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Lamak : ritual objects in Bali

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Why the Balinese make and remake *lamak*

6.1 *Lamak*, ritual and ephemerality

One of my motivations to study *lamak* was that they had received so little attention, probably because, like so many objects used in ritual, their materials are mainly ephemeral. According to Purpura, “ephemeral art refers to works whose materials are chosen by the artist or maker for their inherently unstable characteristics, or which are created with the intention of having finite “life”. [...] Indeed, their impermanence is a constitutive part of their aesthetic, and of the way they come to act on the world” (2009:11). As Stuart-Fox stated, “This element of the transitory – made one day, gone the next – is prominent in Balinese art” (1974:4).

As discussed throughout this book, the main purpose of many rituals in Bali is regeneration of nature, the renewal of life, the continuation of the social group. *Lamak*, being ephemeral objects made of materials of natural origin, contribute to the effectiveness of these rituals by materializing or visualizing transition, continuity of life. Their life cycle correlates with the ritual cycle; their making and remaking is part of the ritual process and contributes to the purpose of the ritual.

Other elements of ritual in particular offerings (*banten*) and holy water (*tirtha*) also play indispensable roles. Holy water, imbued with powerful aspects of the deities, either because it is especially prepared by a priest or because it is placed on a shrine where a deity resides during the course of a ritual, is regarded as a direct transmitter of divine blessings. After worship and prayers, holy water is sprinkled on the worshippers, sipped by them and taken home to be used also by members of the family of the worshipper. The holy water, that is the flow of divine blessings, is related to water flowing down from the mountains and lakes towards the sea, fertilizing the rice fields.

Like the *lamak* ephemeral by nature are the offerings which are placed in shrines and for which the *lamak* act as base. Offerings are the fruits of the earth, often in the form of a meal presented as a gift to deities and ancestors. Their purpose is to act as gift to please the deities, in the anticipation of divine blessings in return, which can be channelled down by a *lamak*. After the ritual is over and the deities have enjoyed their meal, people eat from the ‘leftovers’ of their offerings and take them back home. Like holy water, these so-called *lungsuran* (“what is asked for”) are also regarded as a means to transfer divine blessings. Non-edible parts of offerings, like the palm leaf decoration (*sampian*) on top, are burned or buried, or allowed to decay and return to nature.

As base for offerings, *lamak* are directly related to offerings. Like *lamak*, offerings contribute to the purpose of the ritual in which they are used, through

the correlation or combination of their creation, form, use and purpose.

Within the context of Balinese ritual the *lamak* as ephemeral object shows most comparisons with offerings. Offerings similarly have to be made from natural materials, but the range of these materials is much wider than palm leaves only. Being composed as a meal, rice, products made of rice, and side dishes such as meat are the main components of offerings, but palm leaf artifacts and flowers play an important role. Just as *lamak* can be made of more durable (or less perishable) textiles and coins (*kepeng*), pieces of cloth and money are part of some offerings as well, but only in very small quantities compared to the natural materials.

As regards the aspects of form, offerings have a tripartite vertical structure and contain motifs of life, similar to *lamak*. For example the *cili* (human figure) is represented as figurine made of rice dough or palm leaves in many different offerings, but also the motifs of the tree, mountain, sun and moon, and flowers, fruits and other vegetative elements often occur. The vertical structure of an offering is related to the vertical ordering of the universe or macrocosm (*buana agung*), in which the top represents the world of deities and ancestors.

Although they are thought of as being gifts, as a form of thanksgiving, offerings contain an additional idea of reciprocity, anticipating gifts of blessings in return. Like *lamak*, offerings mediate between heaven and earth, visualize the elements of life the Balinese worshippers hope to receive, and represent the renewal of nature and continuity of life, because they themselves are made of natural materials. Like *lamak*, offerings are ephemeral both by nature and by intention, although the intentional aspect is even stronger in the case of offerings. The fact that they are a gift which can only be given once, is another reason for their continuous re-creation.

Lamak themselves are sometimes regarded as having a life cycle: made of natural materials, then purified with holy water before their ritual use, and afterwards allowed to disintegrate or burned and buried. On the other hand offerings, although equally made from living nature, are purposely made active and effective, they are given life by means of the *mantra* of the officiating priest.

