

Notes About Some Balinese Ideas and Practices Connected with Sex from Western Lombok

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"When we study a culture, we find at once that the same structural assumptions are present in large numbers of details"

(Gregory Bateson)

I. Introduction

The social facts recorded in this essay were (mostly) not elicited through participation in the activities described. The sexual life of villagers is a very private matter and, rather like questions about a person's material circumstances, questions about it run counter to the tenor of polite social intercourse, especially when like the foreign social anthropologist one is distant.¹ It was only when I knew that I had to leave the village to return to Oxford that I plucked up the courage to ask direct questions about sexual activity between men and women. I had, however, gleaned some information about this area of social life from the casual talk and from some of the jokes of male villagers. None of the

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¹ Closeness and distance relative to a particular centre are principles which are discernible in many aspects of Balinese life and thought (cf., e.g., Duff-Cooper 1983 a: *passim*; 1984 a; 1984 b).

information which I accumulated in this latter way is, in my opinion, unfortunately tainted by the fact that it is only a male view; nor, as it turned out, was information obtained in this way compromised by what I found out by direct questions, nor *vice versa*.

Malinowski (1928: 92) makes the point that the treatment of what he calls savage sexuality makes possible

a closer co-operation between the practical sociologist and the student of primitive Mankind ..., [and that] it promises to link up with the concern which the medical, psychological, and sociological specialists have in the problems of sex. It promises also to be useful to the practical reformer or legislator.

In this, of course, the social anthropology of a people's sexual activities is not different from what one assumes is one of the main reasons that ethnographers publish their data: to provide the factual bases from which other people, in whatever discipline or field of activity, can elaborate their own concerns.

So far as social anthropology and the anthropologist are concerned, Needham (1981: 94) has written that one way of dealing with questions of the kind, What is life all about?, is "to seek deliberately to divest ourselves of any preconceptions and to contrive a direct encounter, so far as that may be possible, with human experience." What Lévy-Bruhl (1937: 288, *passim*) calls the «impérativité» of sexual customs and manners could be argued to be among those habits of thought and of action which run deepest in us; a corollary of that argument is that to consider such alien ideas and practices as those addressed in this essay is