



# Review of ‘Desire, Divine and Demonic; Balinese mysticism in the paintings of I Ketut Budiana and I Gusti Mirdiana’, by Michele Stephen

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## Book reviews

Michele Stephen, *Desire, divine and demonic; Balinese mysticism in the paintings of I Ketut Budiana and I Gusti Nyoman Mirdiana*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005, ix + 179 pp. ISBN 0824828593. Price: USD 52.00 (hardback).

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Complemented by several illustrations, this monograph presents itself as a study of Balinese mysticism based upon the paintings of I Ketut Budiana and I Gusti Nyoman Mirdiana, two accomplished contemporary Balinese artists. However, the title only partly reflects the content of the book, and may fail to attract the attention it deserves from a wider scholarly audience. Stephen's work indeed offers an innovative, ground-breaking interpretation of the complex phenomenon of Balinese religion. Taking the artwork as her point of departure, the author draws on contemporary Balinese practices as well as ancient texts, thus initiating a wide-ranging analysis bringing together disciplines such as anthropology, religious studies and philology. Her analysis is not limited to the modern period, but attempts to redefine a mystical and philosophical tradition going back several centuries that 'is not owed to, and predates, twentieth-century reformist efforts to realign Balinese religion with Indian Hinduism or introduce Hindu devotional religion' (p. 27). This tradition, as she points out, is much more complex than most scholars have previously assumed.

In the first chapter the author details the aims of her work, critically surveying and synthesizing in the form of statements the received ideas that have dominated scholarship on Balinese religion since the middle of the twentieth century. In doing so she describes as misleading such ideas as the emphasis on ritual praxis, the denial of a developed speculative and philosophical textual tradition, and the tendency to consider Balinese Hinduism as an autonomous entity capable of being correctly understood only on its own terms. Criticizing the widespread assumption that any attempt at comparing Balinese Hinduism with Indic Hinduism constitutes a foreign superimposition, the author aims to demonstrate the strong Indic roots of Balinese religion by comparing some of its fundamental tenets with those of Hindu Śaiva Tantrism.

Having posited that 'Balinese art is the mirror of religious thought' (p. 25) and after outlining her working methodology, Stephen introduces the artists Budiana and Mirdiana – both of them her personal acquaintances and collaborators during fieldwork on Bali – and analyses twelve paintings by each

one (in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively). These are mostly executed in a 'traditional' style and inspired by mythological and religious themes, sometimes the result of meditative experiences of the artists. In commenting on each painting, the author takes the perspective of an anthropologist more than that of an art historian, accepting the artists' own interpretations and the answers they provided to her questions. Notwithstanding Budiana's reassuring affirmation that 'his work reflects shared Balinese thinking and teachings' (p. 74), one may wonder whether this is always the case. In fact it is often difficult to ascertain the antiquity of doctrines and one may run the risk of mixing up heterogeneous elements, especially when the historical perspective is not the primary concern of a work, as in the present case. As Stephen herself admits, both Budiana's and Mirdiana's opinions 'reflect to some degree the influence of the modern, reformed version of Hinduism in Bali that places emphasis on [...] ethical concepts that had much less salience in the past' (p. 75). While this influence could have taken place without necessarily supplanting older concepts, a careful evaluation of the issue would require another book. On the other hand, a positive point is that Stephen, focusing on actual works of art reproduced in plates, offers readers the useful opportunity to check for themselves the descriptions and interpretations she advances.

In the second stage of her argument, Stephen proceeds to interpret and contextualize the elements found in the artworks by taking into account the religious doctrines widespread in modern Bali among various classes of people. With the aim of showing the fundamental continuity of Balinese thought over the last centuries, the author draws from relevant passages of religious texts belonging to the *tutur* category, written in a mixture of Sanskrit and Old Javanese. Since very few of these texts have been published, the author's direct consultation of typewritten copies stored in the collection of Gedung Kirtya (Singaraja) and Pusat Dokumentasi Budaya Bali (Denpasar) is praiseworthy, and rare in studies done from an anthropological viewpoint. Attacking the views that define Balinese Hinduism merely as a conglomerate of layers that have grown up around an original kernel of animistic beliefs, she shows that the philosophical concepts still widespread in contemporary Balinese beliefs can also be found in the *tutur* literature. These doctrines are in turn not substantially different from those common in Tantric sources from South Asia. Examples of similarities with South Asian Tantrism include the prominence of the demonic forms of the goddess (Śiva's spouse, called Umā or Durgā) in the artists' paintings as well as in traditional Balinese iconography.

The analysis of such similarities forms the principal subject of Chapter 4, which strikes me as the most interesting – albeit also the most problematic – part of Stephen's work. Here the author quotes the eighteen key features of Tantrism identified by Goudriaan (1979) and compares them to features of Balinese religion. With a considerable degree of insight, Stephen succeeds in

casting new light on the religion of Bali. But the result is not definitive; as she points out, there is still room for further reassessment of the Tantric element in Balinese religion by means of a systematic comparison with Indic elements.

