

Negara Ubud: The Theatre-state in Twenty-first-century Bali

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In his book Negara: The Theatre-state in Nineteenth-century Bali (1980), Clifford Geertz argued that ceremonial display, rather than material power, was the real basis and indeed the purpose of pre-colonial states in Bali, and by extension South East Asia. This article argues, on the basis of historical and ethnographic evidence from one of these kingdoms, that he was largely wrong about pre-colonial Bali, but that, ironically and presciently, his model makes increasing sense in early twenty-first century Bali. The article also discusses the reasons for this and finally suggests a more dynamic model based on Bourdieu's metaphor of material and symbolic capital, which seeks to bring Geertz's essentially static model to historical life.

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On 24 July 2004, a recently deceased member of the princely house (*puri*) of Ubud, Bali, was cremated in a huge public ceremony. Thousands of local people worked for weeks before, and it was witnessed by 3,000 invited guests and thousands more who were uninvited, including tourists, press and film crews from all over the world. It was billed, like several such previous ceremonies, as “the last great royal cremation”.

Over 150 years earlier and only a few kilometres east of Ubud, a wide-eyed European visitor witnessed a royal cremation which was, apart from the shocking spectacle of three wives of the deceased king throwing themselves into the flames, strikingly similar to the recent one.¹ The publicity for the 2004 cremation and the earlier account concurred that everybody who was anybody was there, so in 1957 when Clifford and Hildred Geertz were working in Bali and such an event occurred, they made a point of attending. They thought they had finally succumbed to tropical delirium when among

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the crowd they saw Margaret Mead (Inglis, 2000: 12). However, in preference to using Mead's (Bateson & Mead, 1942) or their own descriptions of a cremation, Clifford Geertz turned back to the nineteenth-century visitor's horrified, but fascinated, description of this earlier cremation for the centrepiece of his book *Negara: The Theatre-state in Nineteenth-century Bali* (Geertz, 1980).

The central argument of *Negara* is that such spectacular ceremonies were about public demonstration—not of the power of the ruling elite, but of their splendour and magnificence and the correspondence between their earthly arrangements and the order of the cosmos itself. Geertz then took the argument a step further and argued that it was such ritual display rather than economic, political or military power that was the real basis of pre-colonial states in Bali—and by extension throughout South East Asia. They were, he said, “theatre-state[s]” in which:

The stupendous cremations, tooth-filings, temple dedications, pilgrimages and blood sacrifices, mobilizing hundreds and even thousands of people and great quantities of wealth, were not means to political ends; they were the ends themselves, they were what the state was for. Court ceremonialism was the driving force of court politics; and mass ritual was not a device to shore up the state, but rather the state, even in its final gasp, was a device for the enactment of mass ritual. Power served pomp, not pomp power. (Geertz, 1980: 13)

Or, more succinctly, if less oft-quoted: “[T]he assiduous ritualism of court culture was ... not merely the drapery of political order, but its substance” (Geertz, 1980: 32). This “strangely reversed relationship between the substance and trappings of rule” (Geertz, 1980: 13) stands on its head the assumption of conventional political science that such performances are merely *displays* of pre-existing political, economic, military power. To understand such a state requires us to “elaborate a poetics of power, not a mechanics” (Geertz, 1980: 123), which is just what *Negara* does.

Geertz is arguably the most influential anthropologist of his generation and inarguably the most influential in other disciplines and among specialists in regions other than Indonesia (Anderson, 1995; Burke, 2004: 36; Dirks, 1999: 33; Greenblatt, 1999: 14; Mullaney, 1999: 166; Ortner, 1999a: 1; Pecora, 1989: 244–245; Sewell, 1999: 35). However, it requires only a brief perusal of works bearing his influence to see that it has been largely through his earlier work, contained in a series of brilliantly condensed and lucid essays (subsequently collected and republished in 1973 and 1983). Ironically *Negara*, the apotheosis of his thinking on politics and history, and in his own view one of his most important works (Mark Mosko, personal communication; see also Inglis, 2000: 9), has remained something of an enigma, rarely referred to even by historians or political scientists.² Among anthropologists, however, and especially among specialists in South East Asia, it did not go unnoticed, but reactions were mixed, combining admiration for its scope and ambition with scepticism about its claims.

The most recurrent criticisms are obvious ones along the lines that he has “depoliticised” (Barth, 1993: 222) what is essentially a political institution, or at best “under-emphasis[ed its] political dimension” (Warren, 1993: 90), by “subordinating” the power dimension to the cultural one (Ortner, 1999b: 138) or “leaving aside its material base” (Howe, 1991: 451). As a result the “theatre-state” model becomes “near-totalising”

(Warren, 1993: 80) or “hegemonic” (Barth, 1993: 222), making it appear “more exotic, more extraordinary and more other than the evidence warrants” (Howe, 1991: 451). Margaret Wiener (1995: 10) makes a somewhat different argument (to which we will return later) suggesting not that Geertz ignored power, but that by separating the “expressive and instrumental” aspects of politics he “obscures Balinese intentions”, which were more to do with magico-spiritual power (*kesaktian*) than with status competition.

Geertz’s model of culture was for some years a source of much anthropological innovation and debate (e.g., Austin-Broos, 1987), but it has now been absorbed into—some might say superseded by—subsequent developments in anthropological thinking. The purpose of this article is to revisit Geertz’s ideas about the relationship between culture, history and politics, not as they are expressed in his programmatic essays, but in the form of his only serious attempt to put the theory embodied in these essays into practice on a large scale: *Negara*. It does so via an examination of Geertz’s model of pre-colonial Balinese polities in the light of specific historical and ethnographic evidence from one such polity: Ubud.

The argument of *Negara* is based on a general and idealized model synthesized from evidence from different kingdoms, historical moments and sources. Since it was published, several accounts have been written of actual concrete, historical pre-colonial kingdoms based on various combinations of archival, ethno-historical and ethnographic research (Agung, 1989; Schulte-Nordholt, 1996; Wiener, 1995). While their points of view and emphases vary, in the main they demonstrate that despite the distinctly Balinese cultural flavour of these kingdoms, they were clearly based on more conventionally political-economic forms of power than the theatre-state model would suggest.

