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Thomas A. Reuter/Custodians of the Sacred Mountain

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INTRODUCTION

This book offers a journey into the world of the Bali Aga, or Mountain Balinese. It tells of a people whose culture for centuries has been shrouded in the shadow of the more celebrated lowland kingdoms of southern Bali. In this interlocal ethnographic account of the elaborate alliance systems of the Bali Aga, highland Balinese culture and society is explored for the first time in all its regional complexity. I hope in this book to convey a deeper appreciation of the Bali Aga people and their place in the fabric of Balinese identities and to contribute to a radical reassessment of prevailing assumptions about the political history, society, and culture of this island. The story of the Bali Aga people further raises important issues about the process and politics of cross-cultural representation in the social sciences and in the world at large.

Bali is renowned as a magical window on Indonesia's classical history, when Hindu empires still dominated what is now the world's most populous Muslim nation. In anthropology, Bali has become a test case for new methods of research and theoretical approaches, and to a wider public the island is familiar as a major international tourist destination. Although tiny compared to some of its neighbors, the island of Bali stands out like a beacon of singular significance from the vastness of the Indonesian archipelago (Map 1).

Balinese culture has been subject to ethnographic scrutiny and reflection like few other cultures in the world. Well-known anthropologists of every generation have contributed to a deeper understanding of Balinese society and thus of human societies in general. From the culture and personality studies of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson to the hermeneutics of Clifford Geertz, shifting currents in Balinese studies have provided an excellent indication of shifting currents in anthropological theory. With the case study of Bali at the focus of Western attention for so long, one could be excused for assuming

that further ethnographic research is unlikely to produce major surprises or new discoveries.

There is one fundamental reason why such an assumption would be incorrect. Tall and brightly lit beacons of culture tend to cast particularly long and impenetrable shadows. As it captured ever more attention from outside observers, the courtly society of southern Bali became synonymous with Bali as a whole. At the same time, the world of highland Balinese culture became almost invisible, like a distant planet concealed by the brightness of its star. In popular and ethnographic representations alike, Bali's mountainous center marks the margins of understanding.

"Representation" is fundamental to the enterprise of writing ethnography and also highly problematic for the epistemology of social science. A recent debate in anthropology has focused on the question of whether ethnographers as particular "subjects" are capable of producing reliable, let alone objective, portrayals of cultural others. Many critics have suggested that ethnographic representations written by positioned researchers are subject to bias and not to be trusted. In response to the fact that the Bali Aga are indeed misrepresented or ignored in most of the academic literature on Bali and in recognition of this general crisis of representation in anthropology and other branches of cross-cultural studies, I have made representation a central theme in this book.

My conjecture is that cross-cultural representation is a necessary and legitimate enterprise after all, under certain conditions. In support of this argument, I have taken a significant departure from the rather gloomy perspective on representational knowledge systems that has become a characteristic of postcolonial and postmodernist approaches by challenging some of the basic assumptions informing the current debate and crisis of representation in the social sciences. Most important, I argue that resource competition is not the defining force in social or cross-cultural encounters among human subjects and, hence, that the subjectivity of individual representers is neither a foundation nor an insurmountable obstacle to the accomplishment of genuine cross-cultural understanding.

The problem of representation became the focus of a perpetual debate in the social sciences as Western scholars engaged in the study of other cultures began to acknowledge that their academic disciplines had originated in a period of European history marked by rapid colonial expansion and that the knowledge generated within these disciplines had served as a motor to the mechanics of Western domination from the beginning. In the course of my research in the

highlands of Bali, however, it became obvious to me that a tendency to misrepresent others is not just an issue in cross-cultural encounters with less powerful others. On closer inspection, subjective bias in the construction of personal and cultural identities proved to be a fundamental human conundrum, even for people representing the world from the margins of global and local systems of domination—people like the Bali Aga—and even in their interactions with one another. In this book, the Bali Aga are the focus of analysis as subjective agents of representation, and it is from the perspective of a critical analysis of their representational culture that subjectivity—the central problem of representation—will be approached.

A portrayal of culture and society among the Mountain Balinese, this book is first and foremost an ethnographic representation. The central aim of this ethnography is to explore a complex web of asymmetric status relationships among highland communities arising in the course of their joint participation in complex regional systems of ritual interaction and alliance. The analysis will show how status claims are constructed on the basis of seniority in this society or, more precisely, by distinguishing among different degrees of temporal proximity to a shared and sacred origin. Bali Aga society, unlike a hierarchical system, is founded on a time-based and process-oriented notion of precedence.

