

‘SARASWATI’

CULTURE IN ACTION

Culture is the word through which most Balinese like to define themselves: they are proud of their unique, living culture.

Jean Couteau
CONTRIBUTOR/BALI

To this culture corresponds Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, through whom they symbolically link their tangible (*sekala*) and intangible (*ni-skala*) worlds.

This role is enshrined in Saraswati day, the day of enlightenment, which replays the enlightenment of the mythical origins, when the incestuous son, Watugunung, was separated from his incestuous mother, Sinta, creating in the process not only the calendar, but beyond it, the awareness of time, the need to organize religious and social life — thus celebrating the dawn of civilization.

Saraswati day is indeed one of Bali's main festival days. It closes the year of the 210-day Pawukon calendar and is followed, on the next day, by a day of cleansing, Banyu Pina-ruh, during which people go to the sea and sacred river spots. Much of this is known and has been recently explored in the book *Time, Rites and Festivals in Bali*.

So, why a new book on the topic? Because, to whoever is interested by Balinese culture, Saraswati is not only a system, not only a holy day, but also a festival that celebrates the goddess in many parts and villages of Bali.

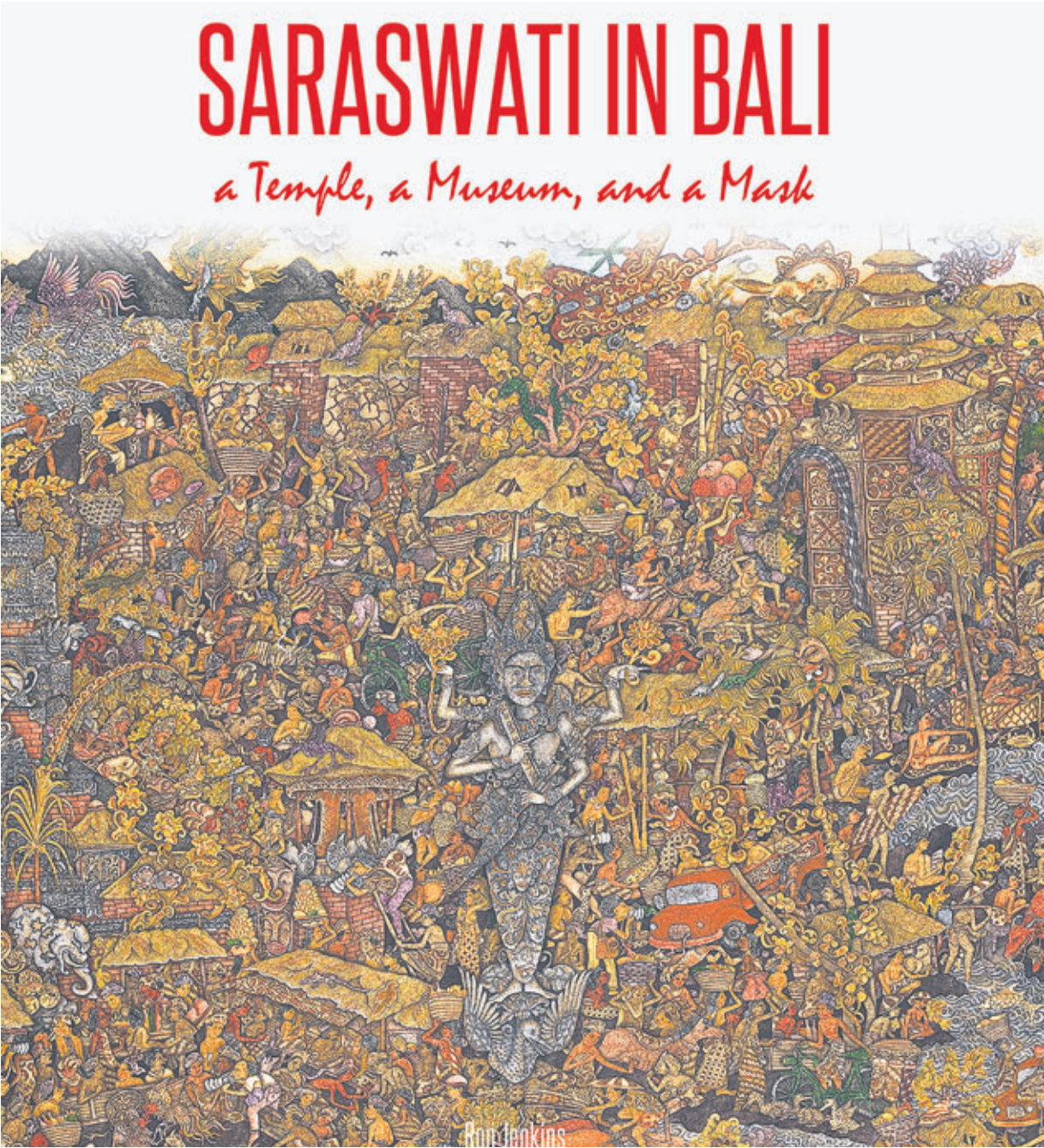
In his latest book, *Saraswati in Bali, a Temple, a Museum and a Mask*, Ron Jenkins, a professor at Wesleyan University, United States, does not explore the myth or the calendar as complex “abstract” constructions, but as a ritual in motion.

