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Narrating Seen and Unseen Worlds: Vanishing Balinese Embroideries

Joseph Fischer

Vanishing Balinese embroideries provide local people with a direct means of honoring their gods and transmitting important parts of their narrative cultural heritage, especially themes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. These epics contain all the heroes, preferred and disdained personality traits, customary morals, instructive folk tales, and real and mythic historic connections with the Balinese people and their rich culture.

A long *ider-ider* embroidery hanging engagingly from the eaves of a Hindu temple depicts supreme gods such as Wisnu and Siwa or the great mythic heroes such as Arjuna and Hanuman. It connects for the Balinese faithful, their life on earth with their heavenly tradition. Displayed as an offering on outdoor family shrines, a small *lamak* embroidery of much admired personages such as Rama, Sita, Krisna and Bima reflects the high esteem in which many Balinese hold them up as role models of love, fidelity, bravery or wisdom. Used as a ritual house decoration, a *tabing* embroidery that depicts the great god Wisnu astride his fierce eagle-like vehicle, Garuda, or the malevolent giant warrior, Kumbakarna, demonstrates the Balinese deep belief in the personified symbols of force and power that threaten and/or enhance their daily lives. The embroidering on these cloths of scores of ghosts, giants, nymphs, ogres, witches and weird creatures reflects a particular Balinese/ Hindu cosmos in which the Balinese strongly believe that the unseen arbitrary upper world and the seen lower one on earth are inseparable and must be seriously taken into account in ceremonies and rituals. The Balinese are also very conscious of their need for levity in daily life as a counter-play to all the uncontrollable and unpredictable forces in the seen and unseen worlds. As evidence of this, many embroideries are populated by two to four so-called clowns, no matter what the scene or story. These figures are Twalen, Merdah, Delem, and Sangut, who appear only in the Balinese version of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. They provide comic relief and humor; they are not bound by traditional conventions of speech and behavior. They fill an important social function in that ordinary folk can participate in laughing at life's foibles, in joking with their gods and in criticizing their superiors.

These narrative embroideries are identified with a particular region of Bali and reflect major essentials in Bali/Hindu culture and religion. Now these pieces are in danger of disappearing. This paper calls attention to "endangered textiles species" and sets forth some criteria for helping to preserve textiles with significant traditional value.

Joseph Fischer has been a lecturer at Rangoon University, at Gadjah Mada University in Indonesia, and at the University of California Berkeley. He conducted doctoral studies at John Hopkins University and the University of Chicago, and has authored *Threads of Tradition: Textiles from Indonesia and Sarawak*; *Modern Indonesian Art*; *The Folk Art of Java*; and *The Folk Art of Bali*; as well as papers on children's art and Balinese embroideries.