

Contemporary Use of The Balinese Script

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The Balinese language (“Basa Bali”) is the native language of nearly 3 million people in Bali and the western part of the neighboring island Lombok. Bali is a very popular tourist destination, and famous for its rich art and culture. Because Bali is one province of Indonesia, the people of Bali use the Indonesian language as the official language in schools, government offices, and other formal institutions. For the native Balinese, the Balinese language is still popular to use in daily life.

The language is commonly written in two different scripts: the Balinese script and the Latin script. This article discusses the history of the Balinese script and the modern use of the script at the present time.



Figure 1 Map of Southeast Asia and Bali

The History of The Script

The Balinese script is without doubt derived from Devanagari and Pallava script from India. The shape of the script shows similarities with southern Indian scripts like Tamil. The concept of syllable also found in other South/Southeast Asian scripts, such as the modern Devanagari, Tamil, Thai, Lao, and Khmer scripts. The Balinese script closest sibling is the Javanese script, which have rectangular form of font shape compared to round shape of Balinese script.

	L'APHABET DU PALLAVA SIECLE DE					L'APHABET DU KAWI LA MOITIE DE L'EPOQUE												BALI	JAVA
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Figure 2 The Development of Modern Javanese and Balinese Script

The arrival of Hindu and Buddha religions in the Indonesian archipelago introduces both Devanagari and Pallava scripts to native Indonesians. Since then they were somehow merged into Kawi, or Old Javanese script. This Old Javanese script is the base of now two modern scripts Javanese and Balinese.

The first evidence of Devanagari and Pallava scripts in Bali was discovered in Penataran Sasih Temple in the village of Pejeng, Tampaksiring, Southeast of Bali. It was found that the *stupas* there contain stamped marks made from clay. Those stamped marks contain scripts written using Pradevanagari or Siddhamatrka alphabet. The text itself is about a mantra of Buddha Tathagata. The other evidence was found in Blanjong Temple in the village of Sanur, Southern Bali. There is a monument of King Sri Kesari Warmadewa that contains scripts written in both Devanagari and Old Balinese alphabets.

The modern Balinese alphabet was not coming from the Old Balinese alphabet, but from the Old Javanese alphabet. It might be caused by centuries of Javanese Kingdom colonization in Bali, and also because of the mass migrations of Javanese fled to their colony following the fall of Majapahit Empire to Moslem Demak's army.

Literatures Written Using The Script

The following literatures are traditionally written using the Balinese script.

Babad (History)

Every clan in Bali has their own temple to pray to the ancestors. Every Balinese are obliged to know their ancestors' history, so they can pray at the "correct" family temple (and also pray at

public temples). The histories of clans are preserved in a form of literatures called 'Babad'. Some of the babads are Babad Kutawaringin, Babad Sri Narayana Krsna Kepakistan, Babad Satria Kelating, Babad Buleleng, Babad Pasek, and still many others.

Usadha (Medicine Recipes and Curing Methods)

Usada are text about traditional medicine and medicinal plants. Usada comes from a Sanskrit word, "ausadhi", which means medicine. There are a lot of usadha texts, that in Gedong Kertya lontar museum in Singaraja, the amount of Usadha lontar surpasses the number of non-Usadha lontar.

Kidung (Chorus)

Kidung is the ritual chorus sung simultaneously by a dozen singers. The most well known kidung is Kidung Wargasari, describing the descendant of God and deities cheered by various offering of Gamelan music, songs, dance, foods, and other arts to receive their blessings. Kidung Malat is also popular with the love adventure of prince Panji and princess Rangkesari.

Kakawin (Verses)

The performance of *kakawin* is a ritualistic oral reading for a religious celebration, similar to that of the ancient Greek Rhapsodies. Reciting story from the epic of Ramayana, Mahabharata, and other stories one rhapsodist reads the poem in a highly strict musical rules and another alternately translates it into a high-dignified Balinese language. In contemporary Bali, numerous temple festivals and other religious celebrations feature kakawin recital on a special site with amplifier.

Gaguritan (Dramatic Recitation)

Gaguritan is the traditional narrative rhyme written in Balinese language rather than Kawi language. The vocal types that compose a play of a Gaguritan are known as Pupuh. There are still about two dozen names of pupuh in Bali that are dominating the performance of Balinese opera, the Arja sung dance drama. Among the most popular gaguritan includes: Jayaprana, Senepati Salya, Sampik Engtay (based on a Chinese story), Tamtam, Cangak, and Basur.

