

Fabricating Power with Balinese Textiles: An Anthropological Evaluation of Balinese Textiles in the Mead-Bateson Collection.

Urmila Mohan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Fabricating Power with Balinese Textiles was produced as the catalogue to accompany the exhibition of the same name at Bard Graduate Center Gallery in New York (23 February–8 July 2018), yet this publication contains more than sufficient insights and scholarship on the subjects of Balinese ritual cloth, visual anthropology, and museum collection and display to stand alone as a useful introduction to all of these subjects. Given the time and resources made available for most contemporary exhibition development, the author and exhibition curator has embarked on an ambitious project on a scale that most curators could only dream of. Beginning with the premise of how we come to terms with objects in museum stores, Mohan has combined archival and field research of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) collection of Balinese textiles in an attempt to situate this collection in a world of “fabricated” images about the idyllic island of Bali.

The focus of this study is the Mead-Bateson research collaboration that resulted in the formation of the AMNH collection. As Mohan notes, “while the Mead-Bateson contribution to visual anthropology via the methodological use of photography and film has been studied, what is less known is their collection of Balinese objects—particularly woven textiles” (1). With the exception of the extensive work done by Hildred Geertz on the paintings they collected in the field, Mohan is the first scholar to devote serious attention to the textiles they collected and documented. Mohan’s aim is twofold. First she draws these objects out of relative obscurity and to recover any notes, observations, and visual documentation the anthropologist couple made about the use of particular textiles in ritual and, to a lesser

extent, in daily life. Second, Mohan embarks on her own field research to document the use of textiles in Balinese ritual today, a process she describes as documenting “rituals across history” (77) or identifying continuities in the use and functions of cloth.

After an introductory chapter providing an overview of the project and a discussion of “Cloth and Balinese Culture” in Chapter 1, Mohan’s evaluation of the Bateson-Mead collaboration and the formation of the AMNH collection in Chapter 2 is genuinely engaging. The 1930s saw a rather diverse group of foreigners take up residence on the island as ethnographers, artists, dancers, and scholars, some of whom were in the employ of the Dutch colonial government and many of whom did not possess formal qualifications in anthropology. Mohan establishes that Bateson and Mead sought to distinguish the “scientific nature of [their] anthropological research from the work done by dancers and artists” (41), yet at the same time she alludes to the collective research effort that saw a great deal of collaboration among them. Mohan covers succinctly the personal and intellectual relationship between Bateson and Mead, their fieldwork methodologies, and the manipulation of the material they filmed and collected, and she alludes to the contributions made by some of their interlocutors. The contributions of the latter have certainly been understated in most accounts of their work in Bali, not only in terms of the roles played by the Balinese who assisted in their various investigations but also in terms of the involvement of scholars like Jane Belo (39).

Sifting through the written and photographic records of their work in the museum archive, Mohan locates specific questions posed by Mead to informants about cloth weaving and the use of offerings, as well as Mead’s observations on the use of textiles in ceremony and as daily attire in the villages of Bangli and Bayung Gede. These findings partly inform her approach in the following chapter (“Cloth in Balinese Rites of Passage”), in which she describes her own journey to Bali to meet

with weavers and observe how textiles operate in Balinese ceremonial practice today. Mohan's keen eye is apparent as she describes a visit to the island of Nusa Penida, which is just off the east coast of Bali, to meet producers of the weft ikat *cepuk* cloth and, not long after, as a guest at a toothfiling ceremony in Ubud, discovering that the *cepuk* cloth being used to cover the teenage girl before her toothfiling was made by the very same producer. This tantalizing dip into the use of textiles in ceremonial contexts—and the attempt to track back and forth between contemporary observation and those recorded by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead—highlights the value of museum collections to inspire innovative fieldwork approaches and definitely deserves further attention.

In leading us from fieldwork into the final chapter, “Balinese Exhibits in Western

Museums,” Mohan makes a neat analogy between the manipulation of material that may have occurred during fieldwork and the manipulation of objects once they reach museum settings. She surveys how Balinese objects have been exhibited in the United States and the Netherlands. This not only highlights the extent to which Balinese culture has been “decontextualized” (110) in museums, but prompts further reflection on Mohan's attempt to move beyond conventional approaches to understanding the legacies of fieldwork. In the case of the Bateson-Mead fieldwork project, this catalogue is an important contribution that goes beyond the iconic status and romanticism of the Bateson-Mead collaboration to reassess overlooked aspects of their work.

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