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Bali, Java and *Kawi* letters: Translating more than words

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I am not a specialist on Bali. I did live in Bali for more than a year in total over the past several decades, thus witnessing first hand its changing lifeways. I am a cultural and intellectual historian of Bali's neighbouring island of Java, and I carried out research on the central Javanese, specifically Solonese, shadow theatre in the early part of my career. I spent around five years in the city of Solo between 1972 and 1984, half of that time attending performances, and the other half hanging out with puppet masters, shadow theatre aficionados, and students of shadow theatre, and organising a project on collecting branch stories, stories that deviate from the trunk stories of the Solonese shadow theatre repertoire. The repertoire I was researching was the Javanese Mahabharata and Ramayana stories, a repertoire with which I was quite familiar. I was asked to be part of this special review to offer comparative insights between southern Balinese and central Javanese cultures from the point of view of the performing arts. From this perspective, I felt exhilarated to read Richard Fox's *More than words* and to read how literally alive Balinese letters, writ large and small, are in present-day Bali.

In Java today, Javanese letters are known by very few younger adults. Sometimes the *hana caraka* as they are called, representing the first five syllables of the Javanese alphabet, are studied in grade school as part of the study of local language or *bahasa daerah*, but rarely after that until university where a few students, never many, might major in Javanese literature. Foreign scholars study the letters and are praised for it by Javanese intellectuals, puppeteers, and language scholars. Manuscripts in Javanese letters are kept in palace libraries and a very few public libraries outside the palaces. These manuscript collections have been usefully and expertly catalogued by Nancy Florida for Solo[1] and Jennifer Lindsay and Tim Behrend and others for Jogjakarta.[2] Only a handful of Javanese inside and outside the courts ever read the many extant manuscripts.

This is why I feel so pleased to see that whether for positive or less positive motives, regular Balinese folk know of the letters and how to use them in particular

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1 Nancy K. Florida, *Javanese literature in Surakarta manuscripts: Introduction and manuscripts of the Karaton Surakarta, vol. 1–3* (Ithaca, NY: SEAP, Cornell University, 1993–2012).

2 For example, Jennifer Lindsay, 'The Kridha Mardawa manuscript collection', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 140, 2–3 (1984): 248–62; Timothy Behrend, *Archipel* 35, 1 (1988): 23–42.

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and exacting Balinese ways. Of course Fox explains how schooling in the national Indonesian language inexorably is making the Balinese letters less a part of Balinese rituals and Balinese life. Fox touches briefly on the presence of UNESCO efforts to protect what they call 'tangible and intangible cultural heritage', a project to protect selected aspects of Balinese or Javanese or other Indonesian island traditions by freezing them in their current stages of change and by paying money to Balinese or other Indonesians to help in this effort. Fox accurately, in my opinion, calls this 'operationalized tradition'.[3] The UNESCO project works all over the world, but has found particularly rich traditions in Indonesia. Young performers who want to make older traditions more relevant to younger audiences have to compete with the heritage efforts to freeze culture in place.

For example, one unintended result of the above-mentioned Solonese Branch story project of 1984–85 was to make certain tellings of the stories we collected more standardised. As a scholar of oral tradition, I had tried to correct for this by designing the project to collect at least three or four tellings of each shadow-play story. But the advanced puppeteers studying at the fine arts academy in Solo, STSI (Academy of the Performing Arts of Indonesia), quickly decided on what was to them the best telling, and that one began to spread among the puppeteers of the Solo area as the correct telling of the story. Learning the reasons why that particular telling was the best was very interesting, but just our presence in the villages had changed the repertoire.[4]