Of a different kind are the ephemeral objects used in Balinese cremation rituals. They are made of less perishable materials, but they are specially made and destroyed as part of the ritual, they are short-lived, ephemeral, by intent only. But also here a connection can be seen between the intention of the object and the purpose of the ritual, the transition of the soul of a deceased person. Not only by the burning of the body, but also of the sarcophagus, transport tower and other accessories used during the cremation ritual, the soul is helped along in its journey towards the world of the ancestors.

But Bali is by no means unique in the richness of its ephemeral ritual material culture. In the material culture of rituals in many cultures ephemeral objects have a significant place. Miller points out that when “artefacts are regarded as relatively ephemeral compared with persons, [...] the focus is then on the manner in which identity is carried along by the flood of transforming things” (1994:409). “Transience [...] is a potential property of the relationship between persons and things [...]” He adds that some societies “have focused upon this quality of objects as having profound implications for the nature of their world” (1994:413). Miller gives as example the *malanggan* wooden funerary carvings of New Ireland extensively studied by Küchler, “the process of deterioration of which is of central importance in the cosmology of the people concerned” (Miller 1994:414).¹ Like the Balinese cremation objects which are ephemeral by intent, *malanggan* are funerary effigies that are animated during the process of their production and ‘killed’ during the funerary rituals. In the words of Küchler, “The height of the *malanggan* ceremony is the dramatic revelation of the effigy, followed moments later by the symbolic activation of its death. What took often more than three months to prepare is over in an hour, the ‘empty’ ‘remains’ of effigies being taken to the forest to be left to decompose ...” (2002:1). By allowing the *malanggan* carving to ‘die’, the deceased person’s soul is allowed to achieve immortality, to become an ancestor, a source of life. “It is thus through the ‘death’ of the

1 Miller refers here to her 1988 article.

object that the finite past is turned into a site of renewal and of accumulation” (2002:7).²

In India, according to Stephen Huyler, “the fundamentals of Indian creativity is the ephemeral”, because “In India all existence is believed to be in constant transition” (Huyler 1996:10).

One of the better-known forms of Indian ephemeral ritual art, the *kolam*, was the subject of a dissertation by Anna Laine in 2009. *Kolam* are sacred floor drawings of rice-flour, created by Tamil Nadu women every morning, again and again. The ephemeral character of *kolam*, which stems from the material they are made of and from the intention of continuously repeating their creation, is related to the purpose of the *kolam*, being an invocation to the deities to enter the house and bless the family. “Women engage in re-creation of meaning and efficacy through the *kolam* practice” (Laine 2009:127). “The most cherished good deed among my informants is charity and generosity, the act of giving. [...] The return is the blessings from the deities, also referred to as religious merit, in Tamil *punniyam*” (Laine 2009:129). “The performance is generally seen as a daily re-creation of auspiciousness and the continuation of life” (Laine 2009:151).

Often, as is the case with *lamak*, the material of ritual objects is ephemeral, as in Indian mud sculptures of deities, thrown into a river after the ritual is over (Fisher 1993). Sometimes the destruction itself of otherwise non-ephemeral objects is a way of exchange between the living and the ancestors, as described by Baker (2011) and Laing and Liu (2004) in their studies of Chinese funeral traditions. But also sacred Tibetan sand mandala and butter sculptures and examples from other parts of the world, like flower ornaments used for initiation rituals in the Sepik area (Hauser-Schäublin 1985), are, like Balinese ephemeral *lamak*, related to the purpose of the ritual. According to Hauser-Schäublin, “The permanence we strive to give materials, by various methods of preservation, is alien to the Sepik cultures, with their use of ani-

mal and vegetable materials. Transience itself and the changes due to time are an important aspect of human experience. This is what they are stressing by their conscious selection of perishable materials, such as flowers and leaves, to decorate a masked dancer” (1985:28).

