

Paradise on Earth? Bali and Tasmania in the Australian National Imagination¹



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The prestigious travel magazine *Condé Nast* recently ranked Bali and Tasmania as 1 and 2 respectively on its 'World's best islands' list. Both islands have a special place in the Australian national imagination.² The reason is complex. It goes beyond the scenery, the climate, the people; it's something to do with the perceived 'contained' nature and the 'timelessness' of islands. As *Condé Nast* puts it: 'In paradise, some things never change - the vistas, the culture, the people'.³

But change *has* occurred in both Bali and Tasmania, through colonial conquest, through tourism and through brutal acts of violence. This essay is a reflection on the idea of the 'island paradise', with particular reference to Bali, but drawing some points of comparison with Tasmania.

The island is frequently invoked as a potent literary metaphor. John Donne famously penned the lines 'No man is an island entire of itself / Every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main'⁴, a sentiment with which AD Hope seemed to disagree: 'You cannot build bridges between the wandering islands / The Mind has no neighbours'.⁵

In his 2001 essay 'That Islanders Speak and Others Hear', Peter Hay writes of imagining the island as both Paradise and hell; as both refuge and prison.⁶ Sarah Island, for example, was proposed by Lt Governor Sorell as a 'place of banishment and security for the worst description of convicts' and developed the reputation as one of the harshest of the penal settlements established during the history of transportation. Indonesia's 'South Seas gulag', the malaria-infested Buru Island, was used by the Suharto regime as a place of political imprisonment, where prisoners had to clear forests, pave roads, create and work their own rice fields and build their own barracks, all the while suffering malnutrition, illness, beatings and torture.

Small islands are geographically pleasing, appealing to a human disposition towards 'containedness'. It is possible to visualise, in satisfying detail, the coastline of an island, to know where it begins and ends, to picture where you are spatially at a given point in time. That 'containedness' seems to invoke the

idea of 'sanctuary', tapping into a sort of universal human quest for a place that might provide security and safety.

The idea of the island as haven is nowhere better depicted than in *The Tempest*, its magical Mediterranean island setting providing a haven for Prospero (the exiled Duke of Milan), his daughter Miranda, the spirit Ariel, and Caliban, the native of the island. Here Prospero is able to indulge his love of books, away from the weary affairs of state, for which he is temperamentally incompatible. The island both encloses him and separates him.

Tasmania

In the nineteenth century, British designer Augustus Pugin had a vision of creating a Gothic paradise in the wretched penal settlement of Van Diemen's Land, using the island's mysterious, brooding atmosphere to reinvigorate in the Antipodes the architectural spirit of the Middle Ages, with slender piers, buttresses, vaulting and pointed arches.⁷

The 'Tasmanian mystique', which so intrigued and inspired Pugin and his disciples, including Henry Hunter, continues to influence the way many mainland Australians think about 'Tasmania', as encapsulated in tourism marketing such as the following from Pacificislandtravel.com:

*There's an otherworldly quality to Tasmania;
romantics can see a gothic landscape of rain clouds
and brooding mountains, revelling in the island's
isolation and heavily wooded wilderness. This gothic
notion extends to the ruins – evident everywhere – of
a terrible colonial past: this was a prison island whose
name, Van Diemen's Land, was so redolent with
horror that when convict transport ended in 1852 it
was immediately changed.*⁸

Such a focus on the island's 'otherworldliness' has led to criticism in some quarters that 'mainlanders' consistently over-emphasize Tasmania's ghoulish elements, while ignoring its achievements, in particular the sanctuary the island offers for a diverse range of people and ideas.

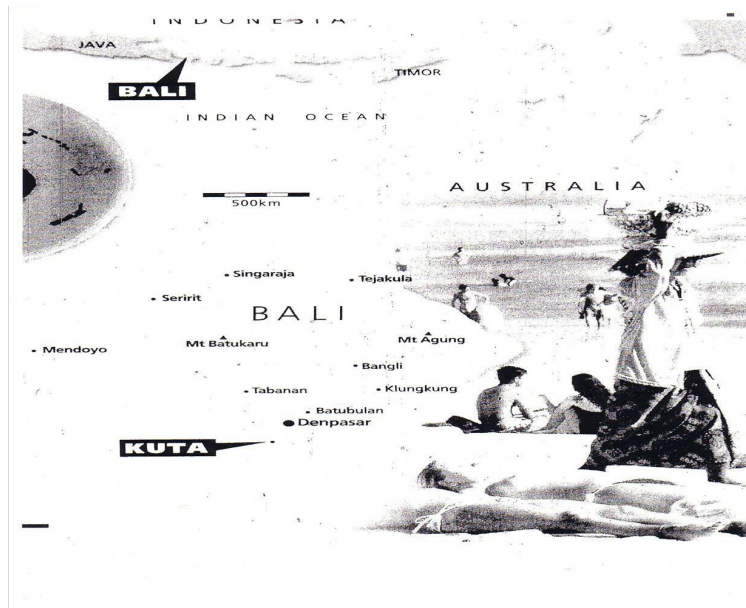
Bali

The place of Bali in the Australian imagination was immortalised in the words of Redgum's 1984 song 'I've been to Bali too':

