

The Barong Wants to go out Again Krisis moneter and the Resurgence of Rituals in Indonesia¹

VOLKER GOTTOWIK²

Goethe-University Frankfurt/Main, Germany

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The economic and monetary crisis (krismo) at the end of the nineties has changed Indonesia in many respects. While the political transformations in the wake of Suharto's step back seem all too obvious, changes in religious activities are seldom taken into account. This paper refers to the impact of krismo on ritual performances connected with the famous Barong figures in Bali. These impacts are twofold: the democratization of Indonesia led not only to a revival of cultural activities of ethnic Chinese of which the reappearance of Barongsai dance troupes after more than 30 years of oppression is only one feature; the economic crises also raised the demand for new Barong masks on the side of the local Balinese people and finally caused a boom of ritual activities connected with these sacred figures. Against this background it will be demonstrated that krismo led not only to a revitalisation of the Barong cult in Bali, but also became itself a topic of particular Barong performances. Therefore it is argued that economic events have religious impacts and vice versa. But how is krismo as a topic taken up by ritual discourse and what kinds of message do the local actors disseminate through the medium of Barong?

Keywords: Religion, Bali, Masks, Chinese, Representation

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² Associate Professor ("Privatdozent") at the Institut für Historische Ethnologie, Goethe-University in Frankfurt/Main.; field research in Indonesia (16 months) and Ghana (6 months); Guest Lectureships in Denpasar (Indonesia), Trenton/NJ (USA) und Accra (Ghana); Chair of the South-East Asia section of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde (DGfV); applicant and member of a DFG-sponsored scientific network for the investigation of the religious dynamics in South-East Asia.

This paper reflects on - what in general terms could be called - the relation between religion and society. I would like to demonstrate that religion is not an obstacle to social development and economic growth. I will rather argue that religion and ritual activities are means to deal with social conflict and economic crisis (cf. Hornbacher/Gottowik 2008). The relation between religion and society is, however, not a one way road as the saying “Armut lehrt beten” (“poverty teaches to pray”) seems to suggest. Ritual activities also have an impact on the social and economic level. But only if one depicts religion as a symbol system - as Clifford Geertz (1966), Victor Turner (1982) and Mary Douglas (1970) among others have demonstrated - its dialectic relation to society comes to the fore.

In spring 1998 - all of a sudden - prices started to rise in Indonesia. Everything became more and more expensive and no end of inflation was in sight. At this time, I was for my third time in Bali and could follow in detail what the later so called *krisis moneter* meant on the local level and for the local people. When I arrived in the village in Southeast Bali, where I used to stay, my landlord took me directly to the market in the city of Gianyar. There he directed my attention to the explosion of living costs in Indonesia: prices for food had increased about 300 percent; eggs and chicken were even more expensive and already unaffordable for the majority of people. Therefore many people had to restrict themselves to two meals per day, sometimes consisting only of plain rice or soup. The elders continued to go to their favourite food stall (*Warung*) in the evening like they always did. But most of them came only for a chat (not for a drink) since they could not afford the amount of 500 Rupiah (the equivalent of 5 Euro Cent) for a cup of tea or coffee anymore.

The situation in Bali was depressing and tense. From other parts of Indonesia came news about riots and violent clashes between different social and ethnic groups and finally - on May 14, 1998 - Suharto, the President of the Republic of Indonesia, had to step down. His resignation from power happened on the peak of violence with hundreds of victims - most of them of Chinese origin. Chinese women in particular became victims of mass rapes in Jakarta and other major cities in Indonesia (cf. Haubold 1998). These violent acts caused hundreds of Chinese families to escape to places, where they felt secure. And they escaped to Australia, Singapore or - Bali.

But what is it that makes Bali a rather secure place for the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia? Why is the relationship between Chinese and Balinese different when compared to other ethnic groups in Indonesia? Against this background, I would like to direct the readers' attention to a Balinese mask, which represents a Chinese woman. The Balinese entertain - in other words - a mask that represents a female Chinese character. And my research guiding question

in this context is as follows: What is this mask able to tell us - on a symbolic level - about the social relationship between the Balinese and Chinese communities on Bali? Or to say it in other words: even when this paper deals with masks, my interests are not in masks, but in the interethnic relations that are represented through the medium of masks (cf. also Gottowik 2006). First of all, let me give you some details about these masks:



*Jero Luh (without headdress)
as displayed in the office of her
ethnographer, August 2008*



*Jero Gedé, the consort
of the white lady
(all photos by Volker Gottowik)*

The Chinese woman or Putri Cina who is represented by a white mask never makes her appearance never alone. She is always accompanied by a black male fellow. Therefore we can say that she is part of a couple that is not only heterosexual, but also interethnic or - if you prefer - biracial: it is a black-and-white partnership.