I treat status as the fruit of a particular form of representational labor. Theories of status, in turn, provide a fresh perspective from which to address issues left unresolved by conventional theories of representation. My assumption in taking this approach was that the basic communicative processes in social games of mutual representation are more easily revealed by examining cases where the stakes are predominantly symbolic rather than material resources and by employing a status economy rather than a political economy model of analysis.

I hypothesize that the symbolic economies of the Bali Aga and other status-oriented societies rest on a fundamental paradox. An ongoing competition for (and asymmetrical distribution of) symbolic resources is made possible and is simultaneously constrained by an intrinsic need to cooperate. This paradox is particularly salient where the social agents or groups participating in a culturally regulated “game” of mutual representation are primarily concerned with symbolic resources, assuming that social status is achieved by securing the voluntary approval of others. It is reasonable to make this assumption at least for situations where the agents concerned encounter one another under a condition of relative material parity. For much

of its recent history, these conditions have applied to highland Balinese society and its economy of ritual status, making it an ideal site for a study of representation processes as they may unfold in the absence of any systematic form of political or economic domination.

The Bali Aga people, however, are no strangers to issues of power. While power differences may not be a major factor in shaping the mutual representations they have constructed of one another, they have also participated and competed—with a distinct disadvantage—on the larger stage of a Balinese politics of identity, as active agents but often also as silent and powerless objects of representation. A further set of questions about representation is thus raised in this study at a level of ethnohistorical inquiry: How have the Bali Aga been represented by more powerful others, and how have they represented themselves to the outside world? Or, put in more general terms: How does representation function under a condition of material disparity?

I argue that the Bali Aga, in their responses to outsiders' portrayals of their culture, have displayed an active and cooperative engagement with, and a vested interest in supporting, the very discourses that allocate to them the status of a politically marginal group. This response suggests that the introduction of material disparities to a game of representation does not necessarily or even typically dispense with a need for cooperation and mutual understanding.

Moving closer to issues of representation at home, I then ask how Dutch colonial intervention in Bali and the accumulation of anthropological knowledge about Balinese society altered the position of the Bali Aga. Whereas a more conventional postcolonial study might stress the impact of Western power-knowledge systems, I argue that the dominant political other for the highland Balinese in the first place has not been a Western colonial power but a changing political and economic elite within Balinese society. From the perspective of the indigenous Bali Aga, the traditional seat of power has been the central palaces of the island's southern kingdoms, and its face a changing aristocracy or modern elite whose sources of power have been located on the outside in one way or another throughout the course of Balinese history. Western images of the Bali Aga were formed on the basis of an increasingly cooperative relationship between Bali's ruling classes and the outside world, established in the wake of initially violent confrontations. This political and economic cooperation was and is underwritten by a process of cultural brokerage and a mutual appropriation of the other's knowledge and power.

These preliminary observations suggest that, along with iron chains

of domination, subtle threads of cooperation seem to extend between people of lower and higher status, between marginal and dominant sectors of a society, and between globally powerful and peripheral societies as they engage in a process of mutual representation. They also raise an important general question about representation. Is intersubjectivity rather than subjectivity the primary force in shaping one's experience with others? And if so, does this experience give rise to a human interest in communicative cooperation that may enable us to develop a representational knowledge of others based on free intersubjective exchange rather than subjective bias?

This book takes up the project of studying popular representation in Balinese society, but it is also a project of (ethnographic) representation in its own right. The first project is an exploration of the grounds for the legitimacy of the second. Through an empirical investigation of processes of representation in highland Bali, I endeavor to provide a better understanding of the practical challenges a popular representation system faces and must overcome if it is to prevent the rise of any lasting and pervasive patterns of discrimination and material domination in the society concerned. By tracing continuities in this social dynamics of representation further, across interpersonal, intrasocietal, interethnic, and cross-cultural contexts, I aim to illustrate that some of the same challenges must be met in order to free ethnographic representations from the charge of subjective bias. In short, I hope to illustrate that a system of knowledge, on the condition that it is based on voluntary and free intersubjectivity, can act as a positive constraint on political domination, no matter whether the knowledge concerned is the product of a popular or an ethnographic representation.

From the Mountains of Bali to the Valleys of Social Theory

In providing an alternative ethnographic portrayal of Balinese society, from the perspective of its indigenous mountain population, this study draws on experiences gained during seven visits over a time span of twenty years, including a major period of eighteen consecutive months of local and regional fieldwork in 1993–1994.¹ The results of this ethnographic research may help to fill an embarrassing gap in the ethnography of Bali by exploring the still mysterious world of its interior highland region.