The story of Ubud in the late nineteenth century offers a unique and perhaps even more useful lens through which to view Geertz’s model because it emerged only on the eve of the colonial takeover of South Bali and the process of its becoming a *negara* was relatively well documented. We can thus, unlike with the older, more established polities, glimpse not just its form, but also the process by which this form developed. For, as Judith Williamson (1978) reminds us: “[I]deology embedded in form is the hardest of all to see. This is why it is important to emphasize process ... it undoes the fait accompli.”

Ubud in the Late Nineteenth Century³

Ubud was, until the late nineteenth century, an insignificant village of some thirty households on the western border of the domain of the *raja* of Gianyar. A small palace (*puri*) was established in Ubud in the late eighteenth century as an outpost of the royal house of Peliatan which, despite direct descent from the earlier and higher-ranking kingdom of Sukawati, was itself but a *punggawaan* (second-tier principedom) of Gianyar. Gianyar had dominated the area since the demise of Sukawati in the early nineteenth century, but by the late nineteenth century the whole of South Bali had degenerated into “a tangled web of conflicts ... one great battlefield” (Schulte-Nordholt, 1996: 159)

with Gianyar at the centre of most of the conflicts, under constant attack by enemies on all sides.

In 1874, the lord of Ubud, Cokorda⁴ Rai Batur, led a coalition that suppressed an attack from the west by the neighbouring kingdom of Mengwi, on behalf of Gianyar. From this moment on, Ubud began to exert increasing influence in the politico-military arena of west Gianyar as a loyal supporter and eventually protector of the tottering kingdom of Gianyar. In 1885, another Sukawati-descended princely house, coincidentally but ironically named “*Negara*” (near Batuan), began a sudden expansion, taking over most of the valley of the Wos River, downstream from Ubud, as well as some land upstream. Within weeks *Negara* became a major power in the area and a serious threat to Gianyar. In 1890 and 1891, Ck. Batur’s son, Ck. Gede Sukawati, led a coalition of his relatives in Peliatan and Tegallalang that comprehensively defeated and destroyed *Negara*. The victors, especially Ubud, emerged from the conflict with considerable spoils, mostly in the form of land.

Ubud was now the dominant power in the area, and as Gianyar became ever less able to defend itself, its king came increasingly to depend on the military power, strategic wile and political acumen of Ck. Sukawati, all of which were, in local thinking the results of his reputed supernatural powers (*kesaktian*). Yet by 1900, not even Ck. Sukawati was able to prevent the inevitable demise of Gianyar at the hands of its combined neighbours, and he negotiated a deal with the Dutch for the bloodless annexation of Gianyar into the enforced peace of the Netherlands East Indies.

The obvious conclusion to be drawn even from this abbreviated account is substantially the same as that of the other histories mentioned above: Geertz’s model of pre-colonial Bali simply does not reflect the evidence available. The making of the *negara* that was Ubud in the late nineteenth century was clearly the result of the military prowess, political astuteness and, in local thinking, the magical powers of its ruler at the time. This is not to say that ritual display did not happen—it no doubt did, as it did in other better-documented kingdoms—but there is no evidence in any of the accounts I could find, Balinese or foreign, that it was what made the polity what it was. All that is recorded is evidently politico-military power of a depressingly familiar kind. While this no doubt reflects to a degree the agendas and interests of the writers of these accounts (of which more below), it is still the only evidence we have.

Does this mean then that Geertz was wrong about nineteenth century Bali? I suspect it does, but not entirely wrong, not only wrong and apparently less wrong as time goes by. It also raises questions as to how and why Geertz could have constructed such a model from evidence perhaps less empirically detailed and specific, but otherwise not essentially different from that available to the rest of us. I will try here to answer these questions, but perhaps we should begin where many discussions of *Negara* do not: with what Geertz actually said.

Imagined Polities

One thing that *Negara* is clearly not is an account of an actual specific historical polity, nor even a synthesis drawn from more than one of them. It is instead an abstract,

generalized ideal-type model of what he believed pre-colonial Balinese states might have looked like. It is constructed not from any historically specific account of any specific state or states, but from bits and pieces of evidence gleaned from a number of sources. These sources include (partial and fragmentary) accounts of pre-colonial Balinese states, but also projections backward from his ethnographic work in south Bali in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as concretizations of ideas derived from theoretical works about classical Indic politico-religious theory. This is no retrospective critical interpretation on my part: here are his own words:

Such a model is itself abstract. Although it is constructed out of empirical data, it is applied experimentally not deductively. ... It is thus a conceptual entity not an historical one ... a simplified, *necessarily unfaithful*, theoretically tendentious representation of ... the nineteenth-century Balinese state. (Geertz, 1980: 9–10; emphasis added)

The *Negara* should thus be treated—as Geertz insists, but his critics often (although understandably) forget—as an analytic construct, not an historical one. And what does he mean by “theoretically tendentious”? The purpose of the model is less to do with analysis, let alone description of nineteenth-century Balinese historical realities, but “to extend our understanding of the development of Indic Indonesia (Cambodia, Thailand, Burma) ... it is a guide, a sort of sociological blueprint, for the construction of representations [of] the classical Southeast Asian Indic states of the fifth to fifteenth centuries” (Geertz, 1980: 9–10).

The concept of the “*negara*” is a product of and tool for historical imagination, or in Geertz’s (1973b: 93–94) own words, borrowed from another context, a “model of and model for” political order. Even the word itself has a flavour of historical imagination, or at least “theoretical tendentiousness” about it. In over a decade of talking with Balinese about the kingdoms their grandparents told them about, I have yet to hear one use the word “*negara*”, nor have I read it in any local account of the past. Its origins are clearly in a Sanskrit term with multiple references to politically important or central places, but its usage in pre-colonial South East Asia is less clear. It appears in ancient Balinese and particularly Javanese texts (Geertz, 1980: 137) as well as in pre-colonial Malay usage (Gullick, 1958: 21), but according to Gonda (cited in Milner, 1982: 123): “[O]nly in modern times has [it] come to ‘express the western idea of state’.” The definitive dictionary of modern Balinese (Panitia Penyusun Kamus Bali Indonesia, 1993) refers to its usage in modern Indonesian where it and its cognate “*negeri*” are used to refer to various aspects and functions of the modern state (e.g., “*pegawai negeri*”, “civil servant”).⁵ It does, however, appear as the name of a major town in West Bali and, ironically of the kingdom vanquished by Ubud on its own path to *negara*-hood. So while it is by no means an unfamiliar word, Geertz, once again, appears to have chosen it “tendentiously”—less to reflect local usage than for its inherently broad and flexible relationship to any empirical historical context. “It is, in its broadest sense, the word for (classical) civilisation, for the world of the traditional city, the high culture that the city supported, and the system of superordinate political authority centred there” (Geertz, 1980: 4). The reader with any remaining doubts about its relationship with empirical reality has only to turn to Geertz’s own (correct) reference, a chapter or

so later, to “the virtual absence of any urban settlements ... in pre-twentieth century Bali” (Geertz, 1980: 46). All of which brings us back to the question “why?”

