

THE HARE KRISHNAS IN BALI: Localized Religion and New Religious Movement

Ravinjay Kuckreja

Universitas Hindu Negeri I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa Denpasar, Indonesia
E-mail: ravinjay@gmail.com

Abstract: As the Balinese sought official religious acceptance in Indonesia, they formalized their ethnic customs and transformed them into a universal religion with an Abrahamic model called “Agama Hindu Dharma”. In aligning itself with Hinduism, the Balinese had to restructure their internalized indigenous faith and share it with Hindus beyond the island, including with others in the archipelago and the religious hearth of India. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), commonly known as The Hare Krishna Movement, is a Hindu-based New Religious Movement. With their active presence in Bali, they provided an informative and devotional perspective for inquisitive Hindus. Preferring their local expression of Hinduism instead, ISKCON books and teachings were banned in 1984 for disrupting public order during the repressive era of President Suharto. The political reformation of 1998 allowed for the recognition of ISKCON, but the exclusivism of Hare Krishna members threatened many orthodox Balinese Hindus. This opposition culminated in 2020, resulting in a decree restricting all non-Balinese Hindu sects from practicing in the Hindu-majority province. This paper documents the formalization of the indigenous Balinese theology and its recent interaction with a multinational New Religious Movement.

Keywords: New Religious Movements; Hinduism; Hare Krishna; Balinese Hinduism; Hindu Sects.

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Introduction

Hinduism is a term that unites many diverse expressions of faith based on the belief of reincarnation, karma, and a concept of *dharma* or duty. Even though the term implies the religious traditions found in the Sindhu river basin, its existence is not limited to the Indian subcontinent.¹ Oddly enough, it is in Muslim-majority Indonesia where one such expression exists, tucked away in the resort island of Bali. In many ways, the Hinduism found in Bali is very different from its Indian counterpart. Although they both rely on Vedic gods to cyclically create, maintain and dissolve the universe, the Balinese do not implore them. Instead, they worship local deities, mainly deified ancestors, who partake in the communal affairs of the modern-day Balinese. Festivities, feasts, dances, blessings, and exorcisms require the essential invoking of the ancestral realms that preside over family altars, temple pagodas, and volcanic craters.² The Balinese religion is an indigenous religion tied to their ethnic identity and customary obligations. It is a syncretic religion that has accepted foreign ideas and interwoven them with local worldviews and terminologies. Deep within it, the Balinese religion applies Hindu pantheon and philosophies, but before the Indonesian Republic, this was not apparent. The “Hindu” umbrella currently providing aegis for this indigenous religion results from Indonesia’s quasi-theocracy. Obligated to adhere to a universal religion, the Balinese adopted the Hindu label, re-instating their alliance to the Shaiva³ sect and Sanskrit mantras.⁴ The adoption of Hinduism, on the contrary, does not guarantee the protection of the Balinese faith. Instead, due to this, the Balinese have exposed themselves to the myriads of Hindu denominations such as those found in other ethnic enclaves of Indonesia’s many islands, as well as the ubiquitous Indian organizations and movements. One such international organization is The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

¹ A. J. Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (Columbia University Press), 2014.

² Clifford Geertz, “Person, Time and Conduct in Bali,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

³ Shaivites are followers of Shaivism, a Hindu sect that worships Lord Shiva as supreme.

⁴ Michel Picard, “Balinese Religion in Search of Recognition: From Agama Hindu Bali to Agama Hindu (1945-1965),” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 167/4, (2011): 482-510.

Rooted in the orthodox Vaishnava *Sampradaya*,⁵ the movement was founded by an Indian monk named A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (1896-1977), who took the teachings of the Bengali god-saint Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534) to the West. Commonly known as The Hare Krishna Movement, it was founded in New York City in 1966 and arrived in Indonesia with the founder's visit to Jakarta in 1973.

This paper explores the interaction between the ethnic Balinese religion, the universal Hindu religion, and a New Religious Movement. In this case, I delve into why the conflict has arisen between the two Hindu denominations. To answer this question, I have compiled the history and theology of both the Hare Krishnas and the Balinese Hindus, backed with personal interviews, media clippings, and official documents. Having had personal and professional involvement with the Hare Krishnas myself, I can provide an insider-outsider perspective, thus forming this concise and thorough paper.

Localized Hinduism

Differing from Abrahamic religions, Hinduism does not have a formulated religious practice and belief. Thus, localized expressions of Hinduism also exist, like in Nepal, a syncretic religion created of Bon (the indigenous religion), Buddhism, and Tantrism. What occurs in localized Hinduism is a syncretism of beliefs and rituals based on visiting traditions. How the locals absorb foreign ideas is also via the worldview of their indigenous religion. In the case of Bali, the indigenous veneration of animistic spirits and demonic forces is blended in with Hinduism (Shaiva and Tantra schools) and Buddhism (Mahayana and Vajrayana schools). What makes it challenging to study or even understand such localized religions is the decades' worth of syncretism, usually done without a reference to the religious hearth. Balinese Hinduism did not utilize the framework of Indian *sampradayas*, or organized traditions, but instead formalized itself. Notwithstanding the frequent and direct relation Bali had with Indian and Chinese traders, the Balinese have adopted these ideas as their

⁵ Vaishnava Sampradayas are monotheistic Hindu sects that worship Lord Vishnu (and His incarnations) as the supreme God. They generally amplify the importance of *bhakti* or devotion as an essential part of their soteriology. The word *sampradaya* implies religious traditions or denominations.