This is not to suggest that the Bali Aga have escaped attention altogether. Earlier research has provided valuable insights into the

local organization and traditions of a few Bali Aga villages (*desa*). The present study, however, pays tribute to a more complex world of mythical connections and ritual interactions in which those and more than one hundred other Bali Aga communities partake. This wider social world is maintained through a vast network of regional, intervillage alliance systems spanning the entire central highland region of Bali and incorporating communities along the island's northern and eastern coasts as well. These important and ancient regional alliance networks are locally known as *banua*, or 'ritual domains'.²

The study of Bali Aga alliance networks illustrates the importance of narrative origin histories and ritualized social interactions for systems of status distribution in Bali and related Austronesian societies. In brief, ritual domains in highland Bali are united by the shared orientation of participating villages toward a sacred time and place of origin. Origin sites are identified in elaborate mythohistorical narratives and marked by ancient regional temples. The status system of an alliance network is ritually displayed during annual festivals held at such regional temples in commemoration of the ancestral deities and founders of the domain concerned. The focal concept and value of "origin" inspires the Bali Aga to conceive of contemporary society as a differentiated whole arising from a common source in the past and expanding in a historical sequence of migrations and village foundations. Villages within a domain thus represent way stations on the path of the ancestors, and the ritual status of a particular village is determined by precedence or relative proximity to the sacred origin of this mythical journey. "Precedence" is an analytical concept for describing a mode of status differentiation crucial to all aspects of social organization in the highlands. First conceived by a group of anthropologists based at the Australian National University and conducting research in eastern Indonesia, the concept of precedence and the social systems it describes fundamentally differ from a concept of hierarchy and a hierarchical mode of status distribution, which are conspicuous in anthropological literature on the Indian caste system.

While relevant to general theories of ritual, status, hierarchy, and social organization, this study most immediately contributes to the comparative ethnology of Austronesian-speaking peoples. This group of historically and culturally related societies is dispersed over a vast region—from Madagascar in the far west, across insular Southeast Asia, and eastward across the Pacific as far as New Zealand and Hawai'i. When contemplated from the perspective of its indigenous moun-

tain people and their culture, the island of Bali no longer stands out from the Indonesian archipelago as a local anomaly on account of a strong element of Indian or Hindu influence in its courtly culture and religion. As much as it may hold surprises in relation to the literature on southern Balinese culture, this ethnography of Bali Aga society will evoke a deep sense of recognition among those who have studied Austronesian societies in other parts of Indonesia and beyond.

For comparative historians, this study of ritual alliance systems in highland Bali may provide a useful model of how the first Hindu-Buddhist polities were established in Bali, and possibly in many other parts of Southeast Asia, by building on the foundation of and adding complexity to earlier and indigenous forms of regional organization. Some mountain temples (*pura*) and the domains (*banua*) attached to them have existed and evolved for more than a millennium. Several such temple networks appear to have been tied together in a larger ritual system at a time when the first Hindu kingdoms flourished on the island. Royal edicts written on bronze plates (*prasasti*) are found in many Bali Aga villages. Several ritual centers in the highlands are also graced by large collections of stone statues of early Balinese kings, hinting at their significance as former state temples.

The advancement of ethnographic knowledge about Bali Aga culture and about the place of the highland people in Balinese history and society is a worthy objective in its own right, and the first and longer section of this book (Part 1) is dedicated to the achievement of this aim. My main focus of analysis, however, is the different systems of representation that inform the regional status economy of highland Balinese society, that position the Bali Aga within a pan-Balinese landscape of identities, and that also position them and other Balinese within popular and anthropological Western discourses. That is, a specific ethnography is used to provide insights about representation in order to resolve the general problem of representation intrinsic to the project of ethnography itself. By beginning with an exploration of the highlands of Bali, however, the structure of this book inverts the course of its own history. A brief reflection on this history will help to clarify why such an inversion became necessary and why it may be fruitful.

Contemporary anthropologists no longer assume that their representations of other cultures belong or remain confined within a value-neutral sphere of scientific reflection. For many, the problem may first arise at the level of textual practice, as they begin to write an ethnography. For others, the problem of representation is en-

countered at the level of ethnographic practice, as a blatant and serious issue in the world at large. The political aspect of the problem, arising from popular (as well as academic) practices of representation, is forcefully brought to the awareness of researchers concerned with the study of a people like the Bali Aga, who are “marginal” not only in relation to Western power but also in relation to the wider societies and nations of which they are a part.