*You've been to Paris and you've been to Boston
You've been to Fiji and you've been to London
But you can't impress me, 'cause I've been to Bali too*

Almost twenty years later, among the scenes of horror and grief emerging from Bali during the days following the October 2002 Bali bombings, a young woman, skin tanned and hair in tiny plaits from her holiday in Bali asked, 'What's going to happen to our beautiful Bali now?' Within that question are contained two 'truths': Bali is beautiful and Bali is

ours. They are truths that were reinforced in news reports across Australia in the following weeks, with headlines screaming 'Terror hits home', '(our) Holiday isle defiled' and 'Terror on our doorstep'. Indeed the strange map published in *The Australian* gives the impression that Kuta is somewhere in Australia and that Bali and Australia are an amorphous mass with Indonesia hovering irrelevantly up there to the north:



The Australian October 15 2002

The Fortress

There is a fine line, it seems, between a haven and a fortress. In Tasmania we saw this depicted in the memorable 2004-2005 Boags advertising campaign, with its images of Tasmanians building a fence to keep out the mainlanders who, after all 'have got their own bloody island.'

In Bali a fortress mentality has been intensified since the 2002 bombings, with a further hardening since the October 2005 bombings. The catch cry in Bali is *ajeg Bali* ('defend Bali'), a credo that brings with it a tough cultural and religious conservatism. After the 2002 bombings, when tourism dropped to a desperate low and Balinese grew increasingly suspicious and resentful of migrants, especially Muslims, to their island, Bali TV managed to capture an audience with a canny combination of extraordinarily graphic images of the bombing and conservative Hindu religious programs. A new Balinese TV star was Ida Pedanda Gunung, a priest who called upon Balinese to strengthen Hinduism and increase their pride in their religion. Non-Balinese Indonesians are required to obtain government approval to live on the island, as well as to pay 'deposits' for such approval, in violation of the United Nations Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees citizens of a country the right to move freely within its borders. The Bali bombings have thus been used by some to erect new boundaries between cultures and religions and to spark new fundamentalisms as a response to fundamentalisms elsewhere in Indonesia and around the world.

Idyllic tourist paradise?

The idea of Tasmania as a haven is regarded by some as a means of glossing over the dark history of the island. How can we reconcile our brutal convict past, the attempted genocide of the Palawa people and the trauma of the Port Arthur massacre with Tasmania's image as a romantic sanctuary. To gloss Pete Hay, there is a 'collision of meanings'. He and others have criticised the mythologising of Port Arthur and its transformation into a sanitised place to have a Sunday picnic. Our way of dealing with our Aboriginal past has been to either deny or normalise it. Many have tried to deal with the terrible events of 1996 by refusing to utter the name of the murderer. (But perhaps such normalising is a universal phenomenon. A while ago I heard a compelling song by the American singer Eric Bibb that described America in the same terms: 'a nation with a cruel and bloody past – when we face our history we'll all be free at last.')

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Anyone who has been to Bali can understand its appeal. The island is undeniably beautiful. But that is not all it is, and I want here to touch on four stories, stories that reveal aspects of Bali that do not sit well with the romantic fantasy.

The first story starts with a shipwreck. But let me begin with a quote from Vicki Baum's 1937 book *A Tale from Bali*:

It must, I think, have been in 1916, a time when Europe was too much preoccupied to remember the existence of a little island called Bali, that I came by chance into the possession of some very beautiful photographs. ...I kept turning again and again to these pictures of men and beasts and landscapes, whenever the horrors my generation was exposed to - war, revolution, inflation, emigration - became unbearable. A strange relationship grew up between these photographs and me; I felt that I should one day come to know those people and that I had actually walked along those village streets and gone in at those temple doors.⁹

Vicki Baum 'discovered' Bali even before the artists and anthropologists of the 1930s, but - despite the fact that she establishes idyllic Bali as a refuge from all that is violent and horrible in war-torn Europe - her tale is in fact not one about the 'beautiful Bali' that Western tourists and travellers have since appropriated; it is about an incident known as the *puputan* or ritual suicide that occurred in Bali in 1906, an event that sat uncomfortably with even the most ruthless of the Dutch colonial administrators but which is unknown to virtually all contemporary visitors to the sleepy village of Sanur where it occurred.