A theatre man looking at a theatre culture, he naturally chooses to focus on the festival side of Saraswati day — on Saraswati as “performance”. And that is the novelty.

Instead of trying to “understand” Bali, like anthropologists usually do, often reifying it or losing themselves in abstruse concepts of dubious “universalist” value, he presents it



Nyoman Meja. Jarak Dancer, 1979, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm. Collection of ARMA Museum, Ubud, Bali



“in action”.

The Saraswati festival he shows us is not reduced to normative traditional aspects supposedly linked to the past; it adapts to change and pops up in a large variety of manifestations.

Those manifestations are themselves presented in the book in chapters that are reminiscent of the various acts of a theatre show — as a succession of significant scenes or moments, as they actually take place in the village of Peliatan, just to the south of Ubud.

This village happens to have a temple, Pura Madya, whose anniversary festival coincides with Saraswati day. So Jenkins has us attend one by one all the main ritual moments of the festival: the awakening of the gods, their street processions, the banter of clowns during a late night opera, the ritual cleansing to the sea on the day following Saraswati, not to mention the visit traditionally paid to *balian* healers, and even the making of a *barong bangkal* mask by a prince of Ubud.

He also adds a few explanations on the function of traditional *lontar* manuscripts with regard to Saraswati.

Jenkins’ purpose is not to conceptualize, but to “bring to life”, which is obviously to him a more efficient way to cross the

Saraswati in Bali: A Temple, a Museum and a Mask
By Ron Jenkins
Published for Agung Rai Museum of Art, Peliatan, Ubud, Bali, 2014
156 pages

cultural barrier that separates modern people from traditional Balinese.

Wary of excessive interpretation, the keys he gives us simply aim at showing how the local people express their collective wisdom through ceremonies, and their understanding, “through active participation in communal song, prayers and ritual preparations rather than direct discussion”.

Balinese “intelligence” indeed comes out as “action” rather than “intellection”. But isn’t that where the island’s renowned magic lies?

Yet, Balinese genius also reveals itself in still images, which is why Jenkins chooses to give iconography an important role in his book.

There are many photographs, of course, but a special mention must be made of the paintings. The writer is one of the few foreigners to fully understand that Balinese painting provides a trove of information about Balinese rites and stories.

Those paintings are not made simply to be looked at, but to be read and deciphered. And what one reads in them are not only narratives, but also, quite often, philosophical speculations.

Jenkins explores the relation of several of the images to the story of Saraswati and the esoteric Balinese knowledge associated with it.

One finds there in particular the visual meditations of Ketut Liyer,

the holy man made famous in the film *Eat Pray Love*, the movie based on Elizabeth Gilbert’s bestselling book of the same name. The artist’s work shown in the book illustrates better than any formal explanation the Balinese concept of life, death, transmigration of souls and ultimate *moksa* (enlightenment) in cosmic oneness.

In relation to the preservation of this living cultural memory, Jenkins underlines the role played by the Agung Rai Museum of Art (ARMA) of Peliatan. The paintings in the book are all part of the museum’s collection.

Anak Agung Rai, the owner of the museum, is a member of the Pura Madya temple congregation. He is also one of the sponsors of the book. The activities held at his museum, as it appears in the book, aim not so much at putting Balinese culture on display, as at providing a place and means for this culture to maintain its “memory” through the tremendous modernization Balinese society is subjected to.

The ARMA, says Jenkins, is a “secular temple of [Balinese] cultural knowledge”, whose “galleries and educational programs help preserve the sacred traditions linked to Saraswati that are enacted in Pura Madya [...]”.

Beyond the description of Saraswati proper, the challenge underlined by the book is indeed to find the means for Balinese culture to project itself into the future without undergoing alienating changes. As such, it ends up as an invitation not only to learn, but also to ponder and think.

bookWORM

JENNY JUSUF

READS MORE than just BOOKS



Courtesy of Jenny Jusuf

Hans David Tampubolon
THE JAKARTA POST/JAKARTA

Writer Jenny Jusuf believes that to be able to write well, one must read more than just books.