The lady is known as Jero Luh, the guy as Jero Gedé. Together - as a couple - these two masks are called Barong Landung. What does this name indicate? Barong is a generic name for powerful magic masks on Bali of which Barong Ket (a mixture of dragon and lion) is probably the most famous; but the origin of the word Barong is unclear (cf. Zoete/Spies 1938, Belo 1949). And Landung is Balinese and means high. Barong Landung-figures are high, since the Balinese wear these masks not in front of their faces, but as head masks of giant puppets which they lift upon their shoulders. These giant puppets have a powerful magic and appear on different ritual occasions (details about the ritual contexts of Barong-figures are given in Gottowik 2005).

More interesting for our purpose are the different myths and legends that are connected with these figures. Only few Balinese know about these stories. Therefore one has to look for experts. But if you ask - let us say - five experts about Barong Landung, you will receive at

least four different versions of these myths and legends. Yet all versions clearly indicate that the white lady is of Chinese origin.

The identity of her black companion is - on the contrary - less obvious: According to some experts he is a prince from India; according to others he is a Balinese king (*Raja*); and according to others again he is a demon from Nusa Penida, a small island offshore Bali. But all versions indicate that the beautiful white lady and the ugly black guy were married. Most versions also indicate that she was a Buddhist, while he was a Hindu. And according to some experts - but not according to all - she was not only older than him, but also unable to give birth to a child (anymore). Therefore she is also called “the barren lady” or “Dewi mandul”.



Procession with Barong Landung, March 1998

According to my interpretation, this unequal and contradictory couple indicates two things at the same time: First of all it indicates that since historical times Chinese and Balinese, Buddhists and Hindus belong together - like a married couple. On the other hand, it indicates that Balinese and Chinese should stay apart, since this particular marriage has a strong stigma or defect: there are no offspring - and childlessness is one of the worst bad blows a Balinese couple can imagine.

Therefore I would like to conclude, that the major characteristic of this unequal couple is ambivalence: it is - to use Clifford Geertz' notions - a model of and a model for interethnic

relations between Balinese and Chinese (cf. Geertz 1966). But if this exemplary couple is a model of a successful partnership (that was able to overcome all obstacles, even childlessness) or a model of a failed partnership (that was unable to produce descendants and regulate succession properly) is open to debate.

And indeed, there is a kind of ongoing debate; there is discourse and counter discourse and what could be called politics of interpretation: When I did research on this white lady and her rustic consort, it became clear, that different ethnic and social groups in Bali prefer different versions and interpretations of this mixed couple. These differences were expressed on the level of stories (myths and legends) told by different social and ethnic groups; but after the fall of Suharto it also became obvious on the level of performance (ritual and theatre).

The Resurgence of Barong Activities

When Suharto had to withdraw and the Republic of Indonesia turned itself in breathtaking velocity into a democratic political system, a lot of discriminating laws against the Chinese minority were confiscated. Already under the new presidents Habibie and Wahid, the Chinese were allowed again to organize themselves and to celebrate cultural events like the famous Chinese New Year's Day in public. As a result, for the first time after 30 years the barongsai dragon dance was performed again in the streets of Jakarta, Medan and other major cities in Indonesia.

But it was not only the Chinese minority in Bali that contributed to a resurgence of Barong activities; under the impression of *krisis moneter*, the Balinese themselves directed their attention again to Barong figures which were well known for their protective power. Old masks almost fallen into oblivion were reactivated, and new masks were ordered after years of a steady decline - as Bali's most famous mask carver, Cokorda Raka Tisnu from the village of Singapadu, confirmed. In other words: many new Barong masks were ordered in these days of political and economic insecurity.

The resurgence of Barong activities is also reflected on the level of performance: At the beginning of the 1990s members of the Art College in Denpasar (*Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia/STSI*) began to collect the myths and legends about the beautiful white lady and her black companion in order to create a play or drama out of these stories; this play, which was finally called "Sendratari Dalam Balingkang", was performed at least two times on the "Bali Arts Festival" in Denpasar. And immediately after the fall of Suharto a Chinese cultural organisation (*Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia/PSMTI*) also created its own version of the story that is connected to this mixed couple. And the differences were striking: while

the performance of the Balinese artists (STSI) emphasized ambivalence (in the way I described it at the beginning), the performance of the Chinese artists (PSMTI) tried to give this story a particular meaning. This was clearly expressed in a review of the Chinese performance in “The Jakarta Post” form July 15, 2001:

“The main message of the show was indeed about the brotherhood of mankind. That two different ethnic groups living harmoniously together is not an unreachable dream, or beyond human capability. King Jayapangus [the Balinese king] and Kang Ci Wie [his Chinese wife] had demonstrated it, and all the people who were involved in Sendratari Legenda Balingkang proved it once again” (Juniarta 2001: 2).

This statement about “the brotherhood of mankind” has to be seen against the background of violence and mass rapes that happened only two years before in many parts of Indonesia. The Chinese actors referred to this Balinese king and his Chinese wife - to use Geertz’ terms again - as a model of and a model for: as a model of a successful interethnic partnership from the past and as a model for a successful interethnic partnership for the future. Against the background of violence against the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia this model became highly significant again. As a result of its new significance, not only new masks were ordered and theatre performances with these masks created for the first time ever. This violence as well as the economic decline connected with krismo also became a topic on the level of ritual.