Sekar Rare (Children's Story Telling)

Sekar Rare is the Balinese lullaby, sung frequently by a (grand) mother to her (grand) baby, or by and among the playing children. There are a countless number of these types, with varying content from the clear narrative meaning to the tricky unsolved puns. These all are the source of various genres of the- Balinese tragedy, comedy, and tragicomedy.

The Media

Since the early times, the Balinese script has been written in various media:

- 1) Stone carving (aka 'Prasasti'). This was the most popular media of the past. It is also the source of information that can be preserved through centuries. It is still used up until the present days, e.g. in temples to mark the temple establishment day and for other historical event.



Figure 3 A Modern Prasasti, about the re-opening of Pura Dalem Sanur after renovation

- 2) Lontar palm leaves. This was the most popular media for writing stories, since nobody can carve stones to write thousands of lines. It was made from palm leaves - 'rontal' in Balinese.



Figure 4 A Contestant in Lontar Writing Contest

Table 1 The Number of Lontar in Collection

N o.	Location	Lontar collection (pieces)		Total
		Usadha	Non-usadha	
1.	Gedong Kirtya, Singaraja (Museum Lontar)	182	244	426
2.	Central Library of Balinese Culture Denpasar (based on Suweda et al. 1999)	45	1704	1749
3.	Library of University of Hindu Indonesia (previously Institute of Hindu Dharma)	6	146	151
4.	Library of the University of Dwijendra, Denpasar	12	101	113
5.	Library of the Faculty of Letters, Udayana University, Denpasar	62	?	?
6.	Usada lontar in Balinese villages particularly belonging to personal collections, village pure's (temples), 'Balian' (dukun - Balinese traditional doctor), kelihan (heads of Balinese adat/cultural system)	N/A	N/A	N/A

Lontars are often considered sacred, and not every person can study its contents. Kids and young people are usually not permitted to read lontar. There is even a special

holy day that people bless lontar collection that they have. It is the science day, Saraswati.

- 3) Paper. Once the Balinese people know about papers and learn about publishing, the contents of lontar were start moving into more practical media, paper. Almost every Balinese family read religious texts from books instead of lontar. Lontar remains sacred, while the contents are no longer sacred and can be read by anyone from books.



Figure 5 A Book "Kidung Tantri"

Some of the kakawin already sold as books are:

- a) Kakawin Ramayana
 - b) Kakawin Mahabharata and Bharata Yudha
 - c) Kakawin Arjuna Wiwaha
 - d) Kakawin Lubdaka
 - e) Kakawin Ni Dyah Tantri
 - f) and many others
- 4) Digital Media. Efforts had been made to preserve the lontar manuscript using the computer. Many lontars were converted into digital image. Various Compact Disc have been circulated in the community, and some are downloadable from the Internet, allowing people to access it from all over the world.

In addition of lontar image capturing, a computerized TrueType font for Windows of Balinese script is also available. It was developed by a Balinese I Made Suatjana and is freely downloadable from <http://www.babadbali.com/aksarabali/balisimbar.htm>. This font is widely used for many published books.

Public Places

Most of the streets in Denpasar (the capital city of Bali) now have street names written in both Latin and Balinese. And so do the villages' border sign ("Welcome to the ... Village").



Figure 6 Street Names in Bali

Traditionally, temple announcements are in Balinese script, often without any Latin scripts at all. Building names inside the temples are also written in Balinese.

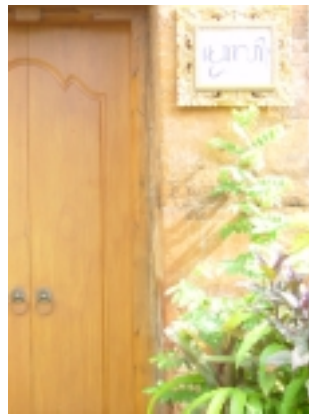


Figure 7 "Medal" Sign, means "Exit"

Government offices' building names are always in Balinese. But it doesn't apply to any letterheads or documents.



Figure 8 Bulding Names

Sekaha Pesantian

Perhaps the most frequent use of Balinese scripts is in 'Sekaha Pesantian' (Kakawin Reading Group) in *banjar*.