Politically naive or morally unreflective explorations of such marginal worlds at best would do little to address the practical concerns of the people who inhabit them and, at worst, could exacerbate their plight by falling into and deepening the very same discursive grooves that have circumscribed their marginality in the first place. Margins and centers are not natural phenomena; they are metaphorical constructs that, in the course of their pragmatic usage, help to articulate and facilitate specific patterns of power relations within a local, regional, national, or global politics of representation. Insofar as the people of highland Bali are indeed a marginalized people, rather than simply “marginal,” any attempt to construct a politically neutral account of their society would have been impossible and irresponsible.

The issues raised by marginality studies in particular are vital ones within the social sciences in their current crisis of representation. The debate sparked by this crisis concerns the epistemology, ethics, and politics of cross-cultural representation, and it is not surprising that anthropology, the comparative study of human societies and cultures, for better or for worse, has been at the heart of the turbulence. A profound crisis of representation arose as postcolonial research revealed Western knowledge systems to have been integral to the establishment and preservation of international power structures in which Western nations occupied (and still maintain) a position of dominance. This and other evidence was interpreted in epistemological terms as the outcome of an underlying problem of subjective bias and as anathema to the notion that social science can provide accurate and objective representations of other societies and cultures.

Few contemporary scholars would deny that ethnographic or historical representations of other cultures have at times been severely biased. Read from a contemporary perspective, at least some of the portrayals of other cultures produced in the spirit of a nineteenth-century evolutionary anthropology and, likewise, some studies of colonized societies conducted by colonial scholars would seem obviously skewed. Unfortunately though, less obvious versions of the same representational distortions continue to affect the work of con-

temporary researchers, even though they may have absorbed some of the critical insights of postmodern theory and are operating in a postcolonial and rapidly globalizing world.

Among the undesirable continuities that have been identified in current anthropology, one of the most significant is the tendency to conflate concepts of geographical, cultural, and temporal remoteness (Said 1978; Fabian 1983; Appadurai 1988). This tendency could all too easily manifest itself in a portrayal of a people like the Mountain Balinese. Researchers in anthropology and other academic disciplines concerned with cross-cultural questions, however, cannot avoid an act of representation if they are to write anything at all about other cultures. A provocative question thus cannot be evaded: How can representations of other cultures be anything other than a subjective and inherently biased form of knowledge?

I commence my search for an answer to this question in the highlands of Bali. This is precisely because the Mountain Balinese are a people in whose history representation has been not just a philosophical but a highly practical issue and one to which they have had to find ways of responding. Approaching the topic of representation from within their lifeworld illustrates that representational bias is a general and existential human conundrum rather than just a special concern for the social sciences. An ethnographic analysis of representational practice also reveals how the scope for subjective bias is constrained by intersubjectivity within Bali Aga, pan-Balinese, colonial, and modern knowledge systems and, ultimately, how a focus on intersubjectivity may help to overcome the problem of subjective bias within the social sciences.

The distribution of status among Bali Aga communities within regional ritual domains involves a peculiar logic of mutual representation of its own. Social status systems, in this and other societies, are the culture-specific products of a history of collective representational labor.

Status relations are comparable to power relations insofar as both are negotiated within the context of the same fundamental paradox. The strategic pursuit of status and power involves an accumulation of "cultural capital" or "symbolic resources," and yet competing parties must rely on the manipulation of interactive, communicative, and essentially cooperative processes as their means of production. It is assumed, however, that status economies are focused more exclusively on symbolic resources. Symbolic economies therefore must rely more exclusively on cooperative processes of representation within a social system of voluntary association and free argumenta-

tion, at least for so long as they remain relatively undistorted by the influence (and, perhaps, help to prevent the occurrence) of glaring asymmetries in wealth and force within the economic and political economies of the societies concerned. In comparison to power, status may not, or not as readily, be derived from alternative sources, such as the exercise of coercive force or the strategic use of material wealth. By adopting a status economy rather than a political economy approach, this study aims to illustrate that the scope for strategic and biased representation in the competitive pursuit of symbolic resources (i.e., in the strategic construction of “knowledge systems”) is significant but finite. Competitive interests and associated subjective biases among participants in a symbolic economy are constrained by a cooperative imperative inherent in the intersubjective nature of symbolic communication and associated processes of knowledge construction.³

As the focus of analysis shifts from the status systems of highland Balinese society to a broader and more political field of contestation in the second part of the book, to an islandwide politics of identity in which the “marginal” Bali Aga have played a surprisingly central role, the relevance of this imperative for communicative cooperation as a restraint on strategic bias in representation will be explored in a historical context of political and economic disparity.