In some cases, the ‘ephemerality’ of objects is associated with the lifespan of humans. For example, according to Rens Heringa who worked in a group of villages near Tuban, East Java, “like human beings, material things are considered living entities, always evolving and therefore essentially ephemeral.” “Textiles, carved wooden containers [...] are only intended to have a short lifespan, their “children” and “grandchildren” constantly replace older generations of objects” (Heringa 2003:471).

More directly related to the life of human beings are the mats which Tobelo women produce in North Halmahera, which Platenkamp (1990, 1995) has studied. Plaited from the perishable leaves of the pandanus plant, people spend the night on these mats and in these mats the dead are buried. “It is these mats, “materialising life”,³ which women produce, and which are transferred, from one house to another along with each life-giving bride. And enveloping the body of the deceased in the grave, the mats and the corpse decay simultaneously, releasing their “life” to the universe at large.” “The mat’s existence coincides with the life span of the human body” and “the life is an intrinsic part of the mat itself” (Platenkamp 1995:30-32).

Like a Balinese *lamak*, of which the ephemerality of the material together with its motifs of life contribute to its ritual purpose (to facilitate the exchange of offerings and blessings of life), in the same way is the ephemerality of a Tobelo “living” mat related to its ritual purpose (to help release life, either by accompanying the life-giving bride, or by helping the dead on his or her journey to the afterworld).

Not only the Tobelo mats, made of ephemeral material, but also various kinds of basketry plaited from bamboo strips, likewise ephemeral, are presented by wife givers to wife takers. Among

2 Curiously, because the ‘act of riddance’ can be achieved by allowing them to decompose in the forest, but also to be collected by foreigners, to be taken out of society, “museum collections of *malanggan* exceed tens of thousands of such figures, perhaps the largest number of figures ever to have been collected from a single cultural area in not more than 130 years” (Küchler 2002:2).

3 As discussed in Chapter 3, the motifs on these mats are all manifestations of “life”. The human form displayed on the mats relates them to other living beings in the universe (Platenkamp 1990:34-35; 1995:9-10).

the counter gifts, transferred from the wife takers to the wife givers, are money and weapons, made from more durable materials as iron and wood. The perishable objects only have to last for one lifespan, because life-enhancing relations have to be made anew every generation (Platenkamp 1990:18). Likewise, the Sumbanese consider textiles, as they do women in a clan household, as impermanent. "Thus, cloths provide the feminine counterpart to masculine metal goods, which are regarded as permanent," according to Adams (1980:220). This impermanency however is more related to the place or ownership of the objects than to their materials or ritual purpose.

Although, unlike these examples from Tobelo and Sumba, the main purpose of a *lamak* is not to be exchanged (in a social context), but to facilitate (socio-cosmic) exchange, the ephemeral palm leaf *lamak* have their opposites in the 'permanent' versions made of cloth, metal (Chinese coins) and other more durable materials. They show that the concept of ephemerality has relative (not absolute) value; there are degrees of ephemerality and an object or its material is regarded as having a shorter or longer lifespan than an object of material which is regarded as their opposites or classified as belonging to the other end of a continuum.

The meaning of ephemerality is of course dependent on the cultural context of the ritual in which they play a role, but in most cases ephemeral objects, with their relatively short life, which are continuously recreated for each ritual, represent the transitoriness and the perishability of life, but also (and above all) the continuity of life, the regeneration of nature and the perpetuity of human society. Further research is needed, but it is possible that many objects are made of ephemeral materials because they contribute to rituals of transition, repetition, continuity. Surely not only within the context of Balinese rituals do ephemeral objects materialize transience, 'transition' of life.

6.2 *Lamak*, visual communication and agency

In an article on the anthropology of art, Morphy (1994) states that in "seeking the explanation of form I mean little more than asking why the object has the shape, componential structure and material

composition that it has, and analysing how these attributes relate to its use in particular contexts. [...] The most productive initial approach to the explanation of form is through function: what the object is used for, what it does, what its effects are, always in relation to the wider context in which it is embedded" (1994:662).

