (p. xxiii).

Much of what is described in this volume is disapproved of by the world religions, of which the practitioners are at least nominal adherents. Yet, often the deceased is seen as an intermediary to God, while in other cases the spirit has become an integral part of the faith, making it unclear whether these entities are “imported gods or […] new names given to indigenous gods” (p. xxiii). However this may be, the potent dead discussed here are “part of the conceptual framework” of Indonesia and their agency is seen everywhere in daily life (p. xxvi).

The introduction having pointed out the prevalence of ancestor veneration in Indonesia, the first article, by Bernard Sellato, immediately calls it into question, discussing rather the making of unancestors among the Aoheng of Borneo. Sellato sees the present recognition of ancestor beliefs as a relatively new phenomenon and notes that, while some Bornean groups sometimes honor their ancestors, this is by no means universal. The Aoheng recognize a number of deities whose functions are
unclear, but who are called upon when founding a new village. They also recognize healing spirits, but these have no connection with the dead except for their residing in captured skulls. At death, a person turns into a corpse and a spirit that sometimes becomes an ancestor. The Aoheng have no rituals by which to elevate selected dead to ancestorhood, which would be contrary to their system of fixed social statuses: One is what one is. In keeping with this fixed status, secondary burial is rare, this being used to enhance the status of the deceased. The exceptions in the past were some aristocrats whose secondary burial was an occasion for headhunting to provide them with spirit-slaves in the afterlife. Since the world of the dead is a more pleasant version of that of the living, the spirits have no desire to return. Those who died long ago may occasionally be summoned ritually for protection and blessings; the more recent dead are prevented from returning. Given this possibility, however, can we really say that the Aoheng do not recognize ancestors? Or is it that they do not use them as often as others do, which is a different matter?

Anne Schiller discusses the mortuary rituals (tiwah) of the Ngaju Dayak, noting that government interference has created uncertainty about the correct way. Since the Kaharingan religion was recognized as a form of Hinduism, there have been efforts to downplay local practices and to devise generic death rituals, attractive to tourists. However, the rituals must be done properly, a matter of local praxis, making some afraid that changes could lead to trouble, especially since a favored model is that of the Ngaju’s old enemies. Since the deceased are powerful and capable of rewarding or punishing their descendants, these are not trivial matters. A tiwah moves the spirit of the deceased to the “prosperous village,” reuniting the person’s three souls. Since the dead have esoteric knowledge, they can be asked to bring their survivors blessings and riches; good fortune is a sign of the ancestors’ potency, while misfortune signifies their displeasure – e.g., at having the ritual performed wrongly. Its recognition as a form of Hinduism has brought changes to the Kaharingan religion, but generally its rituals have been maintained. The greatest change has been the attendant bureaucracy, which is, of course, a source of authority and, thus, power for some.

Becoming an ancestor in Laboya (West Sumba) is serious business, for which the person may prepare while alive, e.g., by building his tomb in front of his house. Qualifications for ancestorhood (marapu), Danielle Geirnaert informs us, include wealth, prestige, and a quality of nobility, as well as having died long ago. Founders certainly qualify, while others may take longer, depending on their status while alive and their descendants’ capacity to perform the rituals. The sacrifices at the funeral recapitulate a person’s social relations at birth, relations with reference to which one becomes an ancestor. Once there, the marapu bestow blessings in the form of abundant harvests, but their anger can bring death. The life that the deceased led determines his amount of dewa, or ‘name.’ Ancestors lead the dead to the land of origin, where they may eventually become marapu, adding their dewa to the ancestral pool. The other aspect of a person, mawo (breath and bodily fluids), putrefies and causes the rains that benefit the human community. Dewa and mawo enter the land of the ancestors together; a person with weak dewa could lose his mawo, and both are needed to achieve ancestorhood and the ability to send blessings. Dewa from the ancestral pool come down and ensure the continuity of life and the house (uma) of which a person is part.