own and embedded them into their religion. These foreign influences have formed, according to Van Leur, “a thin and flaking glaze; underneath it the whole of the indigenous forms has continued to exist.”⁶

Neo-Hinduism and Hindu-Based New Religious Movements

There are many ways to categorize the development of Hinduism. I have opted herein to mark significant developments that are relevant to our discussion. The first change came in the 6th century with the move toward the philosophical Upanishads, away from the ritualism of the Vedas. This was marked by the birth of heterodox Indian philosophies that deny the ritualistic Vedas and caste system, like Jainism and Buddhism. The next came in the 16th century, where the emphasis of religious worship moved toward devotional worship. This is called the *Bhakti* (Devotional) Movement, exemplified through Sikhism and poet-saints. The third would be the response of Hinduism toward the British Raj and its Missionary movements. This gave birth to Neo-Hinduism, a form of Hindu apologetics that answers to the needs of a modern-day Western religious ideal. As King aptly says, “the emergence of Neo-Hinduism is closely linked to important political, economic, social and cultural changes brought about during the last 150 years”⁷. Primarily due to the arrival of Christianity, there was a need for Hinduism to include a monotheistic inclination and Vedantic philosophizing. These Neo-Hindu (also known as Neo-Vedanta) movements sprang in the 19th century, marked by Hindu thinkers and reformers like Vivekananda, Gandhi, and Aurobindo Ghose. Institutional movements were also founded in this period, like Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj. The creation of such allowed Hinduism to, “for the first time in its history, become a proselytizing religion made possible through the reinterpretation and universalization of its message.”⁸

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), commonly known as The Hare Krishna Movement, is rooted in the *Bhakti* Movement. The Bengali saint Sri Krishna

⁶ Van Leur, Jacob Cornelis, *Indonesian Trade and Society. Essays in Asian Social and Economic History* (The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1955).

⁷ Ursula King, “Some Reflections on Sociological Approaches to the Study of Modern Hinduism,” *Numen*, 36/1 ((1989): 72-97. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3269853>.

⁸ Ibid.

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534) introduced the congregational chanting of the Hare Krishna Maha Mantra. This method of devotional chanting (known as *kirtan* or *sankirtan*) is in stark opposition to the Hindu religious scene of Bengal at that time, with Brahmins taking rule over rituals, the monistic Advaita Vedanta spreading throughout the subcontinent, the Muslim rulers that has taken over Bengal and the left-handed Tantra that is still in practice by the local villagers. The chanting of Hindu devotional hymns on the streets, along with public dissemination of Vedic knowledge, was quite a revolution for that time.

ISKCON is a New Religious Movement (NRM) despite its roots in ancient Hindu teachings. What defines it as an NRM is its manifesting of a difference of “alignment” with dominant cultural patterns and social institutions of the society it is situated in at a given point of time⁹. Thus it “may thus appear as a confusing anomaly when a group that is not chronologically and organizationally “new” is nevertheless relationally “new” in terms of its lack of connection to dominant institutional and normative patterns”.¹⁰ New Religious Movements are also considered cults, especially in cases where they are in opposition to its social setting¹¹ and how it views society in general. Stark and Bainbridge¹² describes this as a two-way street of mutual rejection.

It is crucial herein to mention ISKCON’s relationship with Hinduism and the wider society. Due to the geographic and colonial nature of the “Hindu” term, Bhaktivedanta Swami was averse toward the label, stating that “Indians both inside and outside of India think that we are preaching the Hindu religion, but actually we are not.”¹³ On the contrary, he did align himself with Hindu roots to legitimize

⁹ D. G. Bromley, “Perspective: Whither New Religions Studies?” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 8/2, (2004): 83–97. (<https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2004.8.2.83>)

¹⁰ T. Robbins, “Perspective New Religions and Alternative Religions,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 8/3, (2005): 107. (<https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2005.8.3.104>)

¹¹ Zaidman-Dvir and Sharot on ISKCON in Israel for a better analysis of the definition of cult and how it is viewed toward ISKCON, especially in Western countries, (1992).

¹² R. Stark and W. S. Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

¹³ A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, *The Science of Self-Realization* (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1977), 1.

his movement,¹⁴ or opt to call it “*sanatana-dharma*” or “Vedic” instead. In regards to their interaction with the mundane world, Hare Krishnas alienate non-believers (and in doing so, themselves) by referring them to “*karmis*”, those engaged in karmic action, or simply as “non-devotees”. Bearing Stark and Bainbridge’s definition in mind, I deduce that ISKCON is indeed a cult. However, due to the pejorative connotation of the word, many sociologists of religion prefer NRM instead.

The Hare Krishnas in Indonesia

The scene of 16th century Bengal has replicated in 20th century Indonesia. The Muslim-dominated central government, the authority of Balinese Brahmins, the monistic Hindu Vedanta, and the Tantric animal sacrifices form the Hindu climate in Indonesia to this very day. The movement officially branched to Indonesia through the visit of the founder, Bhaktivedanta Swami in 1973, bringing with him Australian disciples that would later manage and expand the organization in the country. The initial years of the movement’s rapid growth were marked by the publication of the books translated and commentated by the founder. His purports and sermons are considered sacred Vedic texts, thus awarding him the title of “founder-*acharya*,” a founder and spiritual figure combined. The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust of Indonesia sold books on the streets of Bali, with productions based in Jakarta. Their best-seller is the “Bhagavad-Gita As It Is” (or in Bahasa Indonesia, “Bhagavad-Gita Menurut Aslinya”), encoding the philosophical discussion between Krishna and the Mahabharata warrior-prince, Arjuna. These books create Hare Krishna devotees, the starting point for their indoctrination, faith, and devotional practice. This method of public chanting and book distribution, done from the streets all the way to university classrooms, is regarded as preaching and, therefore, indispensable activities for the movement’s members.¹⁵ In the early days, devotees in the country were approximately in the few thousands, with most residing in Bali.

