
KAMASAN

A Village in Bali

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Introduction

One day during December 2010 two new signs appeared on the roadway at each of the main entrances leading into Kamasan village. Consisting of a painted signboard hung between two metal poles and suspended high above the passing traffic, they differed little from the many road signs around the country which mark the spatial boundaries between villages, cities, districts and provinces. The text painted in white on a green background visible to persons entering into the village simply announced the name of the village, *Desa Kamasan (Kamasan Village)*, while the message on the reverse, visible to those departing, read *Desa Kamasan Jangan Dilupakan (Don't Forget Kamasan Village)*.

Even though the same message has appeared for decades on signs all around the country, including in Kamasan itself during the 1970s, I was curious about the new sign. I wondered who exactly the target audience of this appeal was. Was it specific to Kamasan or would the same message soon appear around the neighbouring villages in the coming weeks? Was it directed at the small numbers of foreign and Indonesian visitors who come to the village, a plea not to leave Kamasan off their travel itineraries or to take with them happy memories of their visit?

Perhaps it was a call to residents who have departed the village in search of employment in other parts of the island and beyond, not to overlook

their responsibilities to the village and the all-important remittances? Maybe it was a general entreaty on behalf of the village itself not to be neglected in government initiated development plans for the region. The few people that I asked about the sudden appearance of these signs dismissed them vaguely as part of some kind of local government initiative, although many more hadn't even noticed their appearance. But to my surprise, less than a month after they initially appeared, the new signs were revised. The intriguing *Desa Kamasan Jangan Dilupakan* had been removed and replaced with a sign simply stating *Terima Kasih* [Thank you].

My imagination charged, I pictured a delegation of villagers demanding the removal of the original slogan because it was considered contentious in some way. But despite my inquiries within the village and with the local village administration I failed to discover what or who was responsible for this short lived entreaty not to forget Kamasan village, and why it had been so suddenly removed. Just as the circumstances behind the decision to install and then replace this sign remain ambiguous, this minor episode encapsulates some of the ambiguities in the way villages are conceived and the kinds of relationships they have with the world outside.

Far from discrete entities, the villages of Southeast Asia are widely acknowledged to be part of intersecting urban and rural worlds (Rigg 1994). Kamasan village provides a particular example of how a space generally conceived of as rural is entwined in experiences of urbanisation, at the same time highlighting the ubiquitous nature of urbanisation in general.

Kamasan is located in the east of Bali, between the coast and the mountain ranges of Mount Agung. It is part of Klungkung, the smallest district of Bali with a total population of just 170,000 people. Only one third of the total district land area of Klungkung is located on the mainland of Bali, with the rest spread across the islands Nusa Penida, Nusa Lembongan and Nusa Ceningan. Administratively Klungkung is divided into four subdistricts, with Kamasan being one of eighteen villages in the subdistrict also called Klungkung. Although this is the smallest subdistrict in terms of land area it is the most populated with about 55,000 people or 1,896 people per square kilometre.

While today this part of Bali appears something of a backwater compared to the bustle which characterises the south of island, Klungkung has

great significance historically (Wiener 1995). From around the sixteenth century it was the seat of the Dewa Agung, paramount ruler of Bali, who established a new court in Gelgel during the sixteenth century. Technically, at that time, Kamasan was part of Bali's capital city as it belongs to the *desa adat* or customary village of Gelgel. Incidentally, the Gelgel court also included a retinue of Javanese Muslim retainers who established what is now the oldest mosque in Bali (Ambary 1985).

Kamasan remained part of the capital until the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century when the Gelgel court was relocated to Klungkung after rebellions forced the reigning Dewa Agung Jambe to establish a new palace. The new palace, in what is now the capital of Klungkung district, known officially as Semarapura since 1992, is only two kilometres to the north of Kamasan village.

The village of Kamasan provided artisans to the royal court and today the most impressive and permanent display of Kamasan painting can be seen at the Kerta Gosa in Klungkung, the former palace of the Dewa Agung. Kamasan artists generally locate themselves within a lineage of painters descended from the nineteenth century artist Modara, who established the Pulesari descent group as artists, and is still considered the most important artist in the village for the high regard in which he was held by the Dewa Agung.

Kamasan village itself is divided into *banjar* or hamlets reflecting the specialised services once provided by artisans to the court, including the gold and silversmiths of Banjar Pande Mas, the metalsmiths of Banjar Pande and the painters of Banjar Sangging, whose name means Craftsman or Artist. This is not unique to Kamasan with many hamlets around Bali retaining names which denote the arts and trades practiced there, including several other villages in the district of Klungkung like the bronzesmiths in the village of Budaga, the gong makers of Tihingan and the cloth weavers of Gelgel. What does make Kamasan unique is the vigour of the classical painting tradition which dates back at least to the period of the great East Javanese kingdom of Majapahit.

The narrative painting for which Kamasan village is renown has roots in the *wayang* or shadow puppet theatre and is generally referred to as classical or *wayang* painting. Although a similar style of painting was once practiced

throughout Bali and still exists in a few other villages among small numbers of practicing artists (Cooper 2005), Kamasan remains the only village in Bali where the painting style has not been superseded by the adaption of newer styles and materials. Paintings are produced on cloth in a variety of formats and while in the past they were used primarily within temples or in the pavilions of courtly homes, they are now also found in art galleries, museum collections, hotels, government offices, private homes and souvenir shops throughout Bali and the world.