In the Balinese community of Nusa Penida, death and the role of ancestors revolve around reciprocity and a concern with crops and harvests. Rodolfo Giambelli focuses on the mythological theme of the origin of cultigens from a young woman’s dead body, a theme that returns in the beliefs surrounding death. Crucial here is the body, an image of the cosmos, awaiting cremation in its grave in the garden. It is seen as feeding the earth (Ibu Pretiwi), which in return produces crops to feed the people; fertility and crops are reproduced through the bodies of the ancestors. Once the flesh has disappeared, the bones may be dug up to be cremated, a step in the production of ancestors through whom fertility is linked to the community, its identity, origin, and continuity. The flesh, then, turns into plants and cultigens, while the bones become ancestors, representing the community and the founding couple, localized in the founding temple, forming a link between the natural order and the social one.

In Tana Toraja, the deceased are wished a safe journey to the afterlife, while being admonished to
close off the way back behind them. The position of the dead is ambiguous. Mostly avoided, they are invited to participate in some situations. This alteration, Elizabeth Coville writes, makes them into ancestors. Ancestor spirits and other spirits remain separate and have different concerns. Ancestors are associated with death and headhunting, while the others are concerned with life and fertility. The rituals involved in these concerns must be kept separate. Christianity's impact in Tana Toraja has led to a (overt) decline in concerns with fertility – associated with native deities. Those associated with death and ancestors continued to flourish. This separation differs from Bali, where death leads to life. Here, too, ancestors are bearers of wealth and prosperity. The living feed the dead and the deities, and these reciprocate with fertility. Improper conduct leads the dead to send illness and distress. Prosperity being a sign of morality, the dead are a moral force. The spirits of high-ranking persons eventually become divinities, so that social relations continue unchanged in the afterlife. The dead are much like the living, liking presents and involvement. Sacrifices to them are payments for the gift of life. The dead thus continue to influence the living, something felt especially during secondary burials, when their bones are seen, cradled, and wrapped, as signs of their permanence and continuing individuality. As these bones deteriorate and mix with those of previous generations, and memory of the individual fades, the deceased become increasingly anonymous. The essence of especially a person of renown is remembered, however, leading these to become ancestors while others fade from memory.

Anthony Reid describes how, in recent years, the Toba Batak have witnessed a resurgence in the building of tombs for the secondary burial of revered ancestors, especially clan founders. These *tugu* have become a dominant feature of the landscape. This was made possible by the wealth accumulated by migrants, who in this way hope to safeguard for the future the Batak values that are thought to radiate from these monuments. The inauguration of such monuments reflects such values, involving cultural elements in their proper position in the Batak house, the embodiment and localization of the lineage. This is reinforced by an exchange of *ulos* (cloth), an expression of proper social relations. An earlier decline was due to the influence of the Christian church, which since Independence has had to compromise with Batak concerns about ancestors (who desire veneration) and their impact on the community. The rituals associated with the monuments strengthen the lineage, as well as mutually reinforcing its relations with other lineages. Thus, when properly treated, the ancestors bring blessings and welfare, while their neglect can lead to a decrease in the lineage's power.

The Gumai of South Sumatra are concerned with social origins. These origins, Minako Sakai writes, are often conceptually linked to places and their ancestral founders. Forgetting one's origins (the ancestors) can bring disaster, while honoring them brings blessings, especially descendants. As a Gumai household matures, only one of the children and his/her spouse remain in the parental home. Other children move away, occasionally returning to connect with their roots. The remaining child is the *petunggu dusun*, maintaining contact with the place that the founding ancestor created. The founder had a personal connection to this place, where ritual specialists must be able to trace descent from him. Thus, the Gumai recognize two origins: a lineal connection to the founder and a spatial connection to the place. Ultimately, these founders descend from the apical ancestor, Dewa Gumai, whose most legitimate descendant, the Juru Kebalian, keeps the heirlooms and, when in the Juru Kebalian house, personifies the line. Origin, therefore, is associated with a particular ritual specialist in a particular place where feasts must be held, to which the ancestors are invited, maintaining their benevolence. Tombs of village founders are favorite pilgrimage destinations. The Gumai are pressured to abandon this veneration, but resist because of the ancestors' importance. Accommodation has led the Juru Kebalian to perform the ancestor-linked parts of his rituals in private, while the communal part is celebrated in the Islamic way. Although the timing of rituals has changed from the agricultural cycle to the Muslim calendar, ancestors have been Islamized, and the ancestral altar has been replaced by the mosque, and while the legitimacy of the ritual has been influenced by outside agents, the basic concern with origins and ancestors remains.