Moving, finally, beyond the context of Balinese worlds and to a more global politics of representation, I will demonstrate how a communicative imperative for cooperation, though sometimes in the form of cross-cultural complicity, may have influenced the way in which the highlands and Bali as a whole have been portrayed by Western scholars working in a colonial or postcolonial setting.

It is in the following sense that the mountains of Bali may stand to fill the valleys of anthropological theory. If the analysis of status systems within Bali Aga society can lend strong support to the hypotheses that representation is an essentially intersubjective process and that cooperation is thus fundamental to the cultural construction and contestation of knowledge, it may be possible to extend the argument toward a more general intersubjective theory of representation and human understanding. In this book, then, an analysis of status systems in highland Bali is to provide the source of conceptual tools for a general critique of cultural knowledge as it is employed in the service of people’s quest for status as well as power (insofar as both draw on communicative or interactive processes of representation). Looking at power and knowledge from the margins, this study aims

to shed new light on the intersubjective play of human interests in processes of representation. This procedure may reveal how subjective biases and strategic interests affect popular or anthropological perceptions and portrayals *of* others, even within a single society or group, but also how a genuine intersubjective understanding may be gained in cooperation *with* others.

First Impressions

First impressions are powerful, deceptive, and often more durable than they deserve to be. Few could tell more about the fossilization of first impressions than the people of highland Bali. Unfortunately, the power of first impressions has not proved favorable for them. I found that some of the harshest realities in Bali Aga lives were a sediment of others' self-projective imagination, others to whom their lived reality had never been much of an issue. My own account of their culture must begin somewhere near the surface as well, inevitably perhaps, and not without purpose. In conveying a first impression of highland Bali, my aim is to illustrate how some of the established opinions about the Bali Aga were constructed and why they may need to be deconstructed.

First impressions are formed in the immediate context of personal experience and initially serve only to inform someone's private opinions about another people and their culture. Such isolated opinions are rarely of much consequence until they are voiced and discussed, and become widely accepted by others. The first evidence for a more permanent characterization is often a public act of labeling. How members of another culture are named may provide an indication of whether or not superficial impressions have hardened prematurely into opinions. The latter is likely to have occurred if the chosen name is a descriptive characterization.

The ethnic label "Bali Aga" is a perfect illustration (from Old Javanese *aga*, "mountain"). A popular Balinese term, it appears at first to be no more than a dispassionate and appropriate description for a people whose principal homeland is a vast highland region stretching across Bali's mountainous interior. The simplicity of the term, however, helps to conceal a deeper significance. This descriptive label draws exclusively on first and superficial impressions, isolates the visual characteristic of a people's location in physical space, and then transforms it into a value-charged metaphoric reference for the people themselves. As such, it must attract suspicion.

Map 2. The island of Bali

The topographic metaphor “Mountain Balinese” draws attention to the physical distance separating the people of the highlands from others living around the major urban and political centers of the island’s southern coastal region (Map 2). As an element in the metaphoric construction of a cultural identity, however, it evokes a more complex notion of distance. This secondary and rather derisive connotation of the term arises because physical remoteness is employed in both traditional and modernist Balinese discourses as a trope for historical and cultural distance.⁴ The term “Bali Aga” is a focal metaphor in a local discourse that has constructed its social referents as a remote and marginal people. Somewhat less common Balinese designations for this ethnic minority of mountain people are the terms “*bali mula*” and “*bali kuna*,” literally translated, the original or ancient Balinese. This choice of labels helps to confirm what has only been

asserted until now. For other Balinese, an excursion into the distant highlands simultaneously signifies a journey into the past. It leads to a place where an indigenous people are assumed to maintain a cultural tradition originating from before the dawn of “Balinese civilization” (as southern Balinese define it).

For a number of reasons I retain the local designation “Bali Aga” in this text despite its somewhat negative connotations. A new label, on its own, could have provided no more than the illusion of a social change. Even if a replacement term were to become widely accepted, without a corresponding change of attitude among illocutors, it would all too soon acquire the same semantic character as the one it was meant to replace. In order to dispel the social prejudices that have haunted the Bali Aga, a more fundamental change of consciousness is required. This book aims to contribute by challenging superficial, selective, and misleading characterization of the highland people in popular and scientific discourses and by replacing first impressions with a deeper understanding of their culture.