Why *Negara*?

Why (and indeed how) did such an experienced and competent scholar come to produce a model apparently so at variance with the evidence? Part of the answer to this question has been suggested above and will be discussed further below: he created it “tendentiously”, first for specific theoretical purposes to do with political theory—“an alternate conception of what politics is about” (Geertz, 1980: 135); second to advance a general approach to history not as a continuous, let alone material, process, but as succession of broad cultural schemata (Geertz, 1980: 5–6); and third, like Milner (1982), to contribute a cultural dimension missing from the existing discussion about Southeast Asian politics (Geertz, 1980: 18–19). In other words, he knew what he was doing. However, there are, I think, also four more specific, but perhaps less deliberate reasons, which are evident from a closer reading of his text.

One of Geertz’s stated reasons for his approach was the simple fact, still true today, that we have very little direct evidence with which to write about pre-colonial Bali (Geertz, 1980: 5–6). Consequently, he used as his primary (not secondary, let alone supplementary) source: his own ethnographic knowledge of Bali in the mid-twentieth century (Geertz, 1980: 7). This is most obvious in his discussions of the social organization of both the ruling class (in Chapter 2) and the village (Chapter 3), which are rich with ethnographic detail and subtlety. It is also, I believe, implicit in his discussion of ritual display (Chapter 4), which forms the core of his argument, but lacks the detail and subtlety of the previous ones. The only evidence actually cited of pre-colonial Bali is Helms’ account of the cremation and a plan of the main palace of Klungkung in 1905. Like me, he had very little else to go on, apart from the accounts of other postcolonial ethnographers and his own experience of months of fieldwork, in the course of which he undoubtedly witnessed countless ceremonies and visited palaces and surviving royal courts in action. His image of pre-colonial ritual and its political function was, at least in part, a retro-projection of his experience of his ethnographic present.

The second point concerns the larger argument of *Negara* about “the classical South-east Asian Indic states of the fifth to fifteenth centuries” (Geertz, 1980: 10). This is based on the assumption that: “Bali in the ... nineteenth century may not have been a mere replica ... of the fourteenth, but it was ... fully continuous with it [and] no matter what alterations [it] had suffered ... it was [an] example of a system of government once more widespread” (Geertz, 1980: 9). This assumption provides the basis for several key parts of his argument and, leaving aside any debate (e.g., Schulte-Nordholt, 1996: 13) about how much or little Bali had changed, it raises the question of just how “Indic” Balinese states really were. Geertz (1980:16, 239) acknowledges that “caste” is something of a misnomer in Bali, resulting from “its Indic trappings”, and that “[t]he Indic surface of Balinese political institutions has acted to inhibit a comparative reference eastwards ... toward the Pacific”. His (detailed, ethnographically-based) discussions of social and political organization contain neither Indic trappings nor Westward

references, but when he moves to “political symbology” his argument assumes that Balinese kingship is essentially Indic. His discussion of the philosophical basis of ritual (Geertz, 1980: 105–107) is entirely in terms of a set of Indic concepts. His analysis of “the palace as temple” (Geertz, 1980: 109–115), a questionable analogy in itself, finds all manner of Indicisms, but ignores the elements that are clearly of indigenous rather than Indic origin.⁶ Both these discussions are based almost entirely on the writings of scholars of Indological bent. Even where he considers the changes effected to “political institutions” in “their passage south and east”, he sees them essentially as transformed Indic ones rather than indigenous Indonesian ones (Geertz, 1980: 124–126). None of this is to deny Indic influence in Balinese politic-religious ideas and practice, but it is a matter of (im)balance of representation.

A third reason for the form of the *Negara* that seems so divorced from the historical evidence is Geertz’s view of history, which, at least in *Negara*, is essentially ahistorical or at best nonprocessual. Likewise the *Negara* is “an essentially constant cultural form” (Geertz, 1980: 125). As Roseberry (1991: 24) puts it: “[C]ulture as a text is removed from the historical process that shapes it and it in turn shapes.” According to Geertz (1980: 34), while “[t]he scale of things varied, and their brilliance, as well as the details ... [b]ut not ... between say 1343 and 1906, what they were about”. As Schulte-Nordholt’s evidence from Mengwi (presented below) suggests, such assumptions may not be well-founded.

Finally, Geertz’s model of the state is essentially a top-down one in which people “construct a state by constructing a king” (Geertz, 1980: 124). His argument, of course, is that this is the whole point, that in Bali the “cultural element” that was the dominant one “came ... from the top down”. Yet he also acknowledges that “the power element, grew ... from the bottom up” (Geertz, 1980: 19). My point, and that of others, is that it is precisely this—the power element and the bottom-up elements—that he underestimates and downplays. According to Carol Warren, whose work (much of it near Ubud) emphasizes the popular and democratic aspects of Balinese political culture, “the theatre-state metaphor gives illusory integrity to the ‘elite truths’ which are alleged to be the pivotal forces in Balinese life [while] ... the popular elements ... are subordinated to an elite-culture interpretation” (Warren, 1993: 81). These, it seems to me, are inherent limitations in the material available to Geertz and biases his approach to it, which begin to answer the question of how and why he constructed such a *Negara*. However, these specific concerns point also to questions of “anthropological approaches to the past” in general.