Bugis ancestors, Christian Pelras informs us, are involved with descent and hierarchy. Relations with
them are different for the nobility and for commoners. The nobility, descendants of the gods, which makes genealogy important to them, were outsiders who were installed as rulers after entering into a contract with the local “children of the soil.” The latter do not trace their descent as closely as the “immigrant” nobility do, and they make offerings to their forebears, an undifferentiated category that merges with the rest of the spirit world, from which blessings and protection are expected. The Bugis see this world as lying between a celestial one and an abyss (pérétiwi), both inhabited by pre-Islamic deities (dewata) that Muslim Bugis call jinn. The dead are divided into ancestors and protecting founders. Graves are visited on Islamic holy days and at weddings, while pilgrimages may be undertaken to the graves of persons thought to have potency – founders, but also unknown persons. These may be asked for favors, with a return visit if the wish is granted. Orthodox Muslims disapprove of this, although the ideas on which these visits are based are never spelled out, namely, that graves are points of access to the spirit realm, just like certain trees and boulders. Indeed, potent spots may be disguised as graves, making them more acceptable to the orthodox. At death, members of the highest nobility return to abode of their ancestral gods. Both the nobility and the commoners venerate their ancestors as a duty, which brings protection, fertility, and, occasionally, resolution of individual concerns.

The next four chapters deal with Java, beginning with Henri Chambert-Loir’s discussion of the graves of Muslim saints, places where these persons’ extraordinary qualities are said to be accessible. Aside from the well-known Wali Songgo, the nine proselytizers who brought Islam to Java, there are innumerable graves of local saints, persons who continued the process in more restricted areas. Often a so-called grave may be a place where the saint reputedly rested (petilasan) and left a trace of his power (kramat), or even a restructured pundhen, a place where a tutelary spirit or founder was previously venerated. These sacred places, Islamized, attract pilgrims in varying numbers. There is then a continuum between pundhen and the graves of verifiable saints. To approach a saint, one must go to his grave (ziarah). Individuals come to ask for favors, bringing offerings, taking a token, and returning in thanksgiving when the request is granted. Others come to meditate, seeking enlightenment and praying for some days. More recent are bus tours calling at a number of sites within a short time. Finally, there are visits during Islamic holy days or potent times associated with the site, when thousands may attend. Much of this applies to the graves of founders as well, though on a smaller scale. These are important during village rituals when first ancestors (founders) are remembered. In keeping with modernization, this now often take place in the village hall – although the offerings are still left at the grave. Pilgrimages, the author notes, are a heritage from ancient Java, when founders bested local spiritual powers for the right to take possession of the land. The saints bridge Javanese and Islamic ideas, although in the process the cult of saints has turned into a cult of the ancestors.

Claude Guillot’s discussion of Tembayat Hill can almost be taken as a case study illustrating the previous, general picture. The focus is on Sunan Pandan Arang, a pseudonym of Brawijaya, the last king of Hindu Majapahit who migrated to Semarang after his defeat by Muslim forces. There he became wealthy, found God through Sunan Gunung Jati, and went to Tembayat Hill, the location of a religious community (mandala). Analyzing the significance of the family name Kajoran in connection with this hill, the discussion shifts to the kajeroan in West Java and the parallels between this mandala community and that of the Baduy in Banten. Since mandala communities predate Islam in Java, Guillot wonders whether Tembayat Hill could be an Islamic mandala community.

James Fox next directs our attention to the often-neglected guardian of these sacred places, the juru kunci; the keeper of the “key” to the place, its story, and the success of one's ziarah. Tombs, Fox points out, are references to Java's past, embodying past authority, making them a source of power accessible through the juru kunci. A visit to a tomb places the petitioner in a personal relationship with the deceased and his power, which lingers there. Juru kunci – and at major tombs there may be a hierarchy of them – are the “key” in such visits, as they, often the descendants of the deceased, know the proper forms to be observed and the most authoritative version of the deceased's history. Official histories (babad) sold at nearby bookstalls
often display gaps in their information, that are filled in by the *jurukunci*’s knowledge. This process depends on the persons involved, the *jurukunci* only revealing as much as he feels that his audience is ready for or is appropriate to the present context. The tales told at the tomb interweave past and present events, creating new versions of an ancient oral tradition, through which the tradition is kept alive and relevant to modern audiences.