The term “Bali Aga” was also retained because its meaning is ambiguous in any case, even as it is used by other Balinese and as the highland people themselves tend to stress. The mountains are, after all, the distant and sacred abode of the gods in Balinese cosmology. Furthermore, they are the distant water source of the river-irrigated rice-farming economy this island has depended on for a millennium. The alternative term “*mula*” is similarly polarized in its value implications. The notion of aboriginality is sometimes used to evoke an image of contrast, depicting a primitive culture and backward people who have been left behind on the path of social evolution by their supposedly more civilized and progressive fellow Balinese. In many other contexts, however, the notion of origin conjures up an image of Bali’s mythical creation and sacred beginnings.

In the context of a modernizing society and in the discourses of Bali’s new administrative and economic elite, the more positive value connotations of both terms are losing some of their earlier significance. By situating their cultural other at the opposite end of a temporal and topological scale on which they occupy the here and now, the apex of a cumulative civilization process and the center of power, prominent sectors of modern Balinese society are adopting a strategy of representation by contrast. The features of this strategy are remarkably similar to those identified by Said (1978) in his critique of Western orientalism.

Marginalizing portrayals of the highland people create an institutionalized invisibility rather than simply reflecting a natural invisibility

and an innocent lack of knowledge about them. From the southern coast, the faraway home of the Bali Aga in the highlands of the island's interior is usually obscured by a milky ocean of cloud. Clusters of dark conical shapes sometimes appear in the east and west as Bali's majestic volcanic peaks rise from this land of mist. But the featureless quality of an elusive highland world has not allowed its people to escape evaluation. Rather, the amorphous space between the faraway peaks has been shaped through the power of a projective imagination and fashioned into the shadow image of a dominant Balinese self. The popular image of Mountain Bali, constructed from the external perspective of a coastal civilization, has been clouded not by the steamy atmosphere of this tropical island but by opaque cultural lenses.

While it may have been a Balinese politics of identity that defined the Bali Aga in this way, local prejudices have also influenced popular Western perceptions. Foreign visitors may occasionally explore an intriguing highland environment and gain glimpses of its people and culture. Their general impression of the island, however, is shaped by the powerful and exotic fantasy of a more "Balinese" Bali in the south: a fantasy in which southern Balinese themselves have a vested economic interest. Visitors arrive with expectations generated by travel brochures filled with romantic pictures of dazzling, palm-fringed surf beaches and elaborately terraced rice paddies, glittering in the benevolent light of a tropical sun. These prior expectations are difficult to reconcile with fleeting personal impressions of the island's less hospitable interior.

A set of even more pervasive "cultural tourism" expectations has been shaped by the pervasive image of Bali as the home of a refined courtly civilization. The exotic splendor of a Balinese high culture, commonly associated with the island's aristocracy and their palaces in the south, has been marketed with great proficiency to the world, most notably through the sophisticated, colorful medium of a wide range of artistic expressions. In the panoptic arcades of the global culture market, where visibility and consumer demand are mutually reinforcing variables, southern Bali is displayed and displays itself on a glass shelf at eye level. By contrast, the equally rich history and traditions of the mountain people are hidden and stowed away, for better or for worse, in the darkest recesses of Bali's dusty storeroom of cultural resources.

Superficial appearances have become all-important in the frenetic world of a global consumer culture, where difference is acknowledged and marketable only if it can be favorably recognized at a glance. Nevertheless, the physical characteristics of a highland environment

do have a significance apart from their use as a trope for the cultural construction of its people. Bali's mountain economy is subject to a number of genuinely natural constraints relating to physical elevation, a cooler climate, and local demographics.

Most Bali Aga communities are located at elevations ranging from 800 to 1,700 meters, a climatic zone where intense wet rice cultivation is not feasible.⁵ Highland Balinese have thus historically lacked the population density and surplus of material resources characteristic of the more productive agrarian economy of lowland Bali. Environmental conditions here are more amenable to the cultivation of slow-maturing dry rice varieties, maize, sweet potatoes, bananas, and vegetables, and to the raising of domestic pigs and cattle. A modest surplus could be gained by trading, in the past most notably by controlling the passage of goods through the mountains on their way from the important harbors of northern Bali to the south. More recently, a growing livestock export business (cattle, chickens, and pigs) and a move toward cash-crop agriculture (particularly coffee, citrus, and clove trees) have helped to augment the incomes of mountain farmers.⁶ Where there is poverty in mountain villages nowadays, this is mainly due to a shortage of agricultural land emerging in the wake of recent population growth.⁷ More and more young people fail to inherit or acquire sufficient land to remain agriculturists and are forced to seek alternative sources of income elsewhere.

