Introduction

Bali is a tiny island in the vast island nation of Indonesia. It has long been famed among Western scholars, travelers, artists, and musicians for its extraordinarily rich cultural and artistic life and the profusion of its religious rituals and ceremonies. Although exposed to more than a century of direct foreign influence—and more recently to waves of mass tourism—Bali nevertheless retains a distinctive cultural and religious life. Now incorporated in the bureaucratic and economic structures of the modern state of Indonesia, Balinese nevertheless continue to live lives that are guided by local custom and leaders and centered on communal and family-based religious rituals. Religion, still an important aspect of Balinese life, has largely remained free of centralizing bureaucratic control, and each village community (desa), along with the neighborhoods (banjar) that compose it, the temple associations (pamaksan), and other local groups, take responsibility for organizing and conducting their own religious activities, as does each family. Although Indonesia as a whole is now predominately Islamic in faith, Bali continues to adhere to Hindu teachings that were first introduced to the region sometime early in the first millennium AD. Since that time many different elements have been incorporated into
Balinese religious life, which has developed its own unique forms and expressions to the point that most modern scholars of Balinese religion describe it as something very different from the Hinduism found in India.

In the voluminous anthropological literature on Bali that has emerged during the second half of the twentieth century, five statements in particular about its religion have come to receive wide currency:

1. Balinese religion aims to achieve on earth a mirroring of a divine cosmic order where hierarchical structure, harmony, and balance prevail.
2. Balinese religion is primarily a matter of praxis—ritual performance—rather than speculative philosophy or inner experience.
3. Balinese religion consists of a complex mixture of beliefs and rituals derived from many different sources: a thin layer derived from Hinduism rests on top of a deep foundation of primitive animistic beliefs.
4. Balinese religion can best be understood in its own terms. To look for parallels in Indian sources, as did previous generations of Dutch and European scholars, simply imposes external models on Balinese understandings, which are very different.
5. Balinese religion, like Balinese culture, is multiplex, various, and dependent on local context. No neat explanatory framework or conceptual pattern can account for the endless variety of its specific forms.

Certainly not all scholars of Bali would agree with these assertions, and acceptance of one does not necessarily imply adherence to all five. Nevertheless they represent the opinions of leading scholars in the field and have been, and continue to be, very influential. But in my view, although these statements contain much truth and cannot be dismissed out of hand, they are subtly misleading. Furthermore, I believe they may coalesce into a popular image of Balinese religion that creates a distorted view of it—one that greatly underestimates the philosophical complexity of its beliefs and practices and, furthermore, distances it in the eyes of many from the great religious tradition to which it belongs: Hinduism. It seems strange that local variants of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, as in Burma, Thailand, or Cambodia, have been respected as authentic and spiritually elevated religious practices and doctrines, yet Hinduism in Bali has been regarded as markedly different from the Indian traditions from which it derives. I suggest that a large part of the reason may lie in a greater familiarity with Buddhism among Western scholars and thus a greater respect for its teachings.

Although it is not my intention in this book to reexamine systematically these assumptions about Balinese religion, my arguments as a whole cut across the grain of such conventional wisdom. This book sets out to do three things: to identify a number of mystical themes central to Balinese religion that, although not unknown to Western scholars, have rarely been emphasized by anthropologists and have more often been presented as disparate elements than seen as a cohesive core; to demonstrate the striking parallels between these core themes and Indian Tantric thought; and to show how these mystical themes are expressed in Balinese myth, written texts, and ritual performance. On this basis I will argue that Balinese religion, as it is practiced today, is a unique and creative local expression of
Hindu Shivaitic Tantric philosophy. That is to say: the cultural forms of expression are distinctively Balinese, but the recurring themes they embody closely parallel classic Hindu concepts of the cosmos and the forces that constitute it.

The data I draw upon consist of four elements: visual art; Balinese mythology in oral tradition and written texts; Balinese texts outlining esoteric teachings; and my own and others’ observations of ritual practice. To show that we are dealing with living understandings, not historical relics, I have chosen as my starting point the works of two contemporary Balinese artists painting in traditional styles. Although to those unfamiliar with Bali it may seem a strange enterprise to use the works of contemporary artists to explore key ideas in Balinese religion, much of this book is devoted to showing why this is not so. My own anthropological observations of Balinese culture and ritual began in 1996.6 Although my approach is that of a cultural anthropologist, I will draw upon textual materials and the work of philologists, as well as visual art.