Histories and Anthropologies

Geertz is not the only anthropologist to engage explicitly with history, but the importance of his engagement lies first in the distinctive approach to culture and history he brought to anthropology and second in the influence of his work beyond anthropology, including in the discipline of history itself. Much has been made of the mutual rediscovery and subsequent embrace of anthropology and history since the late 1970s (Biersack, 1991: 1; Burke, 2004: 30; Cohn, 1982; Dirks, 1999: 25; Dirks et al., 1994: 5;

Green & Troup, 1999: 172–181; Herzfeld, 2001: 75; Kellogg, 1991). While this has without doubt been an important development for both disciplines, stating it in such bald terms tends to obscure much of what is in fact a complex and multifaceted process. Neither discipline is strictly bounded or unified in approach. Both are, and always have been, diverse in theory and method, and have long interacted and overlapped in various ways.⁷ The latest crop of hybrid approaches (anthropological/ethnographic history, historical anthropology/ethnography, ethnohistory, cultural history, micro-history, etc.) are thus not-so-new wines in new bottles: continuations, rediscoveries or developments of approaches of some standing in one or both disciplines. Consequently, anything as generalizable as an “anthropological approach to history” (or vice versa) is difficult to identify, and more so to defend.

Discussion of the “turn to anthropology” by historians is beyond the scope of this article (not to mention my own expertise), but it has been widely documented in terms of (theoretically) the use of the concept of “culture” as an explanatory tool and (methodologically) an ethnographic-like focus on “events” relatively circumscribed in time and space.⁸ Seminal examples often cited are the work of Carlo Ginzburg (1980), Robert Darnton (1985) and Natalie Davis (1982). For each of these, Geertz has been a more or less explicit influence, but in each case, the influence has been via his early work: the essays (Geertz, 1973a, 1983), referred to above, on culture and its interpretation. His approach to larger scales (spatial as well as temporal) of history, as developed and exemplified in *Negara* have not, to my knowledge been taken up by historians.⁹ In the case of anthropological approaches to history, there are, as Roseberry (1991: 5; emphasis in original) puts it “a variety of anthropologies appropriating a variety of histories”.

The resultant hybrids vary considerably, but may be grouped broadly into two main categories: those that see history in terms of “culture” or a sequential array of cultural forms, and those for whom history is social/material process.¹⁰ For the latter category, the business of historical anthropology is to explain the social, economic and political arrangements of the past and/or the present in terms of how they got to be that way: using the past to explain the present. These approaches seek to relocate the traditional subject of anthropology—the “people without history” (Wolf, 1982)—both into a framework of world history and to “articulate” their own “hidden histories” (Schneider & Rapp, 1995; see also Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992). For the former, the primary task is to identify and explicate cultural patterns in the past in order to render it intelligible or at least meaningful—an essentially anthropological approach to the past. The main difficulties of such approaches are that an inherent ahistoricity in many models of culture leads to an ironically ahistorical approach to history itself, as well as a methodologically questionable tendency to project contemporary ethnographic readings into the past.

Perhaps the best-known example of this approach is Marshall Sahlins’ (1976, 1981) studies of the historical encounters of Europeans and the peoples of the Pacific islands, in which he analyzes specific events to show that historical processes themselves are “structured” according to the very conceptual schemes that constitute the underlying structures of cultures themselves. He attempts to transcend the inherently ahistorical

nature of his structuralist model of culture by articulating the way in which it determines, or at least conditions, the form of historical change. Historical process is thus reduced to “transformations” of structure/culture. These transformations shape, but are themselves also shaped by that structure/culture. What Sahlins does not do is explicate the processes of change and the forces by which it is driven. While Geertz’s view of culture is distinctively different to Sahlins’, focusing on meaning rather than conceptual schema, the similarity of their approaches to history lies in their downplaying of material political-economic factors and their subsuming of historical process into essentially ahistorical cultural form.

A lesser-known and superficially different example is Ernest Gellner’s “pendulum swing theory” of Islam. This is a theory of both politics and history, but they are constituted by and oscillate between two more or less timeless cultural forms: “an egalitarian, scripturalist monotheism and a more mystical cult of saints” (Gellner, 1981: 209). This approach is in turn reminiscent of Geertz’s use of contrasts between cultural ideal-types to explain phenomena as diverse as the varieties of religious orientation in Java (Geertz, 1960), responses of different Indonesian communities to modernization (Geertz, 1963), or diverse varieties of Islam (Geertz, 1968). As such, both are vulnerable to charges of essentialism and reification of their own analytic categories. So while Geertz’s approach to culture and history are in one sense unique, it may also be seen as a particular case of one distinctively anthropological approach to history—as succession of somewhat idealized cultural forms rather than ongoing socio-political process. Meanwhile there are other models and other evidences to consider.

Is a *Negara* Really a *Kerajaan*?

Balinese of my acquaintance, when speaking of the pre-colonial period, refer consistently to the “*jaman kerajaan*” (lit. “the era of the kingdoms”). “*Kerajaan*” means “kingdom” in the very literal sense of (“*ke*”) “being in the state of” (“*raja*”-) “king”- (“*an*”) “ness” or, less literally but more usefully, as “being in the condition of having a *raja* [king]” (Milner, 1982: 9). Likewise when Balinese speak of pre-colonial polities such as Ubud, they do so in terms not of *negara*, but of *kerajaan*. It is not only Balinese who prefer this usage: at the very time Geertz was writing *Negara*, another scholar of pre-colonial South East Asian politics, Antony Milner, was developing a somewhat different model of them, which he too characterized in the title of his book: *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule* (Milner, 1982).

Like Geertz, Milner was writing against an existing model of which Gullick’s (1958) *Indigenous Political Systems of Western Malaya*, an analysis of political structures, institutions and functions, was the main exemplar. Milner and Geertz both explicitly sought to penetrate and dispel the misinterpretations of pre-colonial political culture that flow from the materialist preconceptions of Western political science. However, where Geertz relies on a combination of Western accounts and his own ethnography in the mid-twentieth century, Milner sees over-reliance on Western texts as part of the problem and his model is based on a careful interpretive reading of a range of contemporaneous indigenous texts.¹¹

The two models share much common ground. Milner refers to several of Geertz's key themes, including the centrality of the person of the king (Milner, 1982: 94–95, 103), of matters of rank and status (Milner, 1982: 100), of ceremonial display and indeed of the primarily symbolic and ceremonial nature of kingship (Milner, 1982: 45–52). He goes on to ask essentially the same question as Geertz: “Did the formal aspects of government expressed in Malay literature and observed at Malay courts reflect or disguise the real basis of Malay political behaviour?” (Milner, 1982: 51). Geertz's answer is clear, that the idea that the theatrical aspects of politics are mere display of the material reality of politics is simply a “misconception” (Geertz, 1980: 122) stemming from “tired commonplaces, the worn coin of European ideological debate” (Geertz, 1980: 123). In his view, the truth, at least in pre-colonial Bali, is the opposite: “The state drew its force, which was real enough, from its imaginative energies, its semiotic capacity to make inequality enchant” (Geertz, 1980: 123).