Kamasan is currently home to almost four thousand people spread across ten banjar. One of these, Banjar Sangging, with a population of almost one thousand people within one hundred and seventy five households is home to the majority of painters. Village authorities estimate that fifty percent of the whole village population derives an income from the painting industry.

It is probable that more people are involved with painting now than was the case in the past, when painting was rarely a full time activity and was combined with periods of farming, particularly as artists were provided with rice fields by the royal court in return for their services. While painting now represents a major, though certainly not the sole, source of income for many families, some still hold plots of agricultural land located at a distance of a few kilometres from the village. This land is largely worked by labourers and sharecroppers from nearby villages as well as by itinerant workers from the neighbouring islands of Java and Lombok during harvest times.

The most lucrative form of employment for young men in the village is the cruise ship industry with many families aspiring to send at least one son through a recruitment agent for training and eventual placement on a liner. This is an investment which requires substantial capital, and securing a placement is currently said to cost about eighty million rupiah.

Other young people are employed in the hotels, spas and resorts of the tourist centres, with some residing permanently in the south of the island while others make the daily commute to destinations as far as Jimbaran and Nusa Dua. While older residents frequently lament the lack of interest that younger people have in becoming artists, at present there are several young artists and many others involved in the marketing and trade of Kamasan paintings outside the village.

This movement of labour clearly ties the village into the continuous urban corridor that now links Bali to Jakarta, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and beyond (Connor & Vickers 2003). This corridor is physically realised in the dual carriage Ida Bagus Mantra bypass which runs up the east coast of Bali from the south, passing through Gianyar and Klungkung towards Padang Bai, a major port serving ferries to Lombok and cruise vessels.

The road facilitates the movement of trucks carrying rocks and gravel dug out from the riverbeds of the Unda river around Klungkung for building development in the south as well as being the means by which the residents of Kamasan travel by motorbike to and from the tourist centres for work and to the capital for university and medical treatment. They share this corridor with tourists touring up and down the coast, whose major stop in Klungkung is the Kerta Gosa or in the case of busloads of Javanese pilgrims, the grave of Habib Ali in Kusamba, believed to be a Muslim advisor to the court of Dewa Agung Jambe of Klungkung.

But it is not just the movement of people that ties Kamasan into processes of urbanisation in Bali, but the art produced in this village, widely recognised as the centre of the classical painting tradition. This is a tradition which very much appeals to more urbanised Balinese who are major consumers of the art. Some of this appeal can be understood in the context of the Ajeg Bali campaign, a media initiated campaign designed to promote an adherence to traditional Balinese culture in the wake of the Bali bombings (Nordholt 2007; Picard 2008).

In his review of this now decade long campaign, Fox (2010) has argued that one of the particular problems in scholarly discussions around how Balinese are formulating a notion of Balinese tradition and of what it means to be Balinese, is the lack of attention to how the representations found in newspaper and television are related to the lives of people living in Bali. One tangible way in which the Balinese have responded to calls for a return to traditional cultural and religious practices, however problematic this formulation may be, is by consuming the products of Kamasan village in new ways.

Contemporary Balinese artist Nyoman Gunarsa, who comes from Klungkung and is himself a major promoter of Kamasan art with a private museum devoted to his large collection, has described the art of Kamasan artist Nyoman Mandra in terms which posit the artist as a kind of bulwark against the influences of foreign culture and tourism in Bali:

In the global era, where Bali is experiencing upheavals in the direction of its art from outside cultures, tourism and the varieties of art active in Bali, Nyoman Mandra remains consistent, convinced and firm in carrying out his Hindu-Balinese philosophical and cultural mission. His works have moved the world, and so elevated the reputation of Bali and the Indonesian people (Nyoman Gunarsa 2009).

This assessment of Kamasan's place and contribution to Balinese art and culture suggest how Kamasan painting can potentially be packaged to cater for a market consciously seeking a product to substantiate their own cultural heritage.

This view fits into the way Mark Hobart (2011) has conceived the Ajeg Bali campaign arguing that while Balinese supporters of the campaign may celebrate Balinese art for its steadfast adherence to tradition they obscure the intrinsic adaptability of the artists producing it. And it is this very adaptability explains why Kamasan artists are now able to produce work for other Balinese who, as a number of Kamasan artists have themselves commented, appreciate the work for being traditional but have limited understanding of the painted narratives themselves.

The classical paintings produced in Kamasan and other centres of painting in Bali have always been produced for ceremonial use by Balinese. Paintings commissioned for temples still account for some of the work produced in Kamasan, though most temples outside of the village have long replaced the painted cloths with cheaper screen printed versions, and artists producing work for temples usually paint for temples to which they belong within the village, most of which maintain good collections of classical paintings for use during particular ceremonies.