Similarly, in this dissertation I have analysed why a *lamak* has a rectangular shape, a vertical, hierarchical componential structure and ephemeral material composition, and how these attributes relate to its use as base of offerings and decoration of shrines in ritual contexts. In answer to the question what it does and what its effects are, I interpreted the *lamak* as an object that makes the ritual effective, that mediates between heaven and earth. I have suggested that the effect a *lamak* has on the Balinese participants of a ritual is to reassure them that the ritual will be effective, which is reinforced by the interrelatedness of all its different aspects.

This interpretation was influenced by the work of Forge, an important scholar of art and material culture, who discussed "How do 'art' objects relate to other aspects of the rituals in which they figure and to other parts of the culture in general?" (1979:280). He came to the conclusion that "Works that successfully embody major portions of the structure of the system in terms of the interrelationships they contain are likely to arouse pleasure and a sense of fitness [...] that [...] may manifest itself as a sense of the presence of the supranormal, of more power than humans alone can achieve" (1979:284). "[S]imilar structures operate in other forms of communication, particularly those concerned in ritual." And he continues, "In the ritual context all these forms come together and reinforce each other in the effect they produce on the participants; [...] What is being conveyed are fundamental assumptions about the bases of the society, the real nature of men and women, the nature of power, the place of man in the universe of nature which surrounds him" (1979:285).

In this sense, the effect of the *lamak* in Bali is reinforced not only by the interrelationship of its different aspects, but also by its relation to other elements of the ritual, which visualize and repeat the same patterns. Classifications of space and time and relations are for example communicated by forms and colours and structures of offerings,

ritual decorations, the shrines themselves and their relative position within a temple.

The concept of objects as carriers and communicators of visual codes was also developed in Leiden by Gerbrands who called things “the picture book of culture” and who stated that “In things the participants in a communication system (culture) have given material expression to some of the aspects of their non-verbal communication” (1990:51).

In the present study, I also paid attention to the way my Balinese informants themselves classified the motifs and their combinations on a *lamak* and explained them as part of a whole, a cosmic totality in which life and fertility are seen as flowing downwards from above. Although the Balinese system of classification and cosmic structure helps to explain the position of the motifs and the overall structure of a *lamak*, we have seen that this is only part of the whole picture. It does not explain what people actually do with a *lamak* and why, nor what a *lamak* itself is supposed to do. As I have pointed out, in a ritual context a *lamak* does more, is more dynamic than only to reflect or to mirror cosmic structures.

So in this study I also discussed the active role of a *lamak* and the effects *lamak* are supposed to produce in ritual. Following Gell (1998), I called these effects the agency of a *lamak*. According to Thomas, in his foreword to Gell’s *Art and Agency*, “For many scholars, and indeed in much common-sense thinking about art, it is axiomatic that art is a matter of meaning and communication. This book suggests that it is instead about doing. ‘Doing’ is theorized as agency [...]” (1998:ix). In the words of Gell himself, “The idea of agency is a culturally prescribed framework for thinking about causation [...]. Whenever an event is believed to happen because of an ‘intention’ lodged in the person or thing which initiates the causal sequence, that is an instance of ‘agency’” (Gell 1998:17). Objects of art can produce effects of “enchantment” because they “are the only objects around which are *beautifully made*, or *made beautiful*. [...], ‘excellence’ being a function, not of their characteristics simply as objects, but of their characteristics as *made* objects, as products of techniques” (Gell 1992:43).

According to Van Eck, objects as actor or agent (who make others or other things act within their network) are not considered to be alive in the biological sense, but nevertheless they can change the

situation of the people who see them (2011:24). Moreover, in a joint paper, Van Eck, Versluys and Ter Keurs argue that “Agency is not a static given (in the way iconographic meanings are) but only comes into existence when enacted, that is performed in a social nexus” (2015:7). Objects can act, or exercise agency, through their iconography or through the properties of the used materials; “design and material may support one another” (2015:3).

Although I used the term agency to signify what a *lamak* is doing in ritual, this does not mean that *lamak* do not communicate as well. I do not agree with the dichotomy between agency and visual communication, with the suggestion that art is about doing, *instead of* meaning and communication. Not only is ‘doing’ additional to ‘communication’, but agency also involves or includes visual communication.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the actions which are part of the agency of *lamak*. By their very presence, making the ritual complete as active participants, mediating between heaven and earth, *lamak* help the Balinese to believe that the ritual will work. *Lamak* contribute to the effectiveness of ritual. What a *lamak* ‘does’, besides its being ritually effective, is also its giving meaning and communicating, and visualizing cosmic structures; all are aspects of its agency.