According to Balinese law a grounded ship became the property of the Raja, the local king. In 1906 the Raja of Badung confiscated a Chinese ship, the Sri Koemala. The Dutch, anxious to complete their dominion over the East Indies, used this as a pretext for intervention. The ensuing fighting was fierce, the Balinese ruler and his nobles preferring annihilation to surrender. When the capital, Denpasar, fell, the local Raja, with his family and followers, dressed in their courtly regalia and each armed with a *kris* advanced to certain death. When the Raja was shot dead, his wives stabbed themselves. The rest of the court, as true Hindu warriors, marched on to inevitable massacre. Vicki Baum describes the scene:

Gun- and rifle-fire swept the Balinese as they came round the ... turning and charged straight for the Dutch troops. The lord was the first to fall. The rest ran on over his dead body in a wild onset and when they fell, still more came on. A mountain of wounded and dead was piled up between the puri and the Dutch troops. Meanwhile the gateway disgorged more and more of them, all with krisses in their hands, all with the same death-frenzy in their eyes, all decked out and crowned with gold and flowers.

Three times the Dutch ceased fire, as though to wake these frantic people from their trance or to spare and save them. But the Balinese were set on death. Nothing in the world could have arrested them in their death-race, neither the howitzers nor the unerring aim of the sharp-shooters, nor the sudden stillness when the firing ceased. Hundreds fell to the enemy's rifles, hundreds more raised their krisses high and plunged them into their breasts, plunging them in above the collar-bone so that the point should reach the heart in the ancient, holy way. Behind the men came the women and children, boys and girls with flowers in their hair, mothers with infants in arms and old slaves with white hair and girlish breasts. They were all decked out with flowers whose scent mingled with the smell of powder and the sickly odour of blood and death that soon filled the air.

The raja's wives had gold crowns on their heads, on which flowers of gold nodded and their hands and arms were loaded with jewels, which they tore off and threw to the soldiers with a look of contempt ... Some of the officers turned their heads aside or put their hands over their eyes, unable to endure the sight of men killing their wives and then themselves, and of mothers driving a kris into their infants' breasts.

The appropriation of Bali by the West had begun. And now, a hundred years later, there is nothing in Sanur to remind us of the way in which it happened.

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My second story begins on 30 September 1965 when an abortive coup took place in Jakarta, a coup that was associated with, but by no means orchestrated by the PKI, the Indonesian Communist Party. In the next few weeks a wave of destruction spread across Java, fuelled by reports of PKI atrocities, and supported by the military leadership under Suharto, the quiet Javanese commander who had emerged to put down the coup. Anti-Communist groups took it into their own hands to destroy the PKI absolutely.

On Bali the killings took place between October 1965 and February 1966. By the end of this period the whole of Bali was a landscape of blackened areas where whole villages had been burnt to the ground, and the graveyards could not cope with the numbers of corpses. The story of the destruction of one village is typical:

One evening the Communists had a meeting and the meeting was guarded by Communist soldiers. Troops and police arrived from a local centre to investigate, and were met by PKI gunfire, which killed one of the police. They left to get supporters from Denpasar, who returned quickly. In a short time the whole village was surrounded, and they shot everyone and burnt the whole village.

The wave of death was spread by youths from the Indonesian Nationalist Party, who were so enthusiastic that an army general said of the situation, 'In Java we had to egg the people on to kill Communists. In Bali we had to restrain them'.

The military were able to distance themselves from the killings. They simply went into each village and produced a list of Communists, which was given to the head of the village to 'deal with'. In most cases villagers carried out this veiled 'order' because they knew if they did not they could be accused of being Communist sympathisers.

After the initial struggle the killing took on a dispassionate tone. Those identified as PKI dressed in white and were led to graveyards to be executed, *puputan*-style. The estimated death toll was 100,000.