The focus of this book is Balinese religion—or rather certain elements of it—that can be discerned in contemporary Balinese thought and practice. Yet at the same time it is concerned with the continuity these elements have with the past. Over the last century or more, Bali has not only been subjected to external forces for change. It has engaged in internal processes of reexamining and recreating its own religious identity, partly if not largely as a result of external pressures. Out of this internal struggle has emerged a new, officially authorized, and state-supported Balinese religion: “agama Hindu.”7 Yet alongside it, or perhaps despite it, most Balinese continue their ritual life in many ways that are clearly continuous with ideas and practices that owe little to reformist efforts and even less to foreign influence. In a recent study Leo Howe describes this new official religion as “in part a continuation, and in part a reconceptualization, of precolonial customary knowledge and ritual practice (adat).”8 A difficulty for the outside observer arises in deciding what in contemporary Balinese religious thought represents continuity with the past and what constitutes reformist views. I will argue against any easy assumption that local practice at the village level represents continuity whereas philosophical or theological views necessarily represent the reformist influence.

Yet it is evident that making such distinctions is a delicate task and there may not always be clear-cut answers. Anthropologists’ increasing awareness over the last two decades or so of the importance of historical change and the local contextualization of knowledge has brought a new awareness of culture as discourse rather than structure. In acknowledging the complexity of discourse concerning religion in present-day Bali that is so clearly depicted by Howe, I think it is still possible to discern in this ferment of contestation, negotiation, and recreation elements that derive from the past but continue to shape in important ways current practice. The term “traditional” has now fallen into disrepute, as it seems to indicate an unreflective notion of an unchanging past. Nevertheless it still provides a useful shorthand term for those aspects of the culture that are not owed to the Western and colonial domination that reached Bali in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.9 In this sense, my topic is traditional Balinese religion as it continues into the present. My aim is to identify a specific cluster of mystical ideas that have their origins in the precolonial past; that are not owed to modern reformist views yet can be traced in contemporary thought; that are expressed in mythology and sacred texts; and above all that can be shown to provide the conceptual basis of the seemingly endless variety of Balinese ritual life.
The intimate relationship between art and religion in Balinese culture is reflected in Chapter 1, which also explores some of the problems of defining Balinese “mysticism.” Chapter 2 focuses on the work of I Ketut Budiana, a contemporary Balinese artist renowned for his mysterious and mystical subjects. In a detailed examination of the imagery of twelve of his paintings I explore his recurring themes. Chapter 3 pursues similar themes in the very different works of I Gusti Nyoman Mirdiana, a young artist whose mythological subject matter leads into a discussion of Balinese mythology. Chapter 4 summarizes the themes depicted by the two artists and discusses how representative their ideas might be of Balinese mystical thinking more generally. This question raises the issue of parallels with Indian Tantrism as it has been redefined in recent studies by Indologists. Chapter 5 explores further Indian parallels with Balinese mythology and ritual in order to show that much of Balinese ritual practice can be reinterpreted as an embodiment of the mystical themes noted in earlier chapters. Chapter 6, drawing the arguments together, concludes that the diverse forms of Balinese religious life can be understood as rich, localized expressions of classic tenets of Shivaite Tantric philosophy.

This book offers a journey though the inner worlds of two contemporary Balinese artists, revealing how their very different works reflect a shared symbolism, mythology, and cultural belief system. It also contends that the cosmos depicted in their works is representative of widely shared Balinese beliefs—revealing a kernel of understanding that can help to illuminate Balinese religion in general. It further suggests the continued importance of exploring parallels—and differences—between Balinese religion and Indian Tantric thought, Shaktism, and classic Indian mythology.

My arguments are at best preliminary; they point to the need for more research and comparative work. Although a great deal has already been written about Balinese religion, there is still much more to be learned. My hope is that this book, by challenging some long-standing assumptions, will stimulate reassessments of existing knowledge and spur new research leading in new directions.