¹⁴ “As far as the Hindu religion is concerned, there are millions of Krishna temples in India, and there is not a single Hindu who does not worship Krishna. Therefore, this Krishna consciousness movement is not a concocted idea.” Ibid., 92.

¹⁵ E. B. Rochford, “Recruitment Strategies, Ideology, and Organization in the Hare Krishna Movement,” *Social Problems*, 29/4, (1982): 399–410. <https://doi.org/10.2307/800029>.

Most Balinese opt to join Hindu NRMs due to their resentment toward Balinese Hinduism being a communal, interdependent and structured institution with no emphasis on the individual's spiritual relationship with God.¹⁶ While some join to flee the predestined caste system or exorbitant ceremonies, most seek to establish their individual emotional relationship with their worshipable deity. Perhaps this was influenced by Indian Hindu devotional sentiments, as popularized through shared myths, and later, dubbed television series. Nonetheless, it is the "devotees' discovery of a new and distinct kind of religious experience... [making them] overcome with uncontrollable emotion and find themselves crying... [which the] Balinese rarely speak in such emotional ways in relation to their traditional or *adat* religion."¹⁷

Towards the end of his life, Bhaktivedanta Swami formed the Governing Body Commission (GBC), headquartered at the birthplace of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in West Bengal. The death of Bhaktivedanta Swami in 1977 caused a management crisis in ISKCON. The zonal *acharya*, established in 1978, was intended to maintain the governing presence and communication of the GBC. Eleven ISKCON gurus represented zones of the world.¹⁸ Indonesia was under the supervision of Bhavananda, who was also actively receiving disciples in neighboring Australia. Several other Australian or Australian-based preachers guided the Balinese devotees, with some even helping in the translation and production of the books at the Jakarta-based Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (with the official Indonesian name "Pustaka Bhaktivedanta"). These books, Indonesian translations of the purports of Bhaktivedanta Swami, were met with appreciation by even members of the Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia (PHDI), the ecclesiastical body governing the Hindus, who were mainly staunch orthodox Balinese Shaivites. Some PHDI members even wrote raving reviews of the books. These reviews were published on the back of the book to promote its legitimacy.

This endorsement, however, quickly faded. In 1984, with a recommendation from members of the PHDI, the oppressive New

¹⁶ Clifford Geertz, *Person, time and conduct in Bali*.

¹⁷ Leo Howe, "The New Religions of Bali: Agama Hindu and Sri Sathya Sai Baba," in *The Changing World of Bali: Religion, Society and Tourism* (London: Routledge, 2005), 100.

¹⁸ Graham Dwyer and Richard. J. Cole (eds.), *Hare Krishna in the Modern World* (Arktos Media Ltd., 2013).

Regime (*Orde Baru*) of President Suharto (1921-2008) banned Hare Krishna books, the publisher (PT Pustaka Bhaktivedanta), the distributor (Yayasan Kesadaran Krsna Indonesia), and the religious contents of the books. The official decree of the ban from the Attorney General's Office states that the Hare Krishna organization, books, and teachings have caused "conflict and disturbance to religious followers, especially the Parisada Hindu Dharma, can damage the internal harmony of Hindus and can disrupt public order." (Surat Keputusan Kejaksaan Agung Republik Indonesia, Nomor KEP-107/J.A/5/1984) The Hare Krishnas were accused of being a dangerous cult, brainwashing the Indonesians to a New Religious Movement with active foreign influence. The accusations went even as far as regarding the Hare Krishnas as dangerous as the Children of God, members of the Christian New Religious Movement, The Family International.¹⁹ An influential PHDI member even accused the devotees of being communists.²⁰ Other Hindu NRMs, like the Sai Baba organization, were similarly accused of generating unrest and disturbing religious harmony, with investigations into the Sai Baba devotees conducted in 1993.²¹ Despite this, some Hare Krishna leaders linked the government ban with the rejection from Pustaka Bhaktivedanta to a profit-sharing agreement with a politically-involved member of the PHDI.²² The ban has severely impacted the lives of all Hare Krishna devotees in Indonesia. Some were excommunicated from the village, some could not retain their jobs and their places of worship were closed.

Moreover, during the hiding of the Hare Krishna devotees, Bhavananda, the zonal *acharya* and guru to most Indonesians fell from his position due to alleged sexual abuse and misconduct. In 1986, along with Bhavananda, four other gurus were unable to continue

¹⁹ The Family International was a Christian New Religious Movement founded by David Berg (1919-1994) in California. They were criticized as being an authoritarian cult and were involved in other controversies, including, but not limited to, sexual abuse.

²⁰ As stated by Tjok Rai Sudharta, a PHDI member. This is recorded in a private interview between Tjok Rai Sudharta and Ida Ayu Made Gayatri in 17 December 2005.

²¹ W. Supartha (ed.), *Memahami Aliran Kepercayaan* (Denpasar: PT Bali Post, 1994).