Libation in front of Barong Landung, September 1997

Krismo as a Topic on the Ritual Level

On April 15, 1998, only few weeks before violence in Jakarta and other major towns in Indonesia demanded the life of approximately 1.200 people, most of them of Chinese origin, I could witness a dialogue spoken through the masks of the white lady and her black companion. They referred to a popular folk story about a young man, his name is Sampik, who has fallen in love with a beautiful girl called Ingtai. This love was unhappy and Sampik suffered tremendously. Against this background, the white lady that everybody identifies as a Chinese character, asks her black companion: “Is it possible that Sampik stopped eating and lost weight, not only because of his unhappy love. May be there are other reasons why he looks now like a dried frog?” - And the black guy answered: “Yes you are right, maybe Sampik has nothing to eat anymore, maybe he starves because of this economic crisis we are all confronted with.” And then he added: “But we should not allow our thoughts to be occupied by this crisis too much. Let’s focus our energy to overcome this crisis together.”

This dialogue, spoken between these two masks on ritual occasion, reminds me very much on the great French anthropologist Emil Durkheim. According to Durkheim (1912), not God speaks through rituals and masks to the people, but the society to its members. In this particular case, masks that represent a multiethnic couple reminded in a situation of crisis everybody on particular virtues and ideals of society. And these ideals have to do with solidarity - as the only way to overcome this *krisis moneter*.

That the ideal of solidarity was emphasized in dialogue with a mask that refers to a Chinese character gives this message a particular significance. A similar message comes across when on other ritual occasions the Chinese character reminds the Balinese on principles of their religion. One particular principle is called Tatwam Asi. It derives from Sanskrit and is translated in different ways; but in general, the Balinese translate it as “Aku adalah kau”, as “You are as I am”. This message transmitted by the white mask, which refers to a Chinese character, has some remarkable implications: It reminds everybody that cultural and linguistic differences characterise mankind only at the surface; in the end, when we face god, we are all equal.



Veneration of Barong Landung in a house temple, April 1998

This is not to say, however, that Barong Landung-figures have a particular message or meaning. I only want to emphasize, that on the peak of krismo in 1998, they reminded the Balinese on equality and solidarity. But in general, they are - as I tried to highlight at the beginning - ambivalent and morally neutral. They are used as a medium for internal communication and could - even when it actually appears unlikely - also be employed for social segregation and apartheid.

Finally it remains unclear, what the white lady and her black companion did in 1965/66, i.e. after the military coup against Suharto, when a witch-hunt broke out against everything communist and Chinese. According to eyewitness accounts the worst massacres against the Chinese minority took place in Bali. Between 40.000 and 80.000 people were killed, shops ransacked and their owners chased away: "Some towns in which the Chinese were dominant became deserted overnight, like Nevada ghost towns" (Hughes 1967: 200).

Even when the last quote refers to Java, the situation in Bali was similar if not worse and puzzled everybody familiar with the people on this island. How could this massacre happen? Unfortunately, we do not know what kind of message the Barong Landung-figures disseminated under these historical circumstances. Since up to the present day, no research has been done on these black and white masks. They were only mentioned in some ethnographic classics from the 1930s, and a detailed description of their appearance is given in "Dance and

Drama” by Beryl de Zoete and Walter Spies (1938). But even these ethnographers conducted no systematic research on Barong Landung-figures: They did not observe them in different ritual occasions, they did not collect the myths and legends related to them and they did not even translate the songs and dialogues performed by them in public. They only stated, that the white mask appeared to them “like an English maiden aunt in her garden” and that her particular outlook gives her “a very Chinese air” (Zoete/Spies 1938: 275).

If the Balinese shared this interpretation, if the white mask appeared to them as Chinese too, remains completely unclear. This lack of knowledge is a pity, considering the significance that at least this paper gives to Barong Landung-figures as a model of and a model for the right attitude towards the Chinese minority in Bali. What is simply missing are early ethnographic reports “from the native’s point of view” that would allow to analyse historical shifts in the symbolic meaning of these figures for the Balinese. Only such an approach would be able to find out, if the trauma of the 1965/66 massacre finds its symbolic expression in the current message of Barong Landung.

Conclusion

As a reaction to krismo, violence and mass rapes in Indonesia, Barong figures on Bali went through resurgence on at least three different levels: first, the confiscation of discriminating laws against the Chinese minority brought Barong and Barongsai dance troupes back into the public; second, against the background of violence against the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, the myths and legends related to Barong Landung gained significance and were performed as theatre plays on stage level for the first time ever; third, on the village level, the Balinese ordered new masks and used them for internal communication; the message on the peak of krismo was, not to look for scapegoats but to overcome this crisis in solidarity.

With this example, I tried to demonstrate that economic events like krismo have impacts on ritual activities and vice versa. Economic crisis and political violence lead to an increase of ritual activities; and these activities reminded all participants how this crisis should be managed. That there was violence against the Chinese all over Indonesia, but not in Bali, indicates that the Balinese have understood the current message of the white lady and her black companion.

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