

Priests and Programmers: Technologies of Power in the Engineered Landscape of Bali

**Priests and Programmers: Technologies of Power in
the Engineered Landscape of Bali**

By J. Stephen Lansing

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Review by Edward H. Schroeder

If this review were not destined for a scholarly journal, it might begin like this: "Green Revolution ruins rice harvest in Bali. Water temples re-invoked to rescue rice production." When Western benefactors of scientific agriculture with their hybrid seeds, commercial fertilizer and chemical pesticides moved in to revolutionize rice production, they brought catastrophe. Like the Dutch colonist conquerors before them they noticed the "water temples," but saw them merely as items of Balinese religion, and thus irrelevant for growing rice. Too bad. In the author's own words: "The water temples are a social system that manages (sic!) production [of rice]. Removing the temples from the control of production ultimately threatens the entire productive system." (123)

The author is a multi-discipline professor in the departments of Anthropology and Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Arizona. Bali is his bailiwick. His five (at least) books, dozens of articles and films as well—[<http://press.princeton.edu/titles/8349.html>] on the

strange and wonderful, culturally complex and enigmatic world of Bali signal his expertise. With admirable clarity he introduces us to the “Aha!” about water temples and their “waters of power,” ignored by Western invaders and visitors from the beginning. When he moves to analyse his findings, the clarity persists, but the water gets deep. He draws us in to conversation with the social philosophies of Hegel, Marx, Habermas, Foucault—and even a citation from ancient Virgil: “Fortunate is he who has found the gods of the countryside.”

Lansing has “found the gods of the [Balinese] countryside” whose water-power sustains rice agriculture from planting to harvest. In this book we learn who they are, what they do, and what the Balinese do with and for them so that there will be another rice harvest next year. Simple it is not, for the deities of Hindu-animist Balinese culture and their respective jurisdictions constitute a labyrinth. E.g., the temple of the supreme Water Goddess at the Batur Crater Lake has altars for over 40 additional deities. At least as extensive is the multitude of heavenly beings worshipped alongside the God of Fire at the Besakih temple on the even bigger Agung volcano right next door.

Comment on the back cover says it best: “Lansing describes the networks of water temples that manage the flow of irrigation water in the name of the Goddess of the Crater Lake. Based on a system of power relations so foreign to Western ideas that it was overlooked by colonial administrators, the practical role of the temples remained unnoticed until the advent of the “Green Revolution” of the 1970s. Using the technique of ecological simulation modeling as well as cultural and historical analysis, Lansing argues that the material and the symbolic form a single complex – a historically evolving system of productive relationships. The symbolic system of temple rituals is not merely a reflection of utilitarian constraints but also a basic ingredient in the organization of production.”

This is fascinating cultural anthropology, even history of religions. Why should it interest missiologists?

Here's the interest it has for this ASM member. I wish I'd seen Lansing's 1991 original edition before Marie and I did our volunteer stint as ecumenical partners with the Balinese Protestant Christian Church back in 1999.

Besides the official work we were asked to do, we kept pursuing our own research curiosity with Balinese Hindus who had become Christ-confessors. Punning on the term "Good News," we'd ask: "What was 'good,' what was 'new' in the Jesus-story presented to you that was compelling enough for you to move your trust to him?" Many a marvelous answer came our way. But in almost every case, we heard "But I also had to move out of my village, abandon all my property. I could no longer make sacrifices to the Balinese gods, and thus I was an intolerable threat to the entire village. Without the sacrifices catastrophe would come. I had to go."

I wish I had asked:

1. Since you now believe that the God and Father of Jesus is the Lord of the rice fields, could you in any way have perhaps at first added Him or introduced Him, as St. Paul did in Athens, as a hitherto unknown god with a hand in the rice harvest?
2. Could you in any way as a Christ-confessor have continued with the old rituals, "baptizing" them in your heart as thank-offerings to the Triune God instead of petitionary sacrifices to the water gods to guarantee the harvest?
3. Does Martin Luther's distinction between God's left hand at work in the daily routines of life and God's right hand work of salvation in Jesus suggest a possibility? Namely, rice and all that it entails is God's ongoing preserving

and protecting care for humankind in his creation. God is to be revered and thanked in those daily-life routines, but salvation is not to be found there. It is in Christ, the unique gift from God's right hand, that even the best of fallen humankind finds their rescue and redemption. This might lead to a different message from the Christ-confessor to his fellow villagers if/when the harvest fails: this is God's call for repentance and not for re-intensified sacrifice.

Does the Naaman story (2 Kings 5) offer a precedent? After being healed by the God of Israel he tells Elisha, "Your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD." But then he adds this codicil: "But may the LORD pardon your servant on one account: when my master [the king of Syria] goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count." And Elisha said to him, "Go in peace."

Would the Naaman nuance work at the water temples? I wish I had asked.