The same comparative theme is continued in Chapter 5, which contains a description of various types of Balinese rituals (Surya-Sewana, Ekadasarudra, Galungan and Kuningan) and of widespread iconographic items such as the mantra *rwa bhineda* and the cosmic diagram *nawasana*. For purposes of comparison the author refers to the model of the 'oscillating universe' that forms the foundation of the Śaiva Siddhānta ritual described by Richard Davis (2000). She then advances, on convincing grounds, a new interpretation of such Balinese rituals in the light of this model, seeing the universe as an incessant flow of opposing cosmic energies personified in pairs of opposites (for instance, Śiva and Śakti, divine and demonic). In contrast with the accepted view of the modern Balinese Parisada Hindu Dharma, which emphasizes ethical principles, she shows that the underlying theme of these rites is the metaphysical process of cosmic reabsorption and re-creation on new premises, as a way to purify creation and restore it to its original status.

In the sixth and last chapter, Stephen summarizes briefly the main lines of her work, noting the need for further philological research in comparative directions along the lines of that pursued by Max Nihom.

The author's interdisciplinary line of enquiry produces good results and her monograph offers an interesting contribution to the understanding of Balinese religion, as it is written from a standpoint that scholars of Indonesian (let alone Indological) matters have so far neglected. However, the author specifies that her primary aim is not to establish in detail any historical antecedents, nor to show how Indic ideas developed in Bali, but only to point out the obvious parallels between these ideas and those reflected in the artworks discussed in the book (p. 84). This modesty of purpose is apparent throughout Chapter 5, where Stephen's heavy reliance upon a secondary source, Goudriaan's *Hindu Tantrism* (1979), might be questioned. Several parts of Goudriaan's pioneering study must be regarded by now as outdated, for the body of available primary scriptures has expanded considerably in the last couple of decades. Moreover, I doubt that Goudriaan's account should be viewed as a comprehensive and standard picture even of the main tenets of Hindu Tantrism (see Padoux's important review of 1981), or that it should be used to carry out the delicate operation of reassessing the 'true' – that is, Tantric – nature of Balinese Hinduism. As a matter of fact, the loose (and problematic) term 'Hindu Tantrism' covers a vast array of both geographically and chronologically distinct traditions (see Padoux 1998). Although Stephen, to her credit, is aware of this fact (pp. 82, 96), she still applies the generalization without advancing any alternative solution to the problem. Therefore, although the overall argumentation is accurate and the

author's main conclusions are quite convincing, I believe that a more analytical and textual-historical approach needs to be pursued in order to check and expand the findings presented in Chapter 5.

A similar note of criticism also applies to the author's handling of the Indological secondary sources. It is unsatisfactory, for instance, that in a work like this no mention is made of the important studies on the history of Śaiva Tantras by Alexis Sanderson (1988, 2001). Instead, in note 32 (p. 152), we find a reference, quite out of place, to the book by Dyczkowski (1987) on the later Kashmirian Śaiva school of the Spanda, referred to as an example of the fact that 'a coming of age of Tantric studies among Indologists is beginning to offer a fresh basis for understanding Tantrism' (p. 82); true, but since this particular school does not appear anywhere else in the book and was in all probability irrelevant to the transmission of Śaivism to Bali, what is the purpose of mentioning it? Similarly, a more relevant historical study by Dyczkowski (1988) appearing in the bibliography is referred to only once (p. 96, note 151), whereas it could have been used in a more meaningful way to provide the reader with an introduction to the division and development of the Indic Śaiva traditions. Such inadequate treatment of the historical and textual development of the Śaiva religion in South Asia also appears with regard to the use of the outdated and incorrect division of the Śaiva scriptures into the two categories of *āgama* and *nigama* (p. 84, borrowed from Goudriaan 1979:13). Likewise, on page 103, the author perpetuates the false assumption that Śaiva Siddhānta developed in South India. In fact this current was originally pan-Indian, and must be distinguished from the later, mostly Tamil, form of Śaiva Siddhānta. Unfortunately, Stephen makes no mention of the ongoing research on the body of Sanskrit Siddhāntatantras now made available in the publications of the EFEO in Pondicherry.

A last point of criticism is that, as the author honestly acknowledges in several instances throughout the work, her arguments are only preliminary and 'more work is needed to fully flesh out and confirm – or refute – [them]' (p. 134). Thus, having read the monograph, one has the impression that it raises more questions than it could manage to resolve. This is a pity, for it means that the author's focus on comparison with South Asia, and her critique of the indigenist viewpoint widespread in studies on Balinese religion, lose part of their force.

Such shortcomings can be easily forgiven in view of the author's impressive knowledge of Balinese matters, her academic background, and the focus of the book, which seems to be addressed primarily to an audience concerned with non-philological interests. *Desire, divine and demonic* constitutes an innovative, well-written and accessible work, marking out new paths for the scholarly investigation of Balinese religion and constituting a rare example of integration of scholarly disciplines.

Some final words must be devoted to questionable editorial decisions. The use of rather small fonts, for example, reduces readability. Furthermore, a larger page format would have allowed better reproduction of the paintings, which given their beauty and richness of detail they certainly deserved (disappointingly, information on the location of the original artworks is not provided). Two small typos can be pointed out: Sakta [year] twice (p. 108) needs to be corrected to Saka (that is, *śaka*); and *mahiṣāsūramardinī* to *mahiṣāsūramardinī* (p. 151).

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