The stark realities of limited economic opportunity in the highlands, however, are not determined by ecological factors alone. Access to new employment and business opportunities in the modern sector of the economy has often been denied the Bali Aga on account of their image of backwardness and lack of relevant connections. At the time when a cultural tourism industry came to dominate Bali's economy (Picard 1990), for example, the Bali Aga were poorly positioned to claim a significant stake in this new and highly profitable enterprise. Cast as a rather cultureless people by comparison to the glamorous courtly civilization of the south, their disadvantaged position could be attributed once again to the "natural" resource poverty of their highland economy.

A trickle of tourist dollars is reaching the highlands nonetheless, though this may not be because of a serious interest in highland culture. The promise of clearer skies and sometimes splendid views during the brief interlude of a relatively dry season, from May to September, attracts a modest influx of foreign and domestic tourists to Kintamani and other highland districts (*kecamatan*). Kintamani

occupies the more elevated northern part of the land-locked regency (*kabupaten*) of Bangli.

Even as locals suffer the recurrent and acute water shortages of this season, streams of tourist buses and hired cars, interspersed by a more regular flow of trucks and vans, add traffic to the road winding up from the regency capital of Bangli in the south to Penelokan. As they follow this ancient trade road farther, through Kintamani Town, Sukawana, Bantang, and Dausa, on their way toward the northern coastal city of Singaraja and the black beaches of Lovina, visitors pass along the tall rim of the caldera that encircles the still active volcano and lake of Batur. Many pause to enjoy the scenic panorama and to catch a breath of cool air—a temporary but welcome relief to those who, their tropical island fantasy transformed into reality, suddenly find themselves suffering under the claustrophobia and relentless heat of the coastal plains.

The transportation needs of foreigners have had some historical impact on the development of mountain infrastructure. In the first decades of this century, Dutch administrator and keen traveler W.O.J. Nieuwenkamp reported with some satisfaction on the “path-breaking” contributions of a new colonial government to Balinese civilization: “In 1906 I traveled the path from Bangli to Batur on horseback, in 1918 by automobile!” (1920:99). Incidentally, 1918 was the year when Bangli, as the last of Bali’s former principalities, came directly under Dutch colonial control. A more comprehensive network of smaller, partially sealed roads has been added since then, mostly during the last two decades. This time it was the Indonesian government’s turn to claim the building of roads as a primary achievement and symbol of its power and administrative penetration.

The new network of secondary and poorly sealed local roads was designed more to meet the aims of national rural development plans than those of a tourist economy. While at the time of my research a majority of mountain villages were at last becoming accessible by road, in most of them the arrival of a white foreigner (*bule*, literally an albino or a person with a skin-discoloring disease) was still a rare, sensational, and sometimes unprecedented event. Significant tourist exposure and revenue has been obtained only in the village of Batur. The territories of this community include the scenic lookout Penelokan on the crater rim and the small settlement Toyabungka at the shore of Lake Batur. Construction projects currently under way in both locations aim to provide luxury facilities where only limited and modest budget accommodation has been available until now. With

the majestic beauty and natural wonders of the volcanic highlands becoming more thoroughly commodified, the foremost attraction for the expected guests is assumed to be nature rather than culture.

Nearly all villages (*desa*) in Kintamani and in the wider region of the island's mountainous interior are Bali Aga communities (Figure 1). The only one to be recognized as such and to attract a measure of cultural tourism on account of this, however, is Desa Trunyan, on the far side of Lake Batur. Together with the famous Tenganan in the Karangasem regency, the Bali Aga village Trunyan is one of the few token emblems of a more archaic Bali on the island's cultural tourism trail and is known in particular for its "primitive" sky-burials.⁸ The piles of skulls in the local cemetery attract only a modest number of visitors, however, owing to Trunyan's other and equally somber reputation as a village of begging children. Travelers' testimonies warn that local men may extort money from passengers by rocking their shaky boats as they ferry them across the lake. Authors of tourist guide books, who generally propagate romantic visions of smiling Balinese, have propagated the image problem of the hill people by characterizing them as "hostile, scruffy hustlers" (Winterton 1989: 157–158) and as a potential "hassle" to those wishing to enjoy the natural beauty of their mountain home (Darling 1990:156).