A little explanation about Balinese community should help here. The smallest organization of a neighborhood is called *banjar*. The size of one banjar varies from ten to hundreds of families. A complete banjar has its own kindergarten, youth group, women group, gamelan musical group, kakawin reading group, and now even an internal security group (*pacalang*). There are approximately around 1300 banjars exist in the island with population around three million.

Banjars in nearby location formed *desa pakraman* (village). Unfortunately, the *sekaha pesantian* organizations are loose and no *sekaha pesantian* exists at the village level.



Figure 9 A Banjar and Its Activity Groups. Look at one Sekaha Pesantian

My father is a member of *sekaha pesantian* in our banjar. As a kid, I followed him went to the *sekaha* reading sessions. The situation was similar to the one in a karaoke room, everyone is eager to take turn reading. In one turn, there were three people participating; one reading (sounds more like singing) the *Kawi* text, one translating to Balinese, and the last one telling the description about the meaning or the moral story of the verse. Of course the singing part is the most exciting one that also requires the higher skills. Those sessions can take hours, even from dusk until dawn.

The percentage of women in the *sekaha* is generally low. It is perhaps related to the traditional view of women in domestic matters and lack of interest among the women themselves. But there are no rules whatsoever about women membership, anyone can join the group.

Sadly, for most of the Balinese, there are no habits of writing new literatures. Old literatures are reproduced and recited over and over for years. Maybe writing is a strange activity for the Balinese, because of its individualistic nature compared to social gathering of *sekaha* sessions.

Less frequently, *sekaha pasantian* also formed in office or schools, which together with *banjars' sekeha* continue to preserve the tradition of *pasantian*.

Learning The Script in Public Schools

The Indonesian proclamation of Independence on August 17th 1945 brought the Indonesian archipelago together in one state. The founding fathers of Indonesia decided on Bahasa Indonesia as the national and official language. Bahasa Indonesia originally was a dialect of Malay spoken by people of Riau in Sumatra Island. This dialect is commonly written in Latin script, and less frequently using a kind of Arabic script called *Jawi*.

Since the introduction of Bahasa Indonesia to the Balinese people, it becomes the official language in Bali also, used commonly in schools and offices, although people still are using the native Balinese language in daily life.

Although math and sciences are taught using Bahasa Indonesia, the Balinese language and alphabets is a compulsory subject for primary and secondary school students in Bali. Since the 3rd grade in school, students spend two hours weekly to study the language and the alphabet, the same hours they also spend for learning English.

For most students, learning Balinese language is fun, because most of them already use it at home and in other traditional community group. But learning the scripts is not as easy. How can a student master an alphabet if they only use it for two hours a week? There's a popular saying among students "*malajah basa bali, macane takutin*" which has double meaning, "*learning Balinese language, we are afraid of the reading part*" or "*learning Balinese language, we are afraid of tiger*". That's why, after I graduated from high school, only one person in my class could read the Balinese script with a decent speed. And that's after ten years of learning!

The most popular book for students learning the Balinese script is "Purwa Aksara", by author I Wayan Simpen, A.B. This man of letters actually had written all the Purwa Aksara editions ranging from 3rd grade until 12th grade. They are reprinted over and over again without major modifications maybe from 1970s until the present date. In one text, we still can read that the price for one plate of rice is Rp 25, which is nonsense for year 2003 (at least Rp 2000 now for decent meal).