Moving to a contemporary setting and concerns, George Quinn describes how the *bupati* of Banyumas, Djoko Sudantoko, used the myth of the founding of Banyumas to legitimize his own position. After taking office, he convened a committee to determine the day when Banyumas was founded, a powerful event, as is clear from the previous chapters. With some reservations, the date of 6 April 1582 was arrived at, a date on which henceforth the regency’s Hari Jadi (Founding Day) was celebrated. After the *bupati* had the resting place of the founder, Jaka Kaiman, refurbished, it became a pilgrimage site where descendants of previous *bupati* regularly come to *ziarah*. The celebration of Founding Day also begins with a *ziarah*, something also commonly done in Java prior to taking office. This is followed by a procession, led by reproductions of local heirlooms, representations of Jaka Kaiman and his wife, and portraits of previous *bupati*, followed by the present *bupati* who, in this way, symbolically places himself as a “lineal descendant” of Jaka Kaiman, drawing on the power and legitimacy of those who came before him. While the power, myths, and symbols of the Indonesian state have tended to overshadow local histories, these traditions live on in local narratives, as Fox made clear in the previous chapter. Djoko Sudantoko, an outsider like Jaka Kaiman (who came from Majapahit), managed to utilize such a local narrative in the new form of Founding Day, and through it strengthened his own authority.

Generally, then, the “potent dead” considered thus far are a source of fertility, welfare, and blessing for their local community, as well as punishers of transgressors of its social mores. A real or constructed relationship with them can be used for personal gain or as a source of authority, but most generally these spirits use their power of agency not for individual but for community concerns – although, traditionally, the community consisted of their own descendants. It is especially on these points that most of the national heroes discussed by Klaus Schreiner differ from the above studies. Schreiner notes that part of Indonesia’s self-invention rests on a veneration of national forebears, symbols of solidarity, identity, and national unity. These national forebears include anti-colonial regional figures, *pahlawan* (heroes) who died in the struggle for independence, and prominent victims of the 1965 coup. The way in which these are used involves the national use of their names, images, and ritual commemorations, such as Heroes Day. The *pahlawan* are remembered collectively rather than individually in ceremonies (*upacara*), while new regimes recognize new heroes, and local ones may be reburied in national cemeteries. While, on the face of it, these activities resemble what has been described before, I was left with a feeling of unease. First, the *upacara* dedicated to these figures are better seen as ceremonies than rituals addressing the innate potency of these deceased. Rather, their potency is a symbolic one, called into being for national political purposes. Furthermore, while these dead are symbolically powerful, no power of agency is attributed to them. While their reburial took them from local significance (where they might have had agency) to national attention, this did not increase their individual power to affect the fate of the living, this remaining in the hands of the governing authorities: The fate of the national community is not thought to depend on them. The use of the term *ziarah* by the authorities to indicate visit to their sites also made me wonder whether this symbolically laden word is not used out of context here – perhaps on purpose. Are they, indeed, asking for aid from the spirits of these persons, or is this a symbolic visit? Similarly, the use of the phrase “ancestor worship” in relation to these dead seems to me out of place, this being a specific, locally specified set of actions by recognized descendants. The one obvious exception to my unease is Sukarno’s grave in Blitar. Sukarno differed from these other dead in being a founder, a cosmically significant person, about whom tales of (even post-mortem) power still circulate. This may be the reason why his grave was downplayed by the Suharto regime, to the legitimacy of which he posed a significant threat, something that other national heroes did not. Nevertheless, Schreiner’s observation of the parallels between local practices and national symbolic manipulation is an important one that should be explored further. Given the adaptability of belief, some of these national symbols may well some day gain agency and protective functions for the national community.
As a whole, this volume is a valuable contribution to our understanding of beliefs in the spirits of ancestors in Indonesia, and the way in which these beliefs have mingled with newer, imported ones, as well as the way in which they may be manipulated through pressures of modernization and national concerns. One aspect that I found somewhat underdeveloped is the way in which these beliefs give shape to community identity, here primarily the village or the lineage or clan. Group concerns rather than individual ones are what founders relate to, while more immediate forebears can be approached on personal matters. It is, perhaps, the success achieved by individuals that leads to their recognition by the community, and thus their elevation to ancestorhood. But these are only minor quibbles.