The very fact that the system of different kinds of *lamak*, the vertical structure of single *lamak*, the form and structure of the individual motifs as well as other visual aspects of a *lamak* fit within the Balinese system of ritual and cosmological classifications, causes the Balinese to feel the sense of appropriateness and completeness that Forge described in a general sense about ritual art (Forge 1979:285). As Miller made clear, these feelings are the result of growing up in a culture with all-encompassing ordering principles, which become second nature (Miller 1994:403). These feelings contribute to the reassuring effect these ritual objects produce on the Balinese participants of a ritual, in other words, to the agency of *lamak* themselves. *Lamak* make the ritual complete (*lengkap*), and being complete, a structured whole, is an important value for the Balinese. And, because Balinese ‘believe in them’, they make and use *lamak* again for the next ritual.

A structural approach investigates *lamak* as part of a cultural system, and takes into account

the perception of the participants of a culture. And precisely *to be* part of the system, *to mediate* between the visible and invisible worlds, is one of the aspects of the agency of *lamak*. Also Layton in a reaction to Gell states that “Gell was wrong to minimize the importance of cultural invention in shaping the ‘reception’ or reading of art objects. [...] Ritual is behaviour to be understood in terms of the participants’ own theory of agency [...] Art is to be seen” (2003:447-448).

In most recent studies of material culture, scholars have paid attention to the more dynamic aspects of things, rather than the structural or semiotic aspects only. According to Tilley (2006:61), “Thus material forms do not simply mirror pre-existing social distinctions, sets of ideas or symbolic systems. They are instead the very medium through which these values, ideas and social distinctions are constantly reproduced and legitimized, or transformed” (2006:71).

According to Pieter ter Keurs (2006:58-60), it is the intangible part of culture, such as ideas, intentions and concepts, that is made tangible in matter. What Tilley calls the process of ‘objectification’, Ter Keurs calls ‘condensation’. But objects also evoke meanings, derived from the object by the subject, and this process he calls “evaporation”. “The whole complex of the physical object and its multiple meanings, condensed and evaporated, can be described as a material complex” (2006:59). “Condensation and evaporation are continuing, irreversible processes in which both the meanings (non-material) and the objects (material) can change” (2006:60). As example Ter Keurs notes that from important *nakamutmut* masks on the island of Mandok (one of the Siassi islands), after a ritual cycle the wooden parts are kept, but the parts made of painted bark cloth are burned. “The meanings of the designs [...] are fixed again the moment the masks are remade for the next ritual cycle. During that period the ideas are again materially condensed” (2006:124-125).

This continuous process of condensation and evaporation can also be applied to the appearing and disappearing character of ephemeral objects with a short lifespan, which are remade for each new ritual, like *lamak*. During the ritual the ideas about the tripartite structure of the universe, the flow of blessings descending from above and

cyclical regeneration of nature are ‘materially condensed’ in the ephemeral *lamak*. *Lamak* as material form/object, including their decorative motifs and the ephemerality of their materials, make visible what is invisible, what is difficult to understand (the nature of the cosmos) as well as visualize the purpose of ritual, the desire that life continues.

6.3 Interrelatedness of different aspects of *lamak*

The main question I wished to answer in this book was: “Why do the Balinese make and remake *lamak*?” Ask a Balinese why he or she makes *lamak*, one receives a diversity of answers, in the first place, religious reasons, such as: to invite the gods and ancestors, to make the shrines more festive, or to participate in temple duties; but sometimes followed by more secular motivations, like: to help friends, family, or neighbours; or nowadays, to sell to customers. However, there is much more to say about the Balinese *lamak*, and in the previous chapters of this dissertation I have described and analysed all the different aspects of *lamak*.