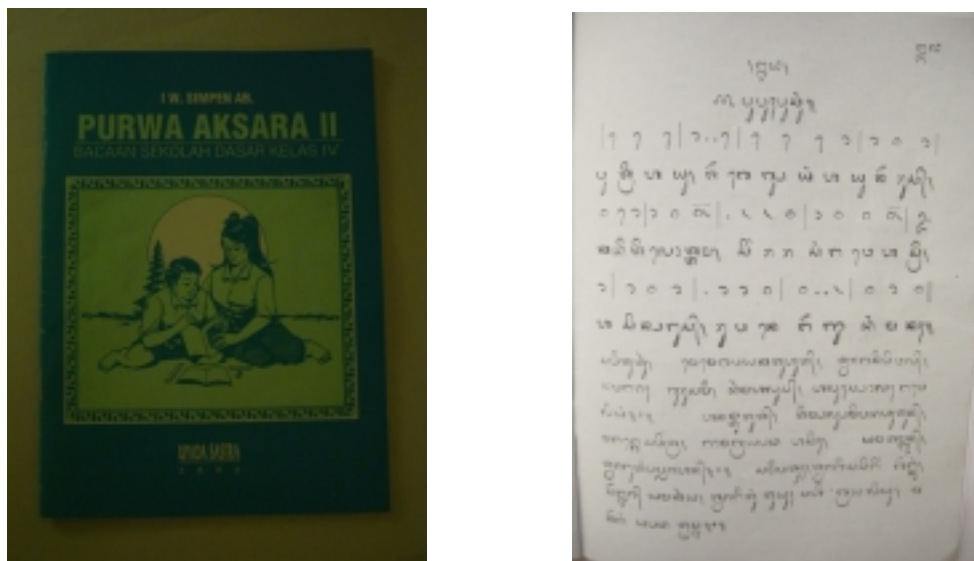


Figure 10 Purwa Aksara - Cover and Inside

There are rarely any grammar lessons inside Purwa Aksara and the contents are mostly texts. The teachers are expected to teach the letters, grammar, and rules then use Purwa Aksara for students to practice reading. The emphasis of the course is mostly on reading, not writing. It is one reason the lack of students' capability of reading. I personally feel that writing is essential for learning an alphabet. One can read a text fluently with continuous reading practice, then will forget it within a week. Writing (not only copying), in the other hand, would make the brain memorize the letters more permanent than only reading.

In Purwa Aksara for elementary school, a lot of the contents are nouns and their picture. For more advanced students in high school, the book contains mostly short stories. I remembered in my high school times, each student had to read one or two paragraph of text loudly in front of the class. Because of the inability of most of the students to read the whole story, we took the short cut. The first student in the teacher's list is always read the first paragraph. He is a lucky guy (His name starts with 'A', that's why he was always first). The remaining of the class guessed his/her part, and learnt only those paragraphs. If he/she wrongly guessed, he/she was in trouble, and might stand in front of the class until the bell rang.

The English courses, which took the same two hours a week enjoyed more attention both from the teachers or the students. While teaching Balinese is a part time job (Balinese language teachers are actually teach other subjects, usually also teach Hindu Religion subject), English teachers are really English teachers. They are educated as English teacher. They can have part time job as tour guides, or giving private English courses after school

times. For the students, learning English is essential for their future, as well as can improve their GPA. Balinese language subject is not part of the GPA, and they simply put no extra effort of learning it.

Will the Balinese script reading skills be lost over generations? I don't think so. Some of the students will be interested in the script at their middle ages, like what their parents did. Personally I am not afraid that the skills will vanish. But I suggest improvements of the teaching method of Balinese script (and also language) in school. Two hours a week for ten years should produce output with better quality than what are produced now. Reading Balinese texts are not only for the old people, but it's for everybody.

The Future of The Balinese Script

As long as the Balinese still maintain their tradition, the Balinese script will still be in use. However, I suggest that improvements should be made into the teaching and research of Balinese language and script.

- There should be more books produced for children to learn about Balinese script. I think an illustrated and colorful dictionary is a perfect tool to learn.
- Purwa Aksara should be updated. I remember the story in Purwa Aksara about a boy named Molog that have his pigs stolen from its fence. Well, most of the boys in the urban Bali area have their nice Sanskrit names now (it's a trend now to give sanskrit names for newborn babies), while "Molog" is traditional name that are not popular anymore. Examples of fruit names are also referring to the traditional fruit of Bali while now Balinese kids are more familiar with Grapes, Sunkist or New Zealand apples. As I mentioned before, the price of one plate of rice is no longer Rp 25, but Rp 2000. It shows how old this book really is.
- There is no proper computerization been implemented for Balinese script, to encourage more publishing. There isn't any character-encoding scheme for Balinese script exists. There is only one computerized font that is just a collection of glyphs that doesn't follow any encoding scheme of propose a new encoding scheme. There should be efforts to be made to computerize the Balinese script properly.

References and Sources

- I borrow the whole description of kakawin, kidung, gaguritan, and sekar rare from University of Georgia web site (<http://www.drama.uga.edu/pages/ofspecin/indiapgs/Balisite/pages/Proto-Theatrical%20Practice.html>)
- I got the statistics about lontar in a website. It's not quoted from an official source, tough. Link: <http://www.proseanet.org/WebDocs/Newsletter/Num023/Activities3.htm>
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