“Reading books is important but, for me as a writer, it is very important to read all kinds of literature,” said the author of *Eat, Play, Leave*, which centers on her experiences interacting with expatriates living in Ubud, Bali and their unique behaviors.

“I do not own as many books as other writers but I read everything, from news, articles, poetry to event advertisements, to enrich my vocabulary and linguistic sense.”

Jenny, who currently lives in Bali, said her writing style was basically a mixture of all the litera-

ture she had been reading.

“I am influenced by a lot of writers. So many writers, that I can say my writing style is like *gado-gado* [mixed vegetable salad]. I have no idea which writer or what forms of literature influenced me the most. Which is good, perhaps.”

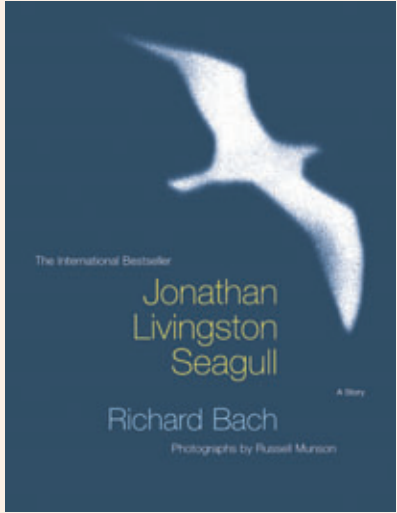
As for her book preferences, she said she loved to read fictional works that tell stories of love, friendship and self-motivation.

“I also love to read books in their original versions instead of translated ones. Translated works often miss the original context and, at times — I really hate it when this happens — they also tend to translate idioms or terms or jokes that do not have proper translations into the local language. Doing this makes the whole work weird.”

Jonathan Livingston Seagull

by Richard Bach

This is the story of a seagull that is alienated from its flock for being different. The seagull knows what it wants and when it goes after its dream of flying, the other seagulls choose to kick it out of the flock. The seagull, which wants to fly, believes that seagulls are not meant to look for food only on the shore. This seagull perseveres through its alienation and keeps on chasing its dream. This is really a story about me. It is very inspiring.



Harry Potter series

by JK Rowling

I really admire how Rowling tells her stories with various plots twists between the characters in the books. Rowling’s struggle to write and to publish *Harry Potter* is also an inspiration for me.

Partikel

by Dewi “Dee” Lestari

I love this book because there are two great lines in it. The first one is “do not be arrogant as humans” and “we are all just passengers”.



Guess what?



AP

Prince returns for Essence’s 20th celebration

NEW ORLEANS: Uttering his signature, “We are gathered here today to get through this thing called life”, Prince opened his set for the 20th celebration of the Essence Festival and showed thousands Friday why a 10-year wait isn’t a bad thing.

As the first licks of “Let’s Go Crazy”, rang throughout the Super-dome, thousands in the audience — already on anticipation — their feet in stayed until the final riffs of “Purple Rain” left the air.

It was the second time the crowd got a taste of “Let’s Go Crazy”. Earlier, he made a surprise cameo appearance during Janelle Monae’s rendition of the song.

Ten years ago, Prince headlined that anniversary, reuniting with some of the players in his musical past. The high-energy show ended with an emotional performance of Prince’s megahit “Purple Rain”.

In 2014, he again ended his show with “Purple Rain”, to the delight of the crowd. — AP

Bunga owes career to a rock band

JAKARTA: Actress-singer Bunga Citra Lestari said her singing career was made possible by rock group Pas Band.

“I owe many thanks to Pas Band as it exposed my work to the label [Aquarius] and I was able to release my own albums,” she said during the launch for the music video of her new religious song “*Kuasa Mu*” (Mighty God) on Wednesday, *kapanlagi.com* reported.

Bunga, or BCL as she is also known, was asked by Pas Band to duet with them on the 2005 track “*Kumerindu*” (Missing You).

The label loved her unique voice and soon after she had featured on the movie soundtrack for *Dealova*, it released her first studio album *Cinta Pertama* (First Love).



Tiibunews

Chinese actress Tang Wei and S. Korean director to wed

SEOUL: Chinese actress Tang Wei, who rose to fame in the erotic thriller *Lust, Caution*, will marry the South Korean director who helmed her 2010 movie *Late Autumn*, the couple have announced.

The 34-year-old star met Kim Tae-Yong, 44, on the set of the English-language co-production in which Tang played a prisoner who falls in love with a South Korean man while on a parole visit to her family in Seattle.

“We came to know and understand each other through a movie. We became friends and eventually lovers,” they said in a joint statement. “And now we are about to become a husband and a wife, although we face a challenge to learn each other’s language. But it will be the happiest moment of our lives.”

The wedding will take place later this year with close family and friends. — AFP



AFP