²² PHDI member, Tjok Rai Sudharta, wrote an undated and signed handwritten memo wanting a profit share of two and a half percent from Hare Krishna book sales. This memo, currently possessed by ISKCON archives, bears the letterhead of the People's Consultative Assembly of which Tjok Rai was a member of.

serving their positions, and in 1987, the zonal *acharya* system collapsed. The leadership model of the GBC was altered several times, resulting in the eventual appointment of eighty members in 1993²³, and the current thirty-four members in 2021, as listed on their official website. ISKCON gurus and preachers were able to freely travel and accept initiating disciples from any part of the world, even though members of the GBC individually are still responsible for representing various countries where they primarily preach. According to the official GBC list, there are eighty-five initiating gurus as of 2021.

The fall of Bhavananda from his guru-hood led to the re-initiation of his disciples with another bonafide ISKCON guru. However, the disappointment with Bhavananda and the ISKCON system also led some Indonesian devotees to leave ISKCON. The external threat of the military-enforced ban and the internal dismay of a falling guru made many Hare Krishna devotees reconsider their alignment. Some sought other Vaishnava organizations/gurus, while some others reverted to being Hindu Balinese, and for some, back to being practicing Muslims.

Two notable ISKCON initiating gurus visited Indonesia. Kavicandra Swami, an American renunciate who joined the movement in 1967, and the late Gour Govinda Swami, an Indian renunciate who joined in 1975. Kavicandra Swami came to Indonesia around the fall of the zonal *acharya* era and rapidly gained followers, re-initiating Bhavananda's disciples. To this very day, most Indonesians are disciples of Kavicandra Swami, who now serve as the nation's GBC representative, along with the Australian monk, Ramai Swami. Other notable initiating gurus include Bhakti Raghava Swami and the late Bhaktisvarupa Damodara Swami.

As the influence of Kavicandra Swami and Gour Govinda Swami grew, so did rivalry amongst their followers, forming a guru groupism. Some asserted that Western gurus are inferior to Indian gurus, causing a split between members. Some, following the individual mission of their guru, dedicated themselves to their service, forming their own group. Following the traumatic incident of the ban, some members were afraid of following the international alignment of neither gurus, opting for a decentralized Hare Krishna movement in

²³ E. B. Rochford, *Hare Krishna Transformed* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

Indonesia. They opened farm and school communities in Java, Bali, Sumatra, and Sulawesi with global support and patronage, away from GBC authority. Thus, during the years of the ban, the guru groupism and the centralized and decentralized split formed disunion amongst the Hare Krishna devotees of Indonesia.

The Indonesian political reform of 1998 brought back some hope, with decrees of the Suharto Era made redundant with the more open and democratic leadership of President B.J. Habibie (1936-2019) and shortly after, President Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009). At the same time, reformist Hindus dominated the Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia. These same reformists accepted non-Balinese Hindus, like other ethnic groups around the country, and the Indian-centric *sampradayas* like the Sai Study Organization (of Satya Sai Baba [1926-2011]) and ISKCON. The acceptance of these *sampradayas* extends to recruiting members to take office in the PHDI and including the term “*sampradaya*” in the body’s constitution²⁴. Taking advantage of this acceptance, the GBC-aligned devotees formed SAKKHI, Sampradaya Kesadaran Krishna Indonesia, a mass organization founded in 2000 to correspond with the PHDI and other governmental institutions.²⁵

However, their journey did not end there. While SAKKHI aims to accommodate the various schisms within the Indonesian congregation, a disciple of Gour Govinda Swami decided to form his competing organization. Damodara Pandit founded the “ISKCON-Indonesia” foundation in Denpasar and claims to be *acharya* (main teacher) of this international society, away from the aegis of the GBC. He even went as far as registering “ISKCON-Indonesia” with the Indonesian Directorate General of Intellectual Property Rights, the Ministry of Law and Human Rights, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. To combat such claims of legitimacy, SAKKHI ventured to gain international link and multinational support by claiming the

²⁴ A mutual agreement was made on the 3rd of November 2001. On the Eight Mahasabha Assembly of the PHDI, the term “*sampradaya* imbued with Hinduism” (*sampradaya bernaaskan Hindu*) was added in Chapter 41 of the PHDI Constitution.

²⁵ I received these details on ISKCON’s history in Indonesia from personal interviews conducted in December 2015 - January 2016 for my sociology research. I interviewed Sundarananda dasa (member of PHDI and senior preacher), Agastya Muni dasa (member of PHDI and SAKKHI pioneer), Sadasiva dasa (early Hare Krishna member and previous leader of the Denpasar temple), and Surya Narayana dasa (involved with the Jakarta-based Bhaktivedanta Book Trust). These abovementioned individuals have given me permission to publish my findings based on their collective verbal recollection.

ISKCON term for themselves. This was done by creating a new legal body, “The International Society for Krishna Consciousness Association” with the Indonesian Ministry of Law and Human Rights, and registering the original ISKCON logo (unlike the slightly modified logo used by Damodara Pandit) with the Indonesian Directorate General of Intellectual Property Rights. This retaliation was successful as the new ISKCON Association gained legitimization through PHDI membership, Ministry of Religious Affairs certification, and even funding. The ISKCON GBC greatly favored the ISKCON Association, granting it to be Indonesia’s ISKCON National Council, a level of authority accepted within the GBC’s global hierarchical framework. The National Council gracefully gained membership of many Hare Krishna centers around Indonesia, including those previously unsettled with SAKKHI. Despite the success of the ISKCON Association, the general public cannot discern the “real” ISKCON from the offshoot created by Damodara Pandit. Nonetheless, the Indonesian Hare Krishnas celebrated the joyous celebration of ISKCON’s 50th anniversary in 2016 with their newly-formed identity.²⁶ Somvir²⁷ notes that there are approximately 1.500 Hare Krishnas in the country today. I would rephrase that to 1.500 initiated ISKCON members.

