

[Giving Demons and Deities Their Due](#)

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INSIGHT

Giving Demons and Deities Their Due

Perhaps nowhere on earth is Hinduism more energetic and culturally explicit than on the tiny island of Bali. It has a unique expression, different than India, yet the same. Perhaps it mirrors what Hinduism was like in India 1,500 years ago. Let's explore a bit of Bali's religious beliefs, temple structure and rites of passage, excerpting generously from the scholarly Bali, Sekala & Niskala, by Fred Eiseman.

Eons ago, seven celestial nymphs from the Pleiades star cluster visited Earth. A prince fell in love with one, and a child was born--half divine, half earthly. That child is all children. And so goes the Balinese version of human origins. If a Balinese child cries at night, she is comforted by being shown the night sky and gently told, "There is your mother, where we all come from and where we all return. There's no need for tears." "Religion is everywhere," wrote Gregor Krausse, a young medical officer sent to Bali by the Dutch army in 1912. "It causes all laws to descend from Heaven to Earth, it allows nobody and nothing to feel alone. Each duty is divine, each place holy, each hour sanctified, every exterior feature is spiritually connected with the inner life." Balinese call it Agama Hindu Dharma, an amalgamation of elements from Hinduism and Buddhism, mixed with indigenous customs. They produce

a colorful mix of ritual and doctrine dominated by two Hindu epics--Mahabharata and Ramayana--and the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva; most temples being dedicated to one of the three. Affinity is shown by an old Mahayana Buddhist poem composed in Java: "The one substance is called two, Buddha or Siva. They say it's different, but how can it be divided by two? Such is how the teaching of Buddha and Siva became one. It's different, but it's one; there aren't two truths." Ida Sanghyang Widi Wasa is the Balinese equivalent of the Supreme God of the Vedas, Brahman.

Balinese are never alone, but coexist with good and evil forces. Life is devoted to maintaining an equilibrium, so that neither Gods or demons get the upper hand. All religious practices are based on this principle, summed up by Balinese painter Dewan Nyoman Batuan, "Everything has its opposite--up/down, day and night, good and evil. If we can integrate these opposites, then we share the strengths of both in our lives and our art." How is this done? Mainly through honoring the Gods daily (in traditional dress) with fruits, flowers, incense and food, and--where Bali departs from classical Hinduism--honoring the demons just as equally, but with meat and rotten vegetables. If the demons are not constantly pacified, believe the Balinese, they can wreak havoc and disrupt the balance. But if they are honored, they can actually be helpful. Another contributor to a balanced cosmos is trance. Channelers, known as balian, are commonly hired by families to bring through ancestors and other entities, who are asked if they are well satisfied in their world, or if more offerings should be given to them.

In celebration of this integration is the arts. "Everybody in Bali seems to be an artist," wrote Miguel Covarrubias in 1937.

"Coolies and princes, priests and peasants, men and women alike, can dance, play musical instruments, paint or carve in wood or stone." And it's still like that today. Whether carving a mask to represent a God or performing a sacred dance to welcome the Deities in a temple, all the arts strive to bring alive the Gods and demons from great epics. I Wayan Dibia, Director of the National Institute of Art in Denpasar, says, "A dancer must purify herself with rituals, because dance is a religious offering. It comes from Siva Nataraja. All movement came from Siva when He created the macro and microcosms."

Temples: Every family compound (each contains homes for brothers and their families) has its temple in the corner closest to Mt. Agung. A village has three public temples: in the center is Pura Desa, temple of the first settlers, dedicated to Brahma. In the mountain direction is Pura Puseh, dedicated to Vishnu. At the opposite end is Pura Dalem, dedicated to Siva. One of the oldest temples in Bali, Goa Gajah, is a cave dedicated to Lord Ganesha, the only one of its kind, thought to have been created during Bali's first contact with Hindus from Java. Jitendra Russle, a recent visitor to Bali, says he was told by a priest that twice people have tried to steal the ancient Ganesha icon. In the first case, the thief was attacked by a rooster and fell to his death. In a later attempt, two thieves were found in a trance on a roadside, with a rooster standing guard!

Each village temple is divided into three roofless sections. In the upslope direction is the inner sanctum, which contains sacred shrines. If the land is flat, the sanctum is elevated. During a temple anniversary festival, carved humanlike figures are taken out of repositories, placed in the shrines and Gods

are invited to inhabit them. This courtyard is divided from the rest of the temple by a wall and a huge split gate decorated with a carving of a leering face, bhoma, whose fangs and bulging eyes keep evil away from the holiest area. A temple's middle section contains storage rooms, a kitchen and pavilions for arranging offerings before they are taken into the inner courtyard. Separated by another wall and gate is the least sacred courtyard, where secular activities are permitted: food stalls are present and people relax, eat and chat.

The brahmana priests, pedandas, are revered spiritual leaders. Besides conducting subtle temple ceremonies and dispensing holy water to families, it's their duty to help other castes with sculpture repairs, cremations, house purifications and family temple anniversaries where they read from the Balinese sacred scriptures, lontars. It's a joy for Ida Rsi Bujangga Widnyana, a pedanda who says he is "always asking God through mantras and offerings to make the micro and macrocosm safe and calm, and all life happy."

Rites of passage: Balinese mark, sometimes with elaborate purification ceremonies, passage from the godlike child to the duty-bound adult. These include: birth, cutting of teeth, puberty, marriage and death. The aim of these rites is to purify and ensure the transition of one's spirit from birth to death and later reincarnation. Everyone Hinduism Today interviewed said tooth filing was the crucial ceremony. While a certain implication in this ceremony is beautification--the front teeth are evened out--the filing is a symbolic reducing of the sad ripu, six personality characteristics: lust, greed, anger, drunkenness, confusion and jealousy. Ms. Ayu Eka, 24, says it was important for her because "it gets rid of bad habits," and

Komang Budastra adds it "makes us more godlike and calm."

Nyoman Wenten [see pg 23] describes the ceremony. "I had my tooth filing after graduating from high school (it can happen between ages 12 and 18). I asked the priest to not file my teeth too deeply, because it's painful! The priest uses three levels of files, from rough to smooth. Many offerings were given--to the house shrine, where I lay down, etc. With all the people around you, you go into a different state of mind and don't feel the pain as much. For the next three days you have to stay home and eat food that is not chewed."

According to Bali resident Lawrence Blair, "In recent years there's been a government attempt to influence Hindus on Bali to be more monotheistic. But over the last year of political change we've reverted to the rich brew of the original import from India, a dash of Buddhism and much original island animism. This brew is, to my mind, what lies behind the much touted 'Bali magic'--and which delights foreign visitors for the same reason that it vexes foreign academic ethnographers: namely, the endless varieties of ritual expression, plus as many interpretive versions of what they mean as there are lay and high priests of the some 20,000 active temples and major shrines on the island. So, the recession may be bad for business, but it's been good for the soul of the island."

With Sara Sastra in Denpasar, Bali, and Rima Xoyamayagya in Texas

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