During the twentieth century foreign tourists have generally been regarded as the mainstay of Balinese art, a development considered to have resulted in the demise of traditional practice. While foreign international tourists have been important patrons of Kamasan art, over the past decade there has been a definite shift in the consumer base of Kamasan art in favour of the Balinese themselves not to mention the many affluent tourists who holiday in Bali from Jakarta and Surabaya. But historically as well, there are well documented examples of Kamasan paintings moving around the archipelago.

A portrait of Mangkunegara VII and his wife taken in Surakarta during the 1920s shows the royal couple seated on the floor of their residence in front of a large Kamasan work. Other photographs from the 1920s show the placement of Kamasan work in the modern homes of aristocratic Balinese, including a portrait of the wife of Tjokorde Raka Gde Soekawati from Ubud showing her seated in front of a painting which hangs as part of the interior decoration of their home. A second photograph shows her again, this time with a European female standing besides the chair she is seated on.

The Balinese who commission Kamasan art today are individuals, schools, university campuses, government departments as well as commercial ventures like hotel and villa developments. One of the largest commissions received by Nyoman Mandra in 2011 was from Mangku Made Pastika, the current governor of Bali, who requested a custom cloth for his private residence of almost forty metres in length depicting scenes from the epic Mahabharata.

Although this order was particularly long, it is not uncommon. As well as purchasing paintings of a standard size that are framed and hung on a wall much like a conventional picture, Balinese consumers seek cloths to hang within specific interior spaces, particularly as ceiling panels. This development has seen Kamasan artists moving away from painting single format scenes, usually associated with tourist work, to producing works on much longer and narrower lengths of cloth, known as *ider-ider* which consist of many scenes and are customarily hung around the eaves of pavilion structures within temples.

The size of these works also requires a large number of artists and colourists and it is not uncommon for up to ten people to be employed in the production of one painting. While the communal nature of production adds to the integrity of these works as traditional products, the practice of artist Nyoman Mandra (1946) shows that it is possible to become the most well known individual name in Kamasan art while heading the most important collective and studio in Kamasan today.

It is not just the way that Kamasan artists work that is subject to ongoing modification, but the ways in which artists present the narrative subjects of their paintings. Many of the narratives depicted in classical work are scenes from the Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as indigenous narratives including the story of black magic witch

Rangda, the courtly tales of Prince Malat Rasmi, the Tantri animal fables and the family of Pan and Men Brayut. The story of the Brayut family relates the tribulations of a poor commoner and rural Balinese couple with eighteen children. A version dating from around nineteen hundred shows scenes of domestic life, including husband Pan Brayut carrying water, bathing his children in the river and cooking on a wood fire.

A recent painting of the same narrative by Ni Wayan Wally (1954) of Banjar Tabanan in Kamasan shows how one artist has responded to the changing Balinese landscape. The invited guests to the wedding of the couple's son Ketut Subaya include a trio of civil servants in their khaki uniforms while tourists also stand on the periphery with cameras. Another Brayut painting, an *ider-ider* on display at the Gunarsa Museum in Klungkung, shows that classical artists of the 1930s engaged with new and urban settings.

The first scene on the Gunarsa painting is a wealthy Balinese couple, seated on chairs and facing each other in conversation across a round table. Each is smoking a large cigarette and a meal lies before them on the table. This is juxtaposed against the next scene which continues the story with the more convention depiction of the poor and rural Brayut couple. The inclusion of the wealthy and modern couple is probably intended by the artist to emphasise the differences between their two worlds. From around the same period, another fragment of an *ider-ider* painting from Karangasem shows an orchestral group accompanying a Barong Rangda performance. Here the drum players seated in the front are dressed in sarongs with white European shirts, one whose left shirt pocket contains several pens.

Of course Balinese artists are not alone in incorporating contemporary commentary in their work and there are many examples in the traditional or classic arts around Indonesia of engagement by artists with the urban world. Closely related to the painting tradition of Kamasan, the Javanese *wayang beber* or narrative scroll paintings of Pacitan, East Java are now maintained through performance using digital copies of the originals which are considered too precious to be used in performance (Chan, 2010).

However, at least one young artist in the city of Solo, Dani Iswardhana, is creating new scrolls for use in performance. His painted and performed narratives are concerned with issues such as the urbanisation of the village

economy, the migration of young people to cities for employment, environmental degradation as a result of chemical fertilisers and the use of village water supplies by commercial water companies. The Brayut couple also feature in his scroll on Semar in Singapore: In Singapore the Brayuts are lost. The babies escape from the baskets and wander aimlessly about (Chan, 2010).

In contrast with this Javanese take on the Brayut couple who are bewildered when faced with the chaos of the metropolis, the artists of Kamasan have demonstrated that they are part of an innovative and adaptable artistic tradition that is not overwhelmed by dealing with the world outside their village. It is precisely the qualities of this tradition, often perceived as the antithesis of the urban world inhabited the contemporary consumers of Kamasan art, which explain how Kamasan has successfully embraced the realities of urban Bali.

Understanding the kinds of engagements that artists have with urbanisation allows for a reformulation in our understanding of how traditional artists work, according greater agency to artists in responding to their changing audiences. This ensures that Kamasan village is unlikely to be forgotten in an increasing urbanised world.

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