Polemic Stated

The success of the ISKCON Association was met with great joy by the Hare Krishna devotees. However, some ISKCON members, now with a renewed independence, resort to their fanaticism. The additional influence of unregulated foreign preachers who urge the Balinese to continue preaching via *harinama sankirtan* and book distribution fuel the fire. Negligent of Balinese Hindu philosophy and custom, foreign ISKCON preachers urge them to adhere to Gaudiya Vaishnava’s tenants exclusively.

Meanwhile, in the face of globalization and tourism, Balinese Hindus seek to uphold their indigenous principles. Bali’s incumbent governor, Wayan Koster (in office since 2018), endorses Balinese

²⁶ I was personally involved with ISKCON at that time and assisted in the legalization of ISKCON in Indonesia, serving as the Indonesian Ministry of ISKCON Communications from July 2013 till August 2017.

²⁷ Yadav Somvir, “Cultural and Religious Interaction between Modern India and Indonesia,” in Martin Ramstedt (ed.), *Hinduism in Modern Indonesia: A Minority Religion Between Local, National, and Global Interests*, (London: Routledge Curzon IIAS Asian Studies Series, 2004), 255-63.

culture, including the mandatory use of Balinese *aksara* alphabets and the legalization of traditional villages via the Majelis Desa Adat (MDA), or the Assembly of Traditional Villages. This MDA legislates the autonomous institution of traditional villages, permitting them to create local laws that supersede provincial or national regulations. This MDA Bali and PHDI Bali made a joint decree that barred the activities of “*sampradaya non-dresta* Bali” from Bali’s traditional villages in late 2020²⁸. Viewing it as a threat to Balinese culture, this governor-endorsed decree has led to public unrest amongst Hindus in Bali and beyond. I will now point out the different factors that have led to public unrest.

The Theological Differences are remarkable between the Shaivite-Buddhist Balinese Hindus and the orthodox Vaishnava Hare Krishnas. There are three main differences. Firstly, the Hindu Balinese regard Shiva as Supreme, albeit with the less dogmatic name of Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa. Vishnu and Brahma are inferior to Shiva. This is the general Shaiva doctrine followed by Shaivites, whether in Bali or India. Gaudiya Vaishnavas regard Krishna as the Supreme Personality of Godhead, even beyond Vishnu. Shiva is a form of Vishnu, not necessarily inferior, but not on the same level. Second, the Balinese maintain a monistic Vedanta. Their soteriology involves the identification/realization of the self as the Supreme Self or *Siwa*. Liberation is equated to merging with and becoming *Siwa*. Vaishnavas generally accept different forms of liberation, including the merging into the Brahman. However, the Gaudiyas maintain that devotional service must be uninterrupted. Although the highest form of liberation is attaining Krishna’s abode and becoming His eternal servant, that is not the goal. The goal remains the attainment of the unconditional love of Godhead or *Kṛṣṇa Prema*. Thus there is a clear distinction between Krishna, God, and the soul, the servant. Both do not identify as one but are instead united in love. Thirdly, as *Siwa* is identical with oneself, the Balinese do not separate themselves from *Siwa*-hood. They view themselves as the microcosm. This self-identification of the body with the universe, and the soul with *Siwa*, equates the individual with God. The Vaishnavas, irrespective of their

²⁸ Statement No.106/PHDI-Bali/XII/2020-07/SK/MDA-Prov Bali/XII/ 2020 dated 16th of December 2020. The term “non-*dresta* Bali” refers to traditions that have not been appropriated for Balinese culture or are not apart of Bali’s socio-religious norms. In other words, they refer to Hindu New Religious Movements.

school or geographical location, are unanimously theistic, retaining a difference between the minute soul and the great God.

The theological similarities, even though not apparent, do exist. Both denominations are monotheistic.²⁹ The Balinese regard all forms of life to be *Siva*. Yes, they worship the Indian gods, local deities, ancestors, guardians of nature, spirits of the land, and goblins. However, they are all *Siva* in different natures. The dead are deified through intricate (and costly) ceremonies, the gods are expansions/incarnations, and the guardians and goblins are exorcised to re-attain *Siva*-hood. Even mere mortals are identical to *Siva*. The Hare Krishnas follow the school of *acintya bhedabbeda*, or the belief of a simultaneous oneness and difference with Krishna. In other words, everything and everyone is a different energy of Krishna. Even though they are not equated with Krishna, there is no difference between the energy and the energetic, just as the ocean's waves are the ocean itself, or the sparks of fire are indeed fire. Next, both Shaivites and Vaishnavas include the process of *bhakti-marga* or the path of devotion in their spiritual practice. Even though the Balinese assert there are four paths of liberation, they follow *bhakti* by default due to their many offerings, which require a sacrifice of time, effort, and money.³⁰ The process of creating these offerings is akin to Hare Krishna worship, even though the latter may take on other forms besides temple worship. Lastly, both traditions honor the Vedas and Vedic deities, especially Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Both share the same Puranic stories and Upanishadic philosophy. In other words, they both live in the same realm of the Hindu worldview.

Unfortunately, the differences take center stage. Vaishnavas, being dualists, are very much against the monistic Advaita Vedanta, even claiming it is non-orthodox and demonic. Therefore the general Hare Krishna attitude toward the Balinese Hindus (and other Hindus who subscribe to monism) is that of hostility, regarding them to be inferior and tasteless for opting for a divinity of absolute emptiness. Hare Krishnas also refuse to worship other demigods, demons, and ancestors, adhering firmly to their opinion that the worship of Krishna is sufficient, akin to watering the roots of a tree instead of

²⁹ S. L. N. I. Sari, "Teologi Hindu Hare Krishna dan Implikasi Bagi Penganutnya," (Thesis-UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, 2021).