Milner's answer is equally clear but different. He acknowledges that the role of Malay *raja* was primarily ceremonial, but he does not conclude from this that they were politically impotent. He devotes a whole chapter to the long and complex story of a king of high lineage, title and ceremonial significance, but little “real power”, who nevertheless was able to use these symbolic resources to exert a decisive influence on political affairs (Milner, 1982: 53–71). Furthermore, this aspect of kingship is systematically obscured in indigenous accounts behind formulaic celebration of the ceremonial aspects (Milner, 1982: 69–71). Apart from the centrality of the person of the king, the dynamic that drives the system and reveals both kings and their subjects as active agents is the search for “*nama*” (“name”, “reputation”) (Milner, 1982: 108–109). So while Milner's model has much in common with Geertz's, it is more sociologically nuanced, historically dynamic and less reductive in its recognition of the interplay of a diversity of factors. The term “*kerajaan*” itself refers not to a cultural abstraction, but to a relationship between rulers and subjects, and his model is about the ways this relationship was worked out in practice. Both his term and his model resonate more than Geertz's with the evidence from nineteenth-century Ubud. The beginnings of Ubud are linked, in both elite and popular versions of its history, with the establishment of a palace—with the *ke-raja-an* of an existing community. And the story of the rise of Ubud is the story of the growing *nama* of its successive rulers. Yet what Milner's model, like Geertz's, says surprisingly little about is the material political, economic and military aspects of the *kerajaan* despite the evidence in the accounts on which his model is based.

Stanley Tambiah's (1985a) model of the “Galactic Polity in Southeast Asia” was first published several years before *Negara* and while Geertz (surprisingly) does not refer to it, it is in some respects strikingly similar, but also has important differences.¹² Tambiah's model, based primarily on historical material from Thailand, emphasizes, like Geertz, the cosmological/political/spatial metaphor of the *mandala*, but only as shorthand for such polities. He also acknowledges that “whatever the realities of power ... ceremonies ... and the enactment of a graded cosmos were indeed not merely an expression but the creation of the galactic polity in its usual form” (Tambiah, 1985a: 271). At the same time, however, there was also, in certain circumstances, a “stronger form” of the traditional polity in which conventionally political-economic motivation

and action on the part of rulers were much more evident (Tambiah, 1985a: 271). Kingship was constituted neither by a cultural ideal nor by power and violence, but by both: “divine kingship was dialectically conjoined with perennial rebellion” (Tambiah, 1985a: 269).

This is a model that takes into account and articulates between the symbolic dimension Geertz emphasizes and the material ones emphasized by more conventional models: “If [the galactic polity] represents man’s imposition of a conception on the world, it is also a reflection of the contours of the politico-economic reality” (Tambiah, 1985a: 280). Furthermore, again unlike Geertz’s essentially static ahistorical model, Tambiah’s polities are “not timeless entities but historically grounded, and ... can be subject to irreversible transformation” (Tambiah, 1985: 281). Later in a review of *Negara*, he elaborates this difference more explicitly, arguing that Geertz’s “flat, static, immobile, and ‘ritualised’ view of the Balinese ruler and his court” is contradicted by his own previously published evidence (Tambiah, 1985b: 336). Such is the debate at the level of general models, which is where Geertz’s argument is primarily directed. However, his material is supposedly derived from pre-colonial Bali, from where there is also other evidence and other models.¹³

Other Evidence, Other Models: Pre-colonial Bali

Much about the character of classical Balinese culture and the sort of politics it supported is disputable. (Geertz, 1980: 123)

[T]he textualisation of power does not change the nature of the Balinese state which is all about power, warfare and domination. (Geertz, cited in Panourgia, 2002: 428)

Of the three comprehensive accounts of pre-colonial Balinese kingdoms, one (Agung, 1989) is a detailed study of political events with virtually no attention to the symbolic aspects of rule. It is written by a Balinese, a scion of the royal house involved, reflecting a highly partisan viewpoint, but supported almost entirely from Western sources. The other two are by Western scholars with long experience in Bali. Both are based on combinations of indigenous and Dutch textual sources and extended fieldwork using local languages. Both therefore provide credible, historically based accounts of how pre-colonial Balinese polities actually worked.

Margaret Wiener’s account of the historically, genealogically and ritually paramount kingdom of Klungkung, like Geertz’s emphasizes ritual, but not its performative aspect; and the centrality of the king, but not as an “impresario” (Geertz, 1980: 13).

Bali was a Hocartian polity, organised by a concern for prosperity controlled by spirits, gods and demons. ... Balinese rulers were responsible for the well-being of their dependents and their land. Thus kings were referred to ... as “protector and refuge”. ... Power entailed a capacity to mediate with invisible forces on behalf of one’s followers. (Wiener, 1995: 56)

Ritual here is a technology not of meaning, but of power. The source of this power is the king, not because of who he is, let alone what he appears or presents himself to be, but through concrete relationships he actively cultivates through various practices,

Royal authority ... rested ... upon the ruler's special relationship with specific deities, demons, ancestors and spirits. ... Such power ... had to be actively augmented by a variety of practices, among them rituals, private meditation ... and manufacturing or otherwise obtaining magical objects. (Wiener, 1995: 58)

The power to which Wiener refers is not just material political power, but a magico-spiritual power known as "*kesaktian*" from which all worldly forms of power ultimately derive.¹⁴ When the kings of Klungkung lost this relationship with the invisible world, their material kingdom crumbled, just as Ubud's grew when its rulers gained in *kesaktian*. Again this resonates with the evidence from Ubud. Local accounts, both contemporaneous written ones and contemporary oral ones, stress along with the military and political exploits of the Cokordas Sukawati, the *kesaktian* on which their worldly powers are ultimately based. This is expressed most explicitly in well-known stories of various royal regalia, usually magical weapons, that are the real stars of these stories and many of which are venerated in public ritual in Ubud to this day. At first sight, this construction of a polity through ritual may appear compatible with Geertz's model, but Wiener's point is that in Bali, what may appear from a Western point of view as a "performative" aspect is, from a Balinese point of view, about power, differently configured perhaps, but as real, concrete and material as any guns, ricefields or manpower. The analytic separation into "performative" or "cultural" and "political" or "material" aspects is itself "an artefact of an analytical position that does not take indigenous discourses seriously into account" (Wiener, 1995: 10) and thus misrecognises and misrepresents Balinese understandings.