In Bali, as Fox explains in *More than words*, the complicated interlacings of landholdings and life-cycle rites keeps Bali's ritual life alive, and the Balinese letters are at the centre of ritual life. It comes as no surprise that the translation of Balinese words and concepts would be equally complex. This leads me to focus in on the chapter on translation, chapter 7. At first I thought the evidence might be too thin with its look at just *agama* or religion/ritual and *atma* or soul stuff. But Fox's discussion of theory and practice in this chapter was incredibly rich and informative as he made both the source language and the receiving language moving targets for translators. Through a review of the work of various scholars from different periods and locations, Fox came to agree with those theorists who believed that the idea of translation itself was catachrestic or 'constituted by a metaphor irreducible to a more "literal" means of expression'.[5] What this means to me is that there is no one to one translation of words in Bali (or elsewhere), and the closest one can come is through a metaphor, a comparison rather than a literal translation. Reading this discussion led me back to the work of the late linguist A.L. 'Pete' Becker and his ideas on translation.

As a student, colleague and friend of Becker, I had already been taught that translation was a very difficult process, to be undertaken with great humility. I want to give

3 Richard Fox, *More than words: Transforming script, agency, and collective life in Bali* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 125.

4 For more examples, see the essays in Susan Lêgene, Bambang Purwanto and Henk Schulte Nordholt, eds, *Sites, bodies and stories: Imagining Indonesian history* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015). Javanese, Sundanese and Balinese shadow theatre traditions were among the first 28 traditions in the world to be named 'Masterpieces of Intangible Heritage' in 2003. See Sadiah Boonstra, 'Defining *wayang* as heritage: Standardization, codification and institutionalization', in Legene et al., *Sites, bodies and stories*, pp. 159–79.

5 Fox, *More than words,* p. 155.

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a short discussion of Becker's idea of 'surface translation', an idea he offered to the faculty in an NEH summer seminar on Indonesian literature in 1992. Becker was the only senior faculty for this workshop, and he taught us almost every day. He was at the time preparing materials for his book of essays *Beyond translation: Essays toward a modern philology*.[6] But I have not been able to find a place where he clearly and fully published his ideas about 'surface translation', a process that made a deep impression on many of us. Fox cites several of Becker's essays in *More than words*, and I believe Fox's discussion of the impossibility of translation fits very well with Becker's ideas of 'surface translation'.

To be very succinct, Becker explained to the NEH faculty group over the course of six weeks in 1992 the idea that most of the literary translations that had been done attempted to capture the sense of a word but not its sound. Scholars are especially concerned with capturing literal meaning rather than the sound and beauty inherent in the formal language of poetry or prose, what Becker saw as the 'surface' of literary language, although that surface was in no way less important than any other meaning. Becker had us work on producing first a literal translation or a gloss of a poem from the various languages we were all studying, and then we were to try our hands at capturing the sounds or 'surface' of our translations without losing too much of the literal meaning. As Fox explained in chapter 7, all translations are metaphors irreducible to a more literal form, and translation is about much more than words. What I took away from Becker's NEH seminar was a new respect for the ideas of literary embellishment going back to the Sanskrit *Natyasastra*, the classic text on the performing arts of India, two thousand years ago. I had studied Sanskrit aesthetic theory with Professor Velcheru Narayanarao in graduate school. Later in my work on Java, I read many of the Dutch scholars who wrote that pre-modern Javanese literature was redundant and full of unnecessary repetitions and embellishments that needed to be cut away to find the true storyline or the 'authentic' text. To me, both Becker and Fox are trying to find or establish a new respect for the ideas of embellishment and complex sound and sense in our translated works.

In closing, I wish to note the ways in which Fox brings attention to how Balinese letters are used by some in Bali to accumulate enough personal power to exact revenge on people or things that have wronged or harmed a person and/or his or her family. That is why the *lontar* or manuscripts that bear the letters can be dangerous for lay people and why there are particular ritual specialists who help those who want to seek revenge. I have only been able to touch upon one or two points from Richard Fox's *More than words*, and I focused mainly on only one chapter. Potential readers should look forward to a book filled with intriguing ideas and fascinating excursions into Balinese thought-worlds and life-worlds. I want to thank Richard Fox and Thomas Hunter for bringing me back to a world of ideas I once so loved.

6 A.L. Becker, *Beyond translation: Essays toward a modern philology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

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