

Interview with Andrea Acri
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Andrea Acri received a type of education that is all but unheard of in the Australian education system today. He studied the ancient languages, Latin and Ancient Greek, and learned the skill of translation. Acri believes that the 'old school' school of school has benefits that are still of great value today: "Translation in ancient languages teaches you a way of thinking, and stretches your mind. You always need to be ready to throw out all your assumptions, and start again. Like maths, translation is an exercise in problem solving."

This education has given Acri a set of skills rare in today's world, and he has employed them in a unique way. Since his first visit to Indonesia to train as a dive-master as a teenager, Acri has been studying the ancient religious manuscripts of Java and Bali in the original Sanskrit. In researching his most recent article, *A new perspective for 'Balinese Hinduism' in the light of the pre-modern religious discourse*, Acri visited dusty private libraries throughout Java and Bali to study palm-leaf manuscripts centuries old.

"I wrote this work because I saw that the anthropology literature had ignored the religious texts of Java and Bali. This led many writers to accept a distortion of history." In Acri's article, he explains the commonplace view that a temporal discontinuity divides the Balinese-Hindu tradition into two distinctly different stages; the pre-modern and the modern. Supposedly, religious traditions and knowledge were transferred through ritual and word of mouth until the modern period. Then, rapid cultural change led to a change in focus to a more intellectual and philosophical approach, and with it, a new reliance on religious texts.

Acri rejects this thesis, and presents an alternate version of history in which the Balinese-Hindu religious culture has smoothly developed over time; in which the roots of the culture today are clearly visible in the ancient past. He presents evidence found in countless family collections and libraries across Bali and Java. He argues in *A New Perspective* that "a complex mystical and philosophical tradition that pre-dates twentieth-century reformist efforts... existed alongside the ritual dimension of the everyday local religious practices described by anthropologists."

I asked Acri how he responds to the argument of philologist Christiaan Hooykaas, that culture is located "in the lives of men" and not in ancient texts. How can we learn cultures today by studying texts written hundreds or even thousands of years ago? Andrea's response was a question of his own: "Could we be expected to study the lives of Christians today without considering the bible?"

Andrea Acri does not only rewrite history; he also preserves it. By translating works, or by digitising them, Acri is ensuring that the ancient knowledge on these scrolls are not entirely lost to history. "These scrolls must be carefully preserved and occasionally transcribed onto new scrolls. Due to the religious conversion of many families in Java, these personal collections are often no longer maintained. This work is very much a mission to me" The knowledge held

in scrolls that translators like Acri are unable to recover and digitise will be simply lost. The importance and cultural impact this process can have has quickly become apparent. Acri translated and publicised a religious scroll he found in Java, only to discover the Balinese-Hindu community had long believed this important work to be nonexistent. The reintroduction of 'lost knowledge' is a significant contribution, to be sure. I asked Acri what he thought about it: "Translating old texts opens doors into the past. It is not my intention to interfere with the culture of Bali, but it is inevitable that this sort of work will sometimes have such an effect."

What's next? Acri plans to continue studying ancient works. "I don't think anything written in these old works is alien to me. There are works on science, on mathematics, some of it very advanced by even today's standards. The 4th century work of Panini laid the groundwork for twentieth century semiotics. We can learn something from every ancient text."