The highlands periodically witness another brief invasion by outsiders as southern Balinese visitors arrive suddenly and in great numbers. The timing and purpose of their pilgrimage to the mountains differs fundamentally from that of foreign tourists. Unlike Western visitors, Balinese are rarely attracted to the mountains during a meteorological and ritual dry season of relative ceremonial idleness lasting from May to October. Each year at the two liminal times of transition in the alternating cycle of the two seasons, however, it is an ancient religious tradition to undertake the once arduous journey into the mountains. These moments, marked by the appearance of the full moon in the months of April (end of wet season) and October (end of dry season), are times set apart for spectacular harvest or fertility rituals in a number of ancient Bali Aga temples. Of crucial importance in the articulation of a long-standing relationship between the people of the mountains and other Balinese, these ritual interactions will be discussed in detail later.

During a wet season of rain and blood sacrifices, lasting from November to March, the mountains recede behind a shroud of perpetual mist and endless chilling rains, and are avoided by tourists and pilgrims alike. Local farmers are mostly left alone to appreciate at first hand the descent of the heavenly precipitation from the realm

Figure 1. Distribution of villages with Bali Aga traditions in contemporary Bali

of the gods, on which the entire island has traditionally depended for its economic survival.

Identifying the Bali Aga with the mountains is tempting and not altogether inappropriate. Many of their communities are indeed located on and together dominate the most elevated central part of the island. Nor can it be doubted that agricultural practices in these communities are adapted to survival under the specific conditions of a tropical mountain environment. As Appadurai (1988) has suggested, however, the cultural discourses that localize an ethnic group in a confined and distant physical space are based on more than an innocent and unmediated metaphoric transferal of environmental features onto the level of social classification.

As the Bali Aga were allotted a place on the conceptual map of the island, through the speech acts and in the cultural representations of their fellow Balinese, anomalies and contradictions between an idealized social topology and actual settlement patterns had to be dismissed. It is conveniently ignored that a number of "Aga" villages are not in the mountains at all. The majority of villages along the arid northern coast of the regency of Buleleng, from Pacung to Penuktukan, are Bali Aga villages as well, and others are found in a small cluster along the southeastern coast of Karangasem, from Tenganan to Seraya. Although the ecology and economics of villages along the northern coast are very different from those in highland villages, the same cannot be said of their culture. Indeed, there would be no empirical grounds for suggesting a cultural divide between a "coastal" and "mountain" people in Bali if one were to define the northeastern coast as the island's most significant shore. The Bali Aga appear as a separate "people of the mountains" (*wong aga*) only when viewed from the perspective of the southern plains and foothills, as has been their fate for many centuries.

An understanding of other cultures inevitably begins with first impressions. These are often sufficient to illustrate that there are ways of life different from one's own. As such, they draw attention and may awaken a genuine sense of curiosity. But first impressions also tend to be riddled with contradictions, as are the kinds of discourses about other cultures that rely on them. Fleeting encounters evidently raise more questions about others (and ourselves) than can be answered on the basis of the superficial information they themselves can provide.

Such questions can only be answered by exploring cultural difference in more ethnographic detail, without allowing the resulting

ethnographic knowledge to serve as a vehicle for constructing an even more pervasive and permanent sense of distance.⁹ In order to reduce a prevailing popular sense of subjective distance toward a particular culture, it may be necessary first to deconstruct subjective and biased portrayals of that culture by other and presumably more prejudiced outsiders, but it is not sufficient. A greater quantity of information in itself is not a guarantee of greater objectivity when it comes to its interpretation. Given the apparent subjectivity of all knowledge and the inevitability of raising further knowledge claims in writing an ethnography (even if a pure deconstructivism approach is adopted), what is required instead is a solution to the fundamental problem of representation.

In the interim, the dismissal of ethnography as yet another form of biased representation should be suspended temporarily on the basis of a critical humanist assumption: Cultural differences (real or imaginary) are relative to a higher-order similarity among people on the grounds of a shared anthropological (lit. “human”) condition, and hence, at least in principle, there is a potential in anthropology for a self-critical interpretation of cultural difference. Though this may be a somewhat uncertain foundation in that it assumes a capacity for critical intersubjectivity in advance of exploring its character and contingency, this uncertainty may provide sufficient rationale for granting this particular ethnography the opportunity to address ethnography’s general dilemma of subjectivity.

In this book, therefore, I will consider Bali Aga ways of living initially as an unfamiliar set of cultural responses to the familiar challenges of human existence. The underlying problem of subjectivity in representation, of having the power to misrepresent and experiencing the agony of being misrepresented by others, constitutes just such a challenge. I will first explore how the Bali Aga people respond to this general dilemma where it is first encountered by them—within their own highland society.