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In Search of Majapahit: The

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Transformation of Balinese Identities

Working Papers (Monash University. Centre of Southeast Asian Studies)

Creese, Helen

Abstract: Majapahit is one of the cornerstones of Balinese identity. For at least the last 300 years, both indigenous and Western discourses have created a definition of Balinese culture and identity in which links to the high culture of Java - epitomised by Majapahit - are central. Like all images, this Bali-Majapahit link has been and remains

a dynamic one, constantly redefined and refined to suit changing political and social contexts. The notion of the Javanese origins of Balinese cultural identity is very clear in Balinese sources, although the image of Majapahit itself is in fact much more subdued than the continuing discussion of it in much 19th and 20th century historiographical writing about Bali implies. This focus on Majapahit has perhaps received its most recent boost through the work of Clifford Geertz (1980), who depicts the Balinese court centres of the 19th century as failed replicas of a Majapahit model. This depiction stands in marked contrast to indigenous portrayals of the period in which Balinese courts are successful because they are like Majapahit, not because they fail to live up to an unattainable ideal. In the 20th century, however, the close link between Bali and Java has again slipped to the background of Balinese interests as new concerns - particularly those caught up in the modern ideologies of nation-state, regional history and world religion - have come to the fore. There exists a wealth of textual data for the study of evolving Balinese identities, although since much of it is anonymous and undated, it is not always clear which texts or versions of texts have undergone reinterpretation since the time of their original composition. Some significant threads, however, weave backwards and forwards through these textual traditions. The most prominent of these is the notion of 'Jawa' which, as Vickers (1986: 274-288) has shown, refers both specifically to the island of Java, and, in a more general sense, to the world 'outside' Bali. By charting some of the Balinese Javacentric discourse of the 18th and 19th centuries, this paper seeks to explore how 'Jawa' - exemplified by Majapahit but embracing all aspects of the cultural, political and social heritage of centuries of contact - is projected in Balinese textual traditions. The paper also attempts a preliminary analysis of the changing focus of Balinese historiography in the evolution of modern Balinese identities, now that the Indonesian state has appropriated and pigeon-holed Majapahit-Java for its own glorious past.



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