The use and purpose of a *lamak* in rituals, its motifs and their symmetrical structure, the colours, vertical structure, and the ephemerality of its natural materials are all interrelated in different ways. Not only are they related to one another, but since they are also related to the sources of life, they all contribute to the intended effect of the ritual in which a *lamak* is used, which is in general terms regeneration of natural life and (therefore) the continuity of the social group who is enacting the ritual.

Balinese use *lamak* during rituals as a base for offerings and as decoration of shrines and altars on which the offerings are placed. The ritual purpose of a *lamak* is to attract the attention of invisible beings to the offerings, so that the ritual will be successful. Because *lamak* contribute in making the offerings ‘work’, they make possible the exchange between the invisible (*niskala*) beings of the upper world and the visible (*sekala*) world of human beings. In other words, they mediate between these worlds. In exchange for offerings, the divine blessings, prosperity and protection of life on earth, flow down from heaven to earth via the *lamak* as pathway. This flow of blessings is visualized in the decorative motifs which are all related to sources

or elements of life, and in the vertical structure of the *lamak* which represents the tripartite hierarchical structure of the universe, in which the highest point is always most sacred.

Just as the motifs are related to the divine blessings the Balinese hope or expect to receive in return for the offerings, likewise the natural materials of the ephemeral *lamak* themselves, taken from useful trees, are associated with the growth of plants and fertility generally. In principle *lamak* have to be made from natural, 'living' materials, and may only be used once. What is hoped for by carrying out the ritual, continuation of life and regeneration of nature, is better represented by an ephemeral *lamak* than by a permanent one, since the ephemeral, natural *lamak* itself is recreated time and again. The contrasting 'colours' of the leaves, and the symmetrical structure of some of the patterns, are related to the complementary opposition of female and male, which is the source of all creation.

Lamak are part of a system of reciprocity in two ways. As ritual object the *lamak* mediates in the wider network of visible and invisible beings, in the processes of exchange between the human and divine worlds. But a *lamak* is also part of the social network of their makers and users, in which *lamak* are made and also themselves are sometimes exchanged. Growing commercialization and the economic transactions within the production and distribution of *lamak* have in recent decades become the answer to lack of time and shortage of materials. These developments have provided support for the continuation of the use of *lamak* in rituals, for the belief in the necessity of the *lamak* in rituals remains strong.

Lamak still play a role in the system of mutual help within families or neighbourhood. This is especially the case with *lamak nganten* which in Gianyar at Galungan are suspended in front of houses where a wedding has taken place in the previous year. More than other *lamak*, their mediation is specifically concerned with new human life, continuity of the family, and relations between successive generations. By being very impressive (their length is many metres) they also indicate in the neighbourhood (*banjar*) the position of the family concerned. They communicate that the family is able to mobilize mutual solidarity of the members of the community to help create these large *lamak*,

or that they have enough means to order them from *tukang lamak*.

The other kind of special *lamak*, *lamak catur*, are an expression of the highest level in the hierarchy of ritual elaboration in Bali. Since the most important offerings for the most important deities are placed on the highest shrines, it is here that the most 'complete' *lamak*, the *lamak catur*, hang down in front, bearing the most (differentiated) motifs associated with all the worlds from the mountain to the sea. As a group of three or four, these are the most 'complete' *lamak*, usually made by ritual specialists. Lower levels of rituals require only ordinary *lamak*, whereas for daily use only *ceniga* or *tlujungan* might be sufficient.

The fact that this system of different kinds of *lamak*, the vertical structure of single *lamak*, the form and structure of the individual motifs as well as other visual aspects of a *lamak*, all fit within the Balinese system of cosmological classifications, is probably the cause of a sense of order and completeness. The concept or word that I heard most often in my conversations about *lamak* with Balinese informants was '*lengkap*', 'complete', usually used in a comparative sense. A ritual was not complete without a *lamak*. An offering or shrine was not complete without a *lamak*. A *lamak* was not complete without motifs. The *lamak* in neighbouring villages were less complete than those in the one's own village. The *lamak nganten* made by *tukang lamak* X were less complete than the ones made by *tukang lamak* Y. A permanent *lamak* was not complete without an ephemeral one on top or underneath. This concept of 'completeness' occurred even more so in conversations about offerings; they always had to be complete, otherwise the ritual would not be successful. The Balinese have a strong sense of the significance of a structured whole, of the interrelatedness of constituting parts. If one element is missing, it does not feel good, as the example of the missing *lamak* in the introductory story in the first chapter illustrated. Not only does it just not feel good, but there is also a sense of anxiety of what might happen, what anger or revenge from the invisible beings might be evoked, if something is lacking. This sense of both order and completeness probably contributes to the effect these ritual objects produce on the Balinese participants of a ritual, in other words, to the agency of *lamak*.

