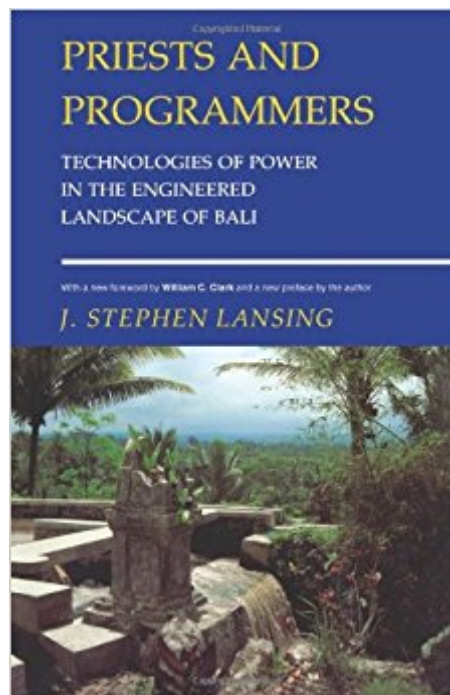




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# Priests And Programmers: Technologies Of Power In The Engineered Landscape Of Bali



## Synopsis

For the Balinese, the whole of nature is a perpetual resource: through centuries of carefully directed labor, the engineered landscape of the island's rice terraces has taken shape. According to Stephen Lansing, the need for effective cooperation in water management links thousands of farmers together in hierarchies of productive relationships that span entire watersheds. Lansing describes the network of water temples that once managed the flow of irrigation water in the name of the Goddess of the Crater Lake. Using the techniques of ecological simulation modeling as well as cultural and historical analysis, Lansing argues that the symbolic system of temple rituals is not merely a reflection of utilitarian constraints but also a basic ingredient in the organization of production.

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## Customer Reviews

A brilliant study of how ancient the social and technical aspects of water management systems in Bali, inextricably bound with nature and religion, were undermined by the Green Revolution in the 1970s. Recommended. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"[A]n enjoyable and stimulating book."--Geoffrey Samuel, *Journal of Asian Studies*"Priests and Programmers is written with admirable clarity and should be of interest . . . to anybody working on applied social research."--Michael Hitchcock, *Contemporary South Asia*"[B]rilliant and delightful. . . . [N]ot only has [Lansing] written a superb book, but he has contributed materially and humanely to

the quality of life of the people he has studied. Too few scholars can make this claim."--Bryan Pfaffenberger, *Technology and Culture*"This is fascinating cultural anthropology, even history of religions."--Edward H. Schroeder, *Missiology*

I bought J. Stephen Lansing's book (subtitle: "Technologies of Power in the Engineered Landscape of Bali") to learn how water temples manage water in Bali. Initially, I thought (see this post) that the priests in these temples told farmers how to share water across their rice fields, threatening divine retribution upon those who did not obey. After reading this book, I have a better understanding. Although my first impression is more or less true (the water temples regulate water flows), it was also a little too superstitious. It turns out that the "priests" (or guardians) of the water temples are more like bureaucrats. Water temples on the lower level (of the subak, or irrigation district of 20-100 farmers) coordinate their labor for common infrastructure and rotation of water deliveries. (They use a "wheels within wheels" system of multiple calendars that cycle every 7, 15, 28, 45 days or on irregular but repeating patterns (7-7-3-1 day patterns); these calendars match various crop and logistical schedules, and they allow various activities to be scheduled independently without losing track of interdependencies.) Above the subak level are one or more levels of temples, each of these receiving "tax" payments from subaks (offerings) in exchange for continuing water delivery (lest the goddess be angry). On a terrestrial level, the superior temples coordinate larger water flows, crop patterns, infrastructure and water rights. Each of these roles explains how the Balinese have been able to grow two crops of rice per year for around 1,000 years. Regulation of water flows is straightforward -- sometimes there is not enough water, sometimes infrastructure constraints require that water go to some subaks but not others, and so on. Crop patterns turn out to be VERY important. Farmers monocropping rice must worry about pests and diseases, and the water temples facilitate coordination of following times and types (flood/rot or dry/burn) so that pests and diseases are "starved out" in an entire area. Infrastructure is also straight-forward in the sense that guardians of the temple provide technical advice (put a weir/diversion here or of this shape), amass funding for big projects, and ensure that infrastructure is maintained. Finally, the temples arbitrate between old and new claims to water, with the goal is maintaining sustainability while developing any and all resources for irrigation use. Elaborate and constant rituals coordinate these activities and the flow of information (up and down) among farmers of various subaks, with "coffee breaks" during rituals functioning as informal information exchanges and coordination. Perhaps the most important part of water temples is their contribution to sustainability. Lansing gives an excellent description of how colonial Dutch bureaucrats had no idea of how the temples worked. (They assumed that the king

had controlled water and taxes for infrastructure; that assumption allowed them to impose a "traditional" tax on farmers.) Even Indonesian bureaucrats had no idea of the temples' roles. Thus, they totally screwed up when they introduced "green revolution" rice that required fertilizers, pesticides and three crops/year. The "modern" system that they rolled out (with the assistance of the typical World Bank technicians) ignored the role of the water temples. Although yields rose in the first few years, water shortages quickly appeared and -- worse -- pests and diseases rose up to destroy up to 100 percent of the "modern seed" crops. In the end, the Bankers and others realized that the temples played a critical -- not superstitious -- role. They allowed the old system to be re-introduced, and the farmers rejoiced! Besides these interesting facts are Lansing's very thorough description of how water temples evolved and worked (i.e., what Lin Ostrom would call the "institutions of water management") and the way that this "primitive" set of institutions was fully matched to modern challenges. Bottom Line: I give this book FIVE STARS for its complete and clear description of sustainable water management in Bali.

Lansing shows, through Balinese irrigation, that technology is simultaneously social and political, but often not in the ways imagined by Western academics and development experts. A dispersed system of water temples and priests successfully managed the irrigation of multiple valleys and plots through a process in which ritual served the regulatory function of feedback. Development projects decoupled the elements of the system and led to declining yields and increased pest damage. A computer simulation of the system was eventually developed, which effectively translated the system functions into a media that development experts could understand, and led to repairs to the damage done to agriculture following the implementation of Green Revolution techniques, revealing the role of ideology in presumably technical knowledge. The study also disproves Wittfogel's hypothesis that "oriental despotism" or extremely hierarchical and centralized states grew out of the expansion and control of irrigation systems. Highly recommended.

A brilliant study of how the ancient social and technical aspects of water management systems in Bali, inextricably bound with nature and religion, undermined the Green Revolution in the 1980s. Highly recommended

Excellent summary of balinese life ways organized around rice paddy irrigation and cooperation. worth a look.

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