³⁰ I. B. Subrahmaniam Saitya and N. L. Ratna Sari, "Implementasi Ajaran Bhakti Marga Yoga di Bali," *Sphatika: Jurnal Teologi*, 12/1, (2021): 85–93.

watering individual leaves (an analogy found in the Bhagavata Purana 4.31.14). Even though no statements disrespect other entities, their worship is considered unnecessary and forbidden. This has caused them much trouble with other Hindus, even in India. Most Hare Krishnas refuse to partake in elaborate Balinese ceremonies to appease ancestral spirits and demonic powers. Some theologically refute the practice of such rituals, declaring their worship of Krishna complete.³¹ Balinese rituals also include meat and alcohol, substances regarded as impure by the Hare Krishnas. The Balinese do not appreciate the Hare Krishna exclusivism that declares their faith and practice demoniac, unnecessary and disgusting. Moreover, the declaration of Krishna's supremacy, including above Shiva, is very much frowned upon. Like most impersonalists, Krishna is regarded as an *avatara* or incarnation of Vishnu; therefore, he is a simple man with divine inspiration. Most Balinese agree that Vishnu is worshipable, not the manifestation of Krishna that appeared to restore *dharma* on earth through his various superhuman acts, including Krishna's participation in the Mahabharata war and his Upanishadic treatise, the Bhagavad-gita. It is confusing for the Balinese to see the Hare Krishnas enthroning Krishna to the level equal to their Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa and above Shiva. There is also much confusion about the worship of Krishna Chaitanya. It is true that Gaudiyas regard Him to be Radha-Krishna, however worship is still directed toward Krishna. Some Balinese, like Ida Ayu Made Gayatri in her 2007 dissertation,³² presume that the Hare Krishnas worship Chaitanya, not Krishna, and hides this fact from the general public to recruit Hindu members.

The Cultural Neglect of the Hare Krishnas is palpable through the clothing they have adopted. Hare Krishnas worldwide have adopted the Bengali garb of dhoti (an unstitched cloth fashioned as loose trousers, worn by men) and sari (cloth wrapped around the lower and upper part of a woman's body). They are inherently Indian ethnic clothes that have been "exported" by ISKCON to Western lands. There are two reasons for this. Clean, unstitched cloth is a requirement for Vaishnava temple worship. Therefore, it is used by

³¹ I Wayan Gata, "Filosofis Sampradaya dalam Kehidupan Sosial Masyarakat Hindu di Bali," *Jurnal Genta Hredaya*, 2/1, Juli (2018): 24-37.

³² I. A. Made Gayatri, "Sistem Religi Sampradaya Kesadaran Krishna di Bali," (Bali: a doctoral thesis, 2007).

the Hare Krishnas in ritual worship, including but not limited to the worship of the deity, marriage ceremonies, and name-giving ceremonies. Some Hare Krishnas, both men, and women, also become a *brahmacari* (monk) or *brahmacarini* (nun), living in the ashram serving the deities and congregation.³³ They are required to wear the dhoti and sari. There are also celibates in the Hare Krishna tradition, who must wear saffron-colored dhoti. It does not seem to be an issue to have clothing worn for ritual purity and ashram penance. The Balinese are concerned that the Hare Krishnas use these clothes as a public identity, worn during public chanting and festivals.³⁴ Balinese converts to the Hare Krishna Movement take pride in their adopted clothing and practices and therefore differ from the generic expression of Hinduism on the island. Some Balinese Hare Krishnas, especially non-ISKCON organizations, also take their Indian clothing to Balinese Temples and ceremonies.

In the temple, Hare Krishnas also cook and serve vegetarian meals. These meals do not contain onion, garlic, egg, and any form of intoxication, including caffeine. Most of these meals are prepared in the so-called “Vedic” way, meaning Indian dishes like *dbal*, *roti*, and *sabji* are regarded as food palatable for Krishna. Being strict vegetarians, most Hare Krishnas reject partaking in village ceremonies as they must prepare meat offerings. The traditional Balinese village community, known as the *banjar*, requires active participation from its members, including preparing offerings for mass ceremonies. They also regulate religious activity in the vicinity, ensuring it meets the time, place, and circumstance norms or *desa-kala-patra*. Each village has its differences, although most aspects have been standardized. The Hare Krishna clothing, festivities, public chanting, temple rituals, and diet are peculiar and not Balinese.³⁵ The method of worship practiced by Hare Krishna devotees also differ greatly from the

³³ K. Widyantari, I. Sudiarna, and I. Sama, “Penganut Hare Krishna: Proses Ritual Aliran Gaudiya Vaisnawa,” *Sunari Penjor: Journal of Anthropology*, 3/2, (2021): 72-79. DOI: 10.24843/SP.2019.v3.i02.p04.

³⁴ As warned by PHDI members and other religious leaders to ISKCON at various times, mainly verbally and informally.

³⁵ The comments of the Balinese are best viewed on social media forums, especially Facebook Groups, where the Balinese share their discontent with Hare Krishna practices that are non-existent in Balinese customs. These have been topics of debate since the early days of the movement and continue today. Mid to late 2020 saw a spike in Facebook postings, comments, and threats toward ISKCON. These have been collected and archived by ISKCON.