Henk Schulte-Nordholt (1996: 1), like Wiener, places the king's role of "protection" from misfortune, both physical and spiritual, at the centre of his analysis of the kingdom of Mengwi. However, his is also a multifaceted model, placing significant weight on "relationships between the royal centre and its satellites", "intricate networks involving the entourage of each ... leader", "irrigation and the distribution of agricultural surplus", "external trade", "warfare" and "the ritual order" whose purpose was not display, but the maintenance of a spiritual "flow of life" (Schulte-Nordholt, 1996: 12–13). His analysis of the successive rises and falls of the kingdom of Mengwi brings to light not a stable unchanging "classical" political form, but ones that underwent processes of constant change as a result of changing factors both internal and external to Bali. The key factor in this process was, as for most of the other writers discussed above, kingship and most of all the person of the king himself. "Kingship was necessary for the continuation of life and ... for the majority of Balinese the 'flow of life' was unthinkable without kingship [but] ... the success of royal leadership depended on the extent to which a king demonstrated his ability to control violence, hence to reinforce order." In this model, "the divine legitimacy of successful kingship was manifested" not through ritual display, but "through violence" and it was "violence" not ritual display that "was instrumental in establishing order" (Schulte-Nordholt, 1996: 332). Unlike the "essentially constant cultural form" of Geertz's (1980: 125) *negara*, concrete, historical Mengwi was "anything but static", "royal power ... was almost constantly in motion" and "violent confrontations threaten[ed] the continuity of the negara" (Schulte-Nordholt, 1996: 332–333). Once again, the multiple factors, dynamism and

politico-military aspects of this model are more consistent with what we know of Ubud's sudden florescence in the late nineteenth century than with Geertz's *Negara*.

So, whether we look at my story of Ubud, those of other Balinese states, or more general models of precolonial Southeast Asian polities, there is precious little evidence or argument to support Geertz's model, beyond the recognition of the centrality of the king and the importance of ritual. Yet in spite of the evidence for its demise, his *negara* will not go away, as so many historical *negara* have done, either in scholarly debate or, as we will see, in Bali itself.

Negaras Lost and Found: Ubud in the Twentieth Century

Negara Lost

Since the golden age of "Kerajaan Ubud", through the twentieth century the kingdom and the integrity of the palace itself¹⁵ were gradually whittled away by colonial control, earthquake and epidemic, the great depression, internal squabbles within the palace, Japanese invasion and the subsequent war, and the political and economic turmoil that followed culminating in the coup that placed Suharto in power in 1965 and the anti-communist massacres that followed. By this time, Ubud was so poor that people were eating the trunks of banana trees to survive and the position of the palace was at its lowest ebb as it had neither significant political nor economic power. Since 1970, however, under the enforced stability of Suharto's New Order, tourism grew and flourished and much of Bali, including Ubud, prospered. This was the context in which the palace began to reassert its influence, this time not through economic or political, let alone military means, but through control over cultural production.

One thing that did survive through all the troubles of the mid-twentieth century was a king who was committed to his own cultural traditions and to sharing them with foreigners. A few foreign expatriate artists also survived and together with some local artists they established a museum of art and the core of a modernizing movement in local art. At the same time, the king, Ck. Agung Sukawati (a son of Ck. Gede Sukawati), began involving himself in the renovation of temples and the performing art groups associated with temples in Ubud and other parts of Bali. He also opened his palace as a hotel for foreign tourists interested in Balinese culture and arts. Together these became the basis of a distinctive form of cultural tourism that was supposed to happen all over the island, but was quickly superseded by conventional tropical beach tourism in most other places.

Negara Redux: Ubud in the Late Twentieth Century

The lords ... strove constantly to extend their ability to mobilize men and materiel [sic] so as to hold larger and more splendid ceremonies and build larger and more splendid temples and palaces in which to hold them. (Geertz, 1980: 19)

By the time of my fieldwork twenty years later, Ubud was a tourist boomtown with a growing commercially based middle class, but the palace was still the centre in many

ways. It is here that many of the nightly performances of traditional music/dance/drama take place. What the palace also does is organize and sponsor ritual and renovation of temples (on an increasingly extravagant scale) in Ubud itself, but also throughout a network of villages around Ubud, especially in the valley upstream toward the mountains. So wherever I go throughout this area I come across lavishly restored temples and huge ceremonies in out-of-the-way and often quite poor villages. The story is always the same: *Puri* Ubud told them what they needed to do and organized and helped financially. Of course, the people of these villages express suitable gratitude to and respect for the *Puri*. They also feel a sense of obligation, so when there are major ceremonies in Ubud, they are invited, and they feel obliged to come to contribute their labour to the preparations.¹⁶

A further dimension is that whenever the palace helps villages with ritual or temple-building, they also help with clarifying local history: re-interpreting and integrating an existing corpus of local stories and traditions into a master narrative that links all the villages into a network under the umbrella of the *puri*. When I ask questions about local histories, I often receive replies along the lines of “we are just simple village people here—we don’t know about history (*sejarah*)—better you ask the *cokorda* in Ubud”.¹⁷ According to the official palace version, this is simply the fulfilment of their hereditary obligation as kings, to take care of the ritual well-being of their people (now that the government supposedly takes care of their material well-being). It is also, they say, part of a deliberate strategy to conserve local culture and maintain a healthy community less prone to the rampant commercial development and the social problems supposedly associated with it in the coastal resorts and urban centres. Most people in Ubud concur, at least outwardly with the official version. The few who express doubts tend to do so circumspectly.

While there may be debate over the motivation for this programme of sponsorship, the net effect is clear: *Puri* Ubud are rebuilding their former kingdom not through direct political or economic dominance, but through control over cultural production: a symbolic kingdom constituted by ritual display, traditional status roles and moral obligation.¹⁸ This is more or less what Geertz’s model would have us believe they were doing in the nineteenth century. Whether they were or not, and whether his *Negara* existed or not, we have no way of knowing. Furthermore, Geertz clearly regarded the *negara*, at least its Balinese variant, as a form which had passed, the “death of the old order [which had] expired as it lived, absorbed in pageant” (Geertz, 1980: 13), but only because “the modern world [had] at length caught up with [it]” (Geertz, 1980: 19). However, ironically, as the modern world increasingly catches up, perhaps even overtakes Bali in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Ubud at least is coming increasingly to resemble what Geertz thought it was like in the nineteenth century. It almost looks as though “[t]hose *cokordas* in Ubud must have been reading Clifford Geertz”¹⁹ (Degung Santikarma, [Balinese anthropologist], personal communication).