Summarizing, an answer to the research question “Why do Balinese make and remake *lamak*?” could be formulated as: “because of what *lamak* do; because *lamak* make the ritual complete, by being part of the whole; because *lamak* mediate between heaven and earth and in this way contribute to the intended effect of rituals, namely security, prosperity and fertility, the continuity of life”.

6.4 Continuities and change in relation to *lamak*

In the course of my research over the past 35 years Bali has changed immensely. Political, economic and religious change certainly have had effects on rituals in general, and in certain cases on the details of actual ritual practices.

Ever-growing mass tourism has brought more wealth to the island, which is often spent on the rebuilding or enlargement of temples of villages or families. The rituals involved are often held at the highest (*utama*) level of ritual elaboration, which means the construction of large, high temporary shrines (*sanggar tawang*), from which the tallest *lamak*, *lamak catur*, are suspended. So it could be argued that indirectly, mass tourism has contributed to a relative increase of this special kind of large *lamak*.

On the other hand, mass tourism and the resulting increase in the number of villas, hotels and theme parks, has to a large extent utilized land formerly used either for rice cultivation or for dryland farming, in the latter case especially having an adverse impact on the numbers of different varieties of palm trees, the leaves of which are necessary for making *lamak*. Also growing urbanisation and population growth, partly related to immigration of labourers from Java and other islands, and to improvement of health care, has contributed to this shift in land use and thus the availability of natural materials, which as a consequence has contributed to the use of smaller and less elaborate palm leaf *lamak*. However, palm leaf *lamak* are still being made, and very often decorated with the same motifs as before.

Moreover, as the possibilities for women to work in towns or in the tourist industry increased, they themselves have less time to devote to making offerings and ritual objects like *lamak* and they buy them ready-made in *jejaitan* workshops or at the markets,

in this way indirectly creating new jobs or opportunities to work from home for other women. To have them ready in stock, these *lamak* are often made from the more durable leaves of the *lontar* palm, not pinned together by means of bamboo *semat*, but fastened by means of staples. Especially on these varieties, the time-consuming geometric *ringgitan* patterns are sometimes lacking and small plastic ornaments in the shape of butterflies or flowers (still ‘natural’ motifs) are used as decorations. Also other decorative elements are imported from and influenced by the latest ‘fashion’ in the so-called ‘artistic’ region, Gianyar.

Related to these changes in availability of time and natural materials, is an increase of the number of often mass-produced permanent *lamak*, made of textiles or of wood and coins, of which much larger supplies (larger in quantity and variety) are available at the markets and in *toko yadnya*. These are usually used in combination with small palm leaf *lamak*, since in principle a *lamak* has to be ‘*dari alam*’.

Besides the increase of larger temple rituals, in some families the increase of wealth has also resulted in a kind of ‘conspicuous consumption’ in the enactment of life cycle rituals, especially weddings and cremations. However, whereas for example the paraphernalia for cremations in economically successful families are becoming more and more spectacular and ever more commercialized, as is the case for elaborate *penjor*, this is not the case with *lamak*, with the possible exception of the expensive *panca datu* coin *lamak*. Although ritually indispensable, a *lamak* apparently is not the kind of significant ritual object with which to show off one’s wealth.⁴

In general one could say that despite certain changes in their materials, techniques, motifs and ways of production, *lamak* remain an indispensable part of Balinese rituals. It is still the reciprocal relationship with deities and ancestors, the ritual exchange of offerings and blessings of security and prosperity, which is at the heart of Balinese religion. Also, despite the changes, the essence of a *lamak*, its vertical structure, its motifs of life and its natural materials have remained essentially unchanged.