Balinese. ISKCON initiates chant at least sixteen rounds of the Hare Krishna Maha Mantra daily on a *japa mala*, a rosary of 108 *Tulasi* beads, a practice not found in Indonesian Hinduism.³⁶ Accompanied with loud, melodious chanting, and the traditional Indian *arati* ceremony, Hare Krishnas conducts temple worship in a way that is foreign for those unfamiliar with the Hindu expression found in the Indian subcontinent.³⁷ The Balinese murmur mantras to hypnotizing rings of the bell. They pray while seated, in outdoor temples, with flowers and incense offered. Howe describes this traditional method of worship as “rather impersonal and mechanically ritualised, temple deities are anonymous and distant, and worship, mediated by priests, does not fully engage the emotions.”³⁸

The Political Stance taken by the Balinese is that they need to take drastic measures to protect their Balinese culture. This is why Bali’s incumbent governor supports the island-wide restriction on Hare Krishna activity (and other non-Balinese Hindu movements).³⁹ The 1984 ban has also been brought up by politicians and Balinese activists, recalling the pre-reformation decree that has not been officially invalidated, despite being based on laws that are no longer applicable. It seems that the 2020 polemic is indeed a political statement to portray that the incumbent governor is doing his best to uphold the Balinese culture and religion, hopefully mending his

³⁶ S. L. N. I. Sari, “Teologi Hindu Hare Krishna dan Implikasi Bagi Penganutnya,” 2021.

³⁷ Ida Bagus Putu Supriadi, “Pembinaan Keagamaan Model Gaudiya Vaisnawa di Pasraman Sri-Sri Nitai Gaurangga Desa Werdhi Bhuana Kecamatan Mengwi Kabupaten Badung,” *Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Agama dan Ilmu Sosial Budaya*, 14/1, (2019). <http://dx.doi.org/10.25078/wd.v14i1.1042>.

³⁸ Leo Howe, *The New Religions of Bali*, 103.

³⁹ Incumbent governor Wayan Koster is a member of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP). Adi Wiryatama, a PDIP member at Bali’s Regional People’s Representative Council (DPRD), stated that “if the activities of the Hare Krishnas cause a polemic and disrupt public order, then Bali’s DPRD will respond. And, our attitude [towards this] is strong: if the Hare Krishnas disrupt public order, then they must be dissolved” (PDIP, 2020 October 31). In June of 2021, Damodara Pandit’s ISKCON-Indonesia reported Bali’s governor, PHDI, and MDA to the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) for obstructing their right of worship, following the trespassing of local villagers and organizations to their ashram (Melda Luxiana, K. 2021, June 8). On the 10th of August 2021, Wayan Koster discussed eliminating any *sampradaya*-based teachings from published Hindu books with other Hindu scholars, including PHDI Bali. (DutaBaliNews: August 11, 2021).

reputation amidst the terrible economic conditions due to the decrease in tourism caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Besides the governor's approval of the Hare Krishna restrictions, publicity has also covered another controversial Balinese politician, Arya Wedakarna, a current member of the Indonesian Regional Representative Council. The public is apprehensive of Wedakarna's interest in gubernatorial elections, even though there is no official indication. Following the Hare Krishna restriction, news outlets published controversies against Arya Wedakarna who has always been supportive towards the Hare Krishnas⁴⁰. The rivalry between the Wayan Koster and Arya Wedakarna might have fueled the polemic, but there needs to be further investigation on this.

Most Hare Krishnas and reformist Hindus surmise that there is indeed a political play behind the 2020 polemic. Although these are mere assumptions, it has impacted the response of the Hare Krishnas and other Hindu *sampradayas*, who refuse to respond in avoidance of political involvement.

The central Indonesian government is also careful in responding to the polemic, which has involved several national institutions like the Ministry of Religious Affairs⁴¹, Ministry of Law and Human Rights⁴², and the Attorney General's Office.⁴³ National concerns are valid considering the multinational ISKCON organization, for they are favored by the Indian, American, and Australian governments. The 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom from the United States Embassy in Indonesia mentions the ISKCON incident.

The Identity Crisis of the Balinese has evolved into a Hindu monopoly, at least on their island of Bali. The Balinese have identified their culture and customs as Hindu, even though they remain two

⁴⁰ In 2015 I wrote for ISKCON News about Wedakarna's appreciation of ISKCON (Kuckreja, 2015). Due to him attending invitations from ISKCON and other Indian-oriented spiritual organizations, he is linked with them. The Balinese MDA also issued a complaint against him in November 2020 (Balipost, 2020) which was followed with protests (Coconuts Bali, 2020).

⁴¹ ISKCON leaders have been approached by the Research and Development Department of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. They similarly interviewed me in September 2021 upon the recommendation of my university.

⁴² The Ministry of Law and Human Rights are involved due to possible violations to religious freedom.