Symbolic and Material *Negaras*

It is clear that nineteenth-century kingdoms were based on lamentably familiar combinations of political manoeuvre and military violence, and that twenty-first-century

ones are based at least partly on symbolic display. What we have not looked at though are the other sides of these two historical coins, let alone the relationships between them. While we have very little evidence of ritual display in the old kingdoms, neither do we have conclusive evidence of its absence. If Helms' account of the cremation in 1847 is anything to go by, it does appear to have happened, at least in kingdoms well enough established and not too busy with warfare to afford it. What its purpose was we will likewise never know, but if Geertz's retrospective projections from Tabanan around 1960 and my experience of Ubud since the 1990s are anything to go by, it is not inconceivable that, as in 2000, it played a role like that Geertz ascribed to it: constitutive, at least to a degree, of a political or at least social order.

As the contemporary tourist gapes like the proverbial "cow looking at a gamelan orchestra" (Geertz, 1973c: 185) at the extravagance of ceremonial performance and draws the conclusion that the lives of Balinese must be constituted by religious sensibilities different, deeper and stranger than their own; the material political-economic forces that condition those very Balinese lives remain invisible to them, obscured by the correspondence between the ceremony itself and the image propagated by the tourist industry. Similarly when Helms and other Europeans observed pre-colonial Bali, they saw and recorded what stood out, that which was most different, and concurred with contemporary European preconceptions. What they did not see or at least bother to record was that which was most familiar and commonsensical: the facts that people worked for their livings and that rulers wielded power. Conversely, indigenous accounts of the late nineteenth century took the trouble to record not what was commonplace and taken-for-granted, which may well have included ritual display, but what was remarkable and noteworthy: the size of the armies, the military hardware arrayed, and the magico-spiritual powers of the leaders and their weapons. It seems likely that the two sets of accounts record different kinds of information about different aspects of pre-colonial politics for different purposes.²⁰ Geertz, for the tendentious reasons he makes so clear, has chosen to emphasize one aspect over the other. What he has not done, except in passing comments, is to consider them both together, much less to articulate any kind of dynamic relationship between. This, in the end is the problem with *Negara*: not the absolute rightness or wrongness of its account, but its partialness and its denial of dialectic. This incompleteness defines the final task of this article.

The Conversion of Symbolic and Material Resources

Kingdoms are not cheap to build in the twenty-first century, nor were they in the nineteenth. The one Ck. Sukawati built was not the unmediated fruit of his personal powers. It was the work of what appears to have been an unusually well-organized and disciplined standing army. This army was in turn provisioned by an unusually efficient centralized system of provisioning, which was in turn made increasingly possible by his control over a large area of productive land (MacRae, 1997: 330–332; 1999: 128–129; 2003: 147–150). If he performed spectacular public ceremonial, like the cremation in 1847, it too was made possible by his control over the human and material resources from this kingdom of productive land (as Geertz himself recognises in the quote

above). Likewise the cremation in 2004, and indeed the whole programme of sponsorship of ritual and temple renovation, in dozens of villages over two decades or more, is a huge material undertaking in terms of labour, materials and plain hard cash. How does the palace mobilize such resources? How do they pay for it all?

It comes from a combination of two main sources. Most of the labour and some of the materials come from the voluntary/invited contributions of their subjects throughout their symbolic kingdom in Ubud and their wider network of client villages. Most of the cash comes from their own businesses, tourism and other, but also from the lease and sale of land. Where did the land come from? The basis of it was won through the political and military prowess of their ancestors over a hundred years ago, but this material base of land, supplemented by tourism enterprises that are ultimately based on land too, is also what they use to finance the programme of sponsorship through which they build their symbolic kingdom. What they are doing is investing material resources into enterprises from which they can expect little or no direct material return. What they get instead is a significant return in terms of prestige (“*nama*” in Milner’s terms), spiritual kudos (“perceived *kesaktian*” in Wiener’s terms), and moral obligation from dozens of villages—the symbolic returns that constitute a symbolic kingdom. These symbolic resources can then be called upon when needed and re-invested in the form of the material resource of labour for yet another ritual display, and so on.

This way of looking at it comes of course from Bourdieu’s (1991:230) conceptualization of different kinds of social power in terms of the metaphor of capital, and especially his insistence that they can, like different forms of energy, be endlessly converted and re-converted into each other. “The only way such an accountancy can apprehend the indifferentiatedness of economic and symbolic capital is in the form of their perfect interconvertibility” (Bourdieu, 1977: 178). Thus in twenty-first-century as in nineteenth-century Bali, as in the North Africa Bourdieu (1977: 180) refers to “it is easy to see why the great families never miss a chance (and this is one reason for their predilection for distant marriages and vast processions) to organise exhibitions of symbolic capital (in which conspicuous consumption is only the most visible aspect)”.

While in Bali, it is cremations rather than marriages that are the locus of the greatest investment in ritual performance, there is no reason to believe that this process of capital-conversion so evident in the twenty-first century was not also going on in the nineteenth century. Geertz may not much like the economic metaphor, but this is the sense in which I think he is partly right: his *Negara* probably did involve the conversion and accumulation of symbolic as well as material capital. Yet—and this is where his model is not so much wrong as misleading or at best incomplete—as we have also seen clearly in contemporary Ubud: “Symbolic capital, a transformed and disguised form of physical ‘economic’ capital, produces its proper effect inasmuch, and only inasmuch, as it conceals the fact that it originates in ‘material’ forms of capital which are also, in the last analysis, the source of its effects” (Bourdieu, 1977: 183, emphasis in original).