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My third story is about the caste system, which Margaret Mead assured her readers sits 'rather lightly in Bali'. A different story is told in a recent novel, *Tarian bumi* or *Dance of the earth*, by Oka Rusmini. This tells of four generations of Balinese women who are motivated primarily by two factors: a yearning desire to be beautiful, and a desire for a *brahmana* (high-caste) husband. An important characteristic of Balinese hierarchy is that a woman should not marry beneath her, that is, that she should not marry someone of lower family or caste. To do so would lower the status of the whole family. But when the novel's protagonist Luh Sekar finally meets and marries her *brahmana* husband, her world changes irrevocably:

She had to get used to a new name, Jero Kenanga. ... A name she had to introduce to her own breath as being her new breath. Ni Luh Sekar, the commoner woman, was gone. Now she had begun her reincarnation as a noblewoman. When she died, her soul would reincarnate in the body of a brahmana.

In addition, she could no longer pray in her family temple. And she could not eat the fruit that had been given in offering to her family ancestors. Everything had changed. Even the language of the woman who had given birth to Luh Sekar had to change. ... Luh Sekar's mother had to treat this child differently from her other daughters. Luh Sekar was no longer the same as them. Sekar was not allowed to eat with them either. She must not be given left-over food. Everything had changed. Everything had to be re-learned from scratch.

But perhaps the cruellest thing for Sekar to bear is that, as a woman who has become a *brahmana* by marriage rather than by birth, she is treated differentially within the circle of her husband's family compound. She is not allowed to share a cup, even with her daughter, or give any of her own food to other members of the compound. She can never truly be a part of her new *brahmana* family, but at the same time she is expected to sever her ties with her commoner past. When her mother dies she is not allowed to touch, let alone bathe, the body and she is forbidden from participating directly in the cremation ceremony.

Notions of class and status, observed amusedly by most visitors to Bali as a proliferation of *Mades* and *Wayans* representing the naming system of the commoner class, and the occasional glimpse of a *Brahmana* priest sprinkling holy water on performers at a trance dance, do not in fact 'sit lightly' in Bali. Rather, caste shapes and directs the lives of the Balinese. It is an insidious and potentially divisive presence in 'our beautiful Bali'.

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Finally, in my fourth story I want to go behind the scenes of a performance that most visitors to Bali will have witnessed - the *Barong* dance. The hour-long tourist performances held daily at *Batubulan* are spiced up with slapstick and bawdy humour that disguises the meaning of the performance, namely the constant need in Bali to maintain harmony between two opposing forces: the benign, beneficial to man, and the malign, inimical to humanity. The destructive power of sickness and death is associated with the latter force and the evil influence of black magic.



Barong

Picture taken from http://www.indo.com/travel_agents/tunas/barong.jpg

Barong, a mystical creature with a long swayback and curved tail, represents the affirmative, the protector of mankind, the glory of the high sun, and the favourable spirits associated with the right and white magic.



Rangda

Picture taken from <http://anthropology.soc.hit-u.ac.jp/~hamamoto/lecture/2003w/rangda.jpg>

The widow witch Rangda is Barong's complement. She rules the evil spirits and witches who haunt the graveyards late at night. Her habitat is darkness and her specialities lie with the practice of black magic, the destructive force of the left. Both figures are of the same earthly substance, possessing strong magical prowess. Somewhere in a mythical past, the Barong was won over to the side of humanity, and, in the play, fights on behalf of the people against the intruding death force of Rangda, whose atrocities extend to kidnapping and murdering newborn babies. From her mouth hangs a flaming tongue signifying her consuming fire, and around her neck, a necklace of human entrails falls over her pendulous breasts. Howling a low, gurgling curse she stalks the Barong while waving a white cloth from whence issues her overwhelming magic. The threat she represents - the danger of mankind succumbing to evil - is also a constant presence in the lives of the Balinese.

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These are all stories of Bali. But if confronted with them I suggest that the tanned young tourist I introduced at the start of this essay would protest, 'No that's not the Bali I meant.' The Bali of my stories is somewhat at odds with the romantic fantasy that is 'our beautiful Bali'.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the University of Tasmania's *Island of Minds* series, Cradle Coast Campus, September 2004

² I would like to thank to Lucy Frost for suggesting the idea that Tasmania and Bali and occupy significant places in the Australian imagination, representing gothic and paradiso respectively

³ *Condé Nast* 30 Classic Islands 2002

⁴ John Donne, 'Meditation XVII' from *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*

⁵ AD Hope, 'The Wandering Islands'

⁶ Hay, PR, 'That Islanders speak and others hear', *40° South*, Tasmania, 20 (2001)

⁷ See 'Tasmania's Gothic paradise rediscovered' *The Age* September 14 2002

⁸ http://www.pacificislandtravel.com/australia/tasmania/tas_intro.asp

⁹ Vicki Baum, *A Tale from Bali*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1937, p. vii