⁴³ The Attorney General's Office has been questioned regarding the legitimacy of the 1984 ban.

separate concepts. Despite many studies into the Hare Krishnas, some Balinese scholars like Ida Ayu Made Gayatri still categorize the Gaudiya Vaishnavas as a different religion altogether. She states that “members of SAKKHI [The Hare Krishna Movement in Indonesia] who have left their responsibilities of ancestor worship and *Tri Murti* (*Tri Kabhyangan*) [the main three deities of Hinduism; Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva] worship, is to mean that they have undergone a religious conversion.”⁴⁴ Balinese Hare Krishnas, who continue to practice their custom side-by-side, practice syncretism in Gayatri’s opinion. Such fallacies equate Balinese traditions with Hinduism, an idea held by Balinese traditionalists. A distinction must be made between the Balinese customs (*adat*) and Hinduism. I say this because there are Balinese who abide by their culture but have adopted Christianity, and there are Hindus who are not Balinese. In other words, Bali does not equal Hindu and vice versa. However, the long debate of the Balinese identity has caused this monopoly and this defensive protectionism over the Hindu term. As Picard comments, “this is the dilemma of *Kebalian*—because of the separation of ethnicity and religion, the Balinese people are split between two alternative referrals, *adat* (customs) and *agama* (religion)”.⁴⁵

The Office for Hindu Affairs at the Ministry of Religious Affairs has opted to celebrate the diversity of Hinduism in Indonesia, highlighting the different indigenous communities that have embraced the religion.⁴⁶ Tri Handoko Seto, a Javanese Hindu academic and meteorologist, took office in August of 2020. This is notable as the Director-General of Hindu Affairs is a non-Balinese for the first time in history. It is a fact that, initially, Hinduism was officially recognized in modern Indonesia to protect the Balinese. However, now it has been employed in protecting other indigenous cultures of Indonesia, disassociating it from the Balinese. It seems like this has resulted in the protection of what is left of Balinese Hinduism

⁴⁴ I. A. Made Gayatri, “Sistem Religi Sampradaya Kesadaran Krishna di Bali” (Bali: A dissertation, 2007), 195.

⁴⁵ M. Picard, *Kebalian: Konstruksi Dialogis Identitas Bali* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2020), 31.

⁴⁶ This is seen from the 2021 Utsawa Dharma Gita competition with participants garbed in provincial clothing and the Director-General’s visit to minority expressions of indigenous Hinduism like in Toraja, Sulawesi, as documented by their official social media.

on the island, to the extend of barring other Hindu expressions in Bali.

Conclusion

The Balinese belief is very much an indigenous, ethnic-based religion that had to adopt a universal religion in order to secure its existence. In doing so, it has retained a monopoly over Hinduism in Indonesia, being the largest followers of the religion in the country. As time passes, however, Hindu influences that are non-Balinese will appear and this did occur with the arrival of the New Religious Movement of ISKCON, as Howe warned:

In its attempts to produce religious orthodoxy and curtail religious diversity with its concomitant political conflict, the Indonesian state has unwittingly created the conditions in which religious innovation has been able to flourish. What began as a struggle to promote a specific version of Balinese Hindu religion has resulted in a new, complex, differentiated religious landscape which has, in turn, proliferated conflicts over the nature of religious truth, the role of high priests, the purpose of ritual, the formation of identities, the link between religion and the state, and much else.⁴⁷

Other indigenous religions of Indonesia have also employed Hinduism to protect their indigenous identity and belief, such as the Dayak Kaharingan, Tengger, Kejawen, Sunda Wiwitan, Alukta Toraja, Pemena Karo and Tolotang.⁴⁸ The current situation in Indonesia has turned Hinduism into a religion with many varieties based on the ethnicity of the practitioner. In fact, they are not ethnic variations of the same religion, but different sects of Hindu Dharma. The focus on the ethnicity of the practitioner has fueled restrictions that make no sense, barring Hindus of one ethnicity from practicing another. Despite the fact that most Indians accept foreign converts, some major Hindu temples in India do not permit non-Indian Hindus to enter, asking one's *gotra* (lineage), caste and family tree to filter pilgrims. This implies that even some Indians consider Hinduism as exclusively theirs, and other ethnicities that have adopted Hinduism

⁴⁷ Leo Howe, *The New Religions of Bali*, 96.

⁴⁸ Only the Tenggernese and Balinese have fully embraced Agama Hindu Dharma. Other indigenous religions mentioned herein have also adopted Christianity, Buddhism or Islam as their official religion. The Office of Hindu Affairs is currently collecting data on these minority expressions.

remain second-class. It is Neo-Hindu organizations and Hindu-based New Religious Movements that have isolated the religion from the ethnicity (to some extent).

Having elaborated on the sources and impact of tension between the two parties, I can surmise three facts:

1. The Gaudiya Vaishnavas and the Hindu Balinese are very different from one another in almost every aspect. The only thing that puts them both in the same category is that both are Hindu, linked to the same Vedic culture and roots.
2. The refusal of the Hare Krishnas as Hindu by the Balinese is ludicrous. The Balinese are interested in only protecting their culture over educating the masses on the diversity of Hindu expressions and traditions.
3. The attitude and behavior of the Hare Krishnas in Indonesia are sacrilegious and unbecoming. ISKCON needs to adapt inculturation to serve its purpose. Failure to do so will lead to its expulsion from Indonesia.

Currently, the Balinese are adamant in keeping their version of Hinduism, while the Hare Krishnas must adhere to their principles as per their predecessors. Only Hinduism can unite the two under its tolerant umbrella. I propose that Hinduism, both in Indonesia and abroad, acknowledge localized expressions of the faith as legitimate and orthodox traditions. Just as Hindus have accepted NRMs like ISKCON as Hindu, there should be similar acceptance toward Balinese Hinduism. In such a way, both should be seen as equal and credible. The adoption of Hindu Dharma by indigenous communities of Indonesia has its drawbacks. Despite it being the only way to legitimize their faith, exposure to the overly diverse expressions of Hinduism can also threaten it. Unlike the Balinese and Javanese, other local faiths might not share the same affinity towards the Vedas and the Hindu pantheon. The mandatory acceptance of which will alter their religion. Unfortunately, Indonesians must take this path to conserve their indigenous beliefs.

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