We need not accept Bourdieu’s reduction in his “last analysis” of the symbolic to the material or even the implicit materialism of his metaphor of capital itself to heed his reminder of the dynamic relationship between the material and symbolic dimensions of such institutions as *negaras*.²¹ Geertz’s contribution has been (like that of other

anthropologists of history-as-culture) to remind us of the symbolic dimension of Balinese, and by implication all political systems. Yet a believable and useful model of South East Asian polities, certainly of Balinese ones, both pre-colonial and postmodern, needs to re-embed the truth of his *Negara* where the actual evidence from Bali, the models of other scholars, the theoretical critiques of his critics and ethnographic and historical commonsense all suggest it belongs: in the flow of concrete, material, historical process.

Notes

- [1] The visitor was Ludwig Helms, a young man in the employ of Mads Lange, a Danish trader whose base of operations was, and his grave still is, in what is now the heart of the Kuta tourist district. Helms' account of the cremation can be found in his memoirs (Helms, 1882) and more detail about Lange and his operation can be found in Schulte-Nordholt (1981).
- [2] E.g., in a recent collection of writings by a virtual who's-who of such influences, *Negara* is mentioned only once, and that by the anthropologist-editor Ortner (1999a: 38).
- [3] This brief history, and indeed all the ethnographic and local historical material recounted here, was, unless referenced otherwise, collected in the course of fieldwork in Ubud between 1993 and 1996, and supplemented by several briefer visits since then. This work was supported by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), Udayana University in Bali, Dr N. Erawan, the University of Auckland and individuals too numerous to name here. It is recounted in more detail in my doctoral thesis (MacRae, 1997) and parts of it in subsequent publications (MacRae, 1998, 1999, 2003).
- [4] *Cokorda* is a title indicating descent from the highest-ranking line in Klungkung. It is often abbreviated "Ck." and will be hereafter.
- [5] It is used by some other foreign scholars of Bali, but mostly in response to its instatement by Geertz as a "gatekeeping concept" (Appadurai, 1986: 357) rather than reflecting local usage (e.g., Schulte-Nordholt, 1996: 6).
- [6] Palaces may also be seen, more obviously and I think more defensibly, as simply grander versions of ordinary houses, in all of which (family) temples are a constituent part. Even if we accept this analogy, there are real differences in function, meaning and geometry between Indian and Balinese temples.
- [7] Similar points are made in various ways by Davis (1982: 267), Herzfeld (2001: 55), Kellogg (1991: 418) and Thomas (1963: 3). An example of the assumption of the separateness of the two disciplines is Sahlins' (1985: 143) (no doubt also tendentious) claim that "the antithesis between history and structure has been enshrined in anthropology since Radcliffe-Brown".
- [8] For this discussion, see Cohn (2004: 30–45).
- [9] *Negara* receives mention, but no more, in Kellogg's (1991: 425) review of anthropological uses of history.
- [10] These two categories may appear too broad and loose for some tastes (for an alternative typology, see Kellogg, 1991), but they correspond roughly to, or at least overlap with, distinctions made elsewhere including that by French (*Annales*) historians between "event-based history and history conceived of as 'motionless' and of long duration" (Cohn, 1982: 242), Levi-Strauss' between "hot" and "cold" societies, and Geertz's (1980: 5) own between history as "a series of major events" and as "general phases of sociocultural development". They also condense Roseberry's (1991: 7–20) three approaches into two. It might also be argued that there is a third category—ethnohistory—whose business is the reconstruction and writing of histories of and from the point of view of the subjects of that history—"the natives point of view" (Cohn, 1982). Yet even within ethnohistory, approaches also tend to fall into these two broad categories.

- [11] The bibliography of *Negara*, which runs to eleven pages, contains only ten local historical texts, all of them published versions of mid-twentieth-century transcriptions. Several others, many of them unpublished, that I was able to find without much difficulty in private collections over thirty years later are notably absent.
- [12] Tambiah's (1976) earlier work *World Conquerer and World Renouncer* is, however, listed in the bibliography of *Negara*.
- [13] Shelly Errington's (1989) *Meaning and Power in a Southeast Asian Realm* arguably represents another model. However, apart from a useful discussion of the political sociology of "entourages" (Errington, 1989: 104–108) and more focus on local understandings of power, it is essentially a *Negara*-like model of an ahistorical Indic cultural form.
- [14] For a general discussion of *kesaktian* in Bali, see Geertz (1994); and on its role in modern Indonesian politics, see Anderson (1972).
- [15] The Balinese term "*puri*" refers, very much like the English "palace", simultaneously to the physical buildings, the (extended) family and the institution in general terms.
- [16] There is a delicate balance of obligation and compulsion here. While the palace insist that villages volunteer their services, and indeed fear missing out on such an opportunity, it is obvious from enquiries in these villages that they are notified of such ceremonies and invited to participate. The lynchpin in the process is usually a local leader keen to enhance his status and power by making things happen in the village and serving the palace at the same time. For an analysis by a local sociologist, see Dwipayana (2001: 256–260)
- [17] Such elite control or "ownership" of local history is not uncommon in south Bali (see, e.g., Parker, 2003: 31, 42).
- [18] It would be easy to impute motivations to the *puri* on the basis of an analysis of strategic use symbolic and material resources, but this would be to reduce Balinese motivations to the categories of Western political science—the very mistake Geertz is trying, according to Wiener unsuccessfully, to avoid. More importantly, despite over a decade of fieldwork in Ubud, I cannot claim to know these motivations with any certainty. What I do know and can analyze, however, is the effects of their actions; but to impute motivations from effects is something else.
- [19] At a conference presentation of this article, I was asked the obvious question "Had they in fact been reading Geertz?". The answer is, I think: No, but they are certainly thinking about Balinese culture and about Ubud and their place in it in terms of a complex cultural formation involving Balinese re-appropriation of a courtly/theatrical model of Balinese culture developed by expatriates in the 1930s and cultivated retained by contemporary expatriates and the tourism industry.
- [20] While this is true of the Balinese texts with which I am familiar, it is apparently much less so of the Malay and Bugis ones with which Milner (1982) and Errington (1989) worked, in which there was much mention of the ceremonial aspects, while the underlying political machinations were systematically obscured. I suspect this may reflect different traditions of historiography, perhaps influenced by Islamic scholarship, but it is a matter for further research.
- [21] For a defence of Bourdieu against the charge of economic reductionism "in the last analysis", see Thompson (1991: 14–15). However Bourdieu's use of the language of economics and symbolism locates him inescapably in the endless debate between "Culture and Practical Reason" in a position that is more or less a mirror-image of Sahlins (1976). However, this too is another discussion.

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