Par Michel Picard

Il fut un temps, pas si lointain, où les publications consacrées à Bali contribuaient à conforter l'image exotique de cette île comme « musée vivant », inventée par les orientalistes néerlandais et relayée par les services promotionnels de l'industrie touristique internationale. Non seulement la société balinaise apparaissait figée dans son histoire, mais encore elle semblait coupée des développements affectant l'archipel insulindien. Et surtout, les Balinais demeuraient ceux dont on parlait mais qui ne parlaient point. Cette situation a commencé à changer avec le renouveau des études balinaises à partir des années 1970. Mais ce n'est que dans les années 1990 que les balinologues rejettent clairement le cloisonnement de leur spécialité pour ouvrir leurs travaux aux questions contemporaines, tandis que certains Balinais commenceront à faire entendre leur voix et à défendre leur point de vue sur la scène académique internationale.

Le choix des thèmes abordés par les divers colloques consacrés à Bali depuis les années 1980 est significatif de cette évolution. Le premier du genre – du moins, depuis le fameux « Bali Congress » organisé en 1937 par le Java Institut –, tenu à Leyde en 1986 sous l’égide du Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology (KITLV), a examiné les relations entre État et société à Bali, leur nature, leurs expressions et leurs interprétations, d’un point de vue historique, textuel et anthropologique. Une partie des communications a été regroupée dans un ouvrage dirigé par Hildred Geertz, de l’Université de Princeton, tandis que d’autres étaient publiées dans la revue RIMA, éditée par l’Université de Sydney1.

Le second colloque d’études balinaises, organisé à l’Université de Princeton en 1991, s’est intéressé plus spécifiquement aux formes de représentation en usage chez les Balinais, en confrontant les épistémologies indigène et étrangère, leurs catégories respectives et leurs emprunts réciproques. A l’issue du colloque, Adrian Vickers, de l’Université de Wollongong en Australie, a pris l’initiative de regrouper en un volume les communications traitant de la modernité à Bali2.

Mais c’est surtout lors du troisième colloque, tenu à l’Université de Sydney en 1995, que l’on assistera à un décloisonnement décisif des études balinaises. Le titre de la rencontre – « Bali in the late twentieth century: Global communications, national identity, and local connections » – mettait d’emblée l’accent sur les problèmes contemporains, à savoir l’intégration simultanée de Bali dans l’État-nation indonésien et dans les réseaux croisés de la globalisation économique et culturelle. Par ailleurs, on notait pour la première fois la présence d’un fort contingent de Balinais, composé, qui plus est, d’étudiants et d’activistes davantage que d’universitaires établis, ce qui n’a pas manqué de ramener les débats académiques vers les préoccupations de l’opinion publique balinaise3. Les deux rencontres internationales organisées depuis la chute de Suharto, l’une en 1999 à l’Université de Melbourne, l’autre en 2000 à Denpasar sous l’égide conjointe de la Society for Balinese Studies et de l’Université Udayana, n’ont fait que confirmer et accentuer ces orientations. En choisissant pour thème « Divisions, inequalities and tensions in the economic, political and representational landscapes of Balinese society » pour le colloque de Melbourne, son promoteur, Thomas Reuter, a voulu prendre acte de l’actualité immédiate en cherchant à comprendre comment la société balinaise était affectée par la crise économique et politique ouverte par la fin de l’Ordre nouveau et l’avènement de la Reformasi qui s’en est suivi. Quant au séminaire de Denpasar – qui avait pour titre « Bali in reformation: religious change and socio-political transformation » –, il était organisé par le Professeur I Gusti Ngurah Bagus en hommage à