⁴ In this regard, a *lamak* is comparable to a *banten canang*, the most common and most basic offering, which is essential in all rituals, but which also has not really changed over the years.



Figure 6.2.



Figure 6.3.



Figure 6.5.



Figure 6.4.

Figures 6.2-6.5 (clockwise): The life cycle of a lamak, from its creation (6.2), to its active life during a ritual (6.3), and its decay (6.4); and then the cycle begins again with the creation of a new lamak from fresh palm leaves (6.5).

6.5 The active life of a *lamak*

As ritual objects, *lamak* have themselves a life cycle, they are themselves in transition.

The material is harvested first, and then the object is as it were recreated, comes into existence, from these natural materials. After a *lamak* is suspended from the front of a shrine, but before it can do its work of attracting the deities to the offerings for which the *lamak* acts as base, the *lamak* is purified by means of holy water. When the ritual is over, and the deities have sent their blessings down via the *lamak*, the active life of a *lamak* comes to an end. If it is an ephemeral *lamak*, it will wither away or sometimes be burned and buried, and so return to its origin, Ibu Pertiwi, Mother Earth. A new cycle starts with preparations for the next ritual; a new *lamak* is recreated, transformed again out of natural elements, representing regeneration. If it is a permanent *lamak*, it is stored away to 'rest' until it appears again and plays its active role on the occasion of the next ritual, although, as discussed, only if it is complemented by an ephemeral *lamak*.

Many *lamak* first had a life as commodity before they started their lives as ritual object. After somebody created them, these specific *lamak* enter the market or are handed over to the person who made the order. It is then their purpose to help these clients to fulfil their religious obligations, while from the point of view of the maker, the making of *lamak* provides an income.

Nevertheless, the main part of the life of a *lamak* is in the context of ritual. *Lamak* are ritually necessary; without *lamak* the ritual would, according to the Balinese, be incomplete. The main 'action' of a *lamak* is being present at the ritual, being visible as part of the totality of offerings and decorated shrines. Through its material and creation process, its form and its purpose, and the interrelatedness of these aspects, a *lamak* in a variety of ways contributes to the purpose of the ritual in which it is present.

By being made of fresh, 'living' leaves taken from nature, and by being made anew each time, *lamak* represent or materialize the continuous renewal of life, the regeneration of nature.

Through the characteristics of their form (their vertical structure, their colours and motifs and

the dual structure of the motifs), *lamak* visualize or communicate concepts of life and their interrelatedness, and the dynamic nature of life-giving blessings, flowing from heaven to earth, from the world of deities and ancestors to the world of human beings.

By acting as base for offerings and at the same time as decoration or 'clothing' of a shrine, *lamak* attract deities to the shrines where offerings are laid out for them.

Through their mediation between heaven and earth, *lamak* assure the effectiveness of the offerings in particular and the ritual in general.

Lamak show that they, as well as the Balinese 'audience', participate in the ordered universe, the wider network of invisible and visible beings.

All these actions are part of the agency of *lamak*. They can be regarded as active participants which enable transactions, the exchange of offerings and blessings, between heaven and earth.

I hope that with this ethnography of the Balinese *lamak* I have made a contribution to the recognition of the role of the *lamak* and acknowledgement of their makers. I have emphasized the importance of ephemeral material culture by studying a Balinese 'art form' which has so far been neglected in Western scholarship, and is, because of its ephemeral nature, hardly represented in museum collections. By studying the agency of Balinese *lamak* within their social and cosmological network, I show that *lamak* appear to be indispensable in Balinese rituals, and that their ephemerality, the fact that they have to be made from materials taken from living nature ("*dari alam*"), contributes to their agency. By studying these valuable and beautiful ephemeral objects, I hope to have contributed to their permanent recognition.

Although the people who make *lamak* never 'sign' their work, and they always work within the cultural conventions about what a *lamak* should look like, I have argued that many 'artists' are acknowledged in their community owing to their skills in creating *lamak*. By giving them a place and a face in this book, I hope that also for a non-Balinese audience they are anonymous no longer.



Figure 6.6: *Never the same: variation in cili figures.*

