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History and Geography

Shaped by Volcanos and Fiery Invasions

The thrilling history and active geographic features that shaped the island of Bali

It looks a lot like the descriptions of Elysian lands where the Gods dwell. If you ask the Balinese, they will say that heaven is identical to their island--just, perhaps, a smidgen better.

Bali is surrounded by coral reefs and colorful fish in calm waters. It lies 3.2 km (2 mi) east of Java and approximately 8 degrees south of the equator. East to west, the island is about 153 km (95 mi) wide and spans approximately 112 km (69 mi) north to south; its land area is 5,632 km.

Volcanos stand tall on Bali island, active harbingers of both life and occasional doom. Bali's volcanic nature has contributed to its exceptional fertility; and its tall mountain ranges provide abundant rainfall that supports the highly productive agriculture sector--although tourism is the main economic activity.

The highest volcano is Mount Agung (3,142 m), known as "mother mountain." Agung is popular with mountain climbers; there are two major routes up, with breathtaking views. An active stratovolcano, it has had major eruptions in the recent past. Another important volcano is Mount Batur, located at the center of two concentric calderas northwest of Mount Agung. In the outer caldera, formed 28,000 years ago in a massive explosion, lies Lake Batur with stunning biodiversity. It is famous for being a great source of fish.

South of the mountains is a broad, steadily descending area where most of Bali's sprawling rice crop is grown. The northern side of the mountain, which slopes more steeply to the sea, is the main coffee producing area, along with rice, vegetables

and cattle.

Beaches in the South tend to have white sand while those in the North and West have black sand. Bali has no major waterways, although the Ho River is navigable by small sampan boats. The largest city is the provincial capital, Denpasar, near the southern coast. Its population nears half a million people. Bali's second largest city is the old colonial capital, Singaraja, which is located on the north coast and is home to around 100,000 people. The island has 3,891,000 residents and is 92% Hindu.

Refuge of a Lost Kingdom

Bali's modern history began when a Javanese king defied the grandson of Genghis Khan. This was in 1290, when King Kertanegara ruled over a mighty kingdom, and the Mongols lived too far away to be considered a real threat.

The Khan did not take the insult kindly. Enraged, he sent a massive expedition of 1,000 warships to Java. Mobilization and travel were slow in those days; the expedition arrived only three years later. By that time, the offending king had been assassinated by a usurper and the former royal family was in exile. The vast armada was left pondering what to do. Ever helpful, the son-in-law of the ousted King Kertanegara, Raden Wijaya, offered to host the invaders and guide them to victory over the new king. It was an offer hard to refuse; after all, the avenging army knew little about life in the tropics--so different from Mongolia--and Java in particular.

Raden Wijaya helped the Khan's fleet crush the usurper in 1293. Almost immediately, he launched a surprise attack on his allies. The operation had been timed to perfection: unable to miss the last days of monsoon winds which could take them home, the Mongols had no choice but to flee in confusion. They never returned.

Ambitious and able, Raden Wijaya became the first sovereign of the Hindu Majapahit Empire, which eventually expanded to encompass all the surrounding islands. In 1329, a brilliant strategist called Gajah Mada became the mahapatih, or prime minister, to the royal family. For 35 years, he led a golden age of the Majapahit empire, consolidating a culture that would eventually survive to the present, not in the capital on Java, but on the neighboring island of Bali.

Bali was home to the Bali Aga people, who followed a form of Mahayana Buddhism with Saivite Hindu and indigenous influences. The Balinese were closely related to the Javanese; both belonged to the Austronesian race, the indigenous people of Indonesia, Malaysia, Mauritius, New Zealand and Hawaii. In 1343, Gajah Mada defeated the Balinese king, bringing a strong influx of Javanese culture into Bali--in religion, architecture, art, dance, theater and (with the introduction of the Kawi script) literature. Those Balinese who refused to be assimilated created small communities which survive to this day in Bali, with a population of about 3,000 and a distinct language.

Little did the Majapahit Javanese know that by creating an outpost of their civilization in Bali, they were also creating a heaven that would allow the survival of their culture.

After a brief golden age, the archipelago empire fell into dynastic conflict and civil war, weakening its ability to defend itself. Meanwhile, its expansionist ambitions made it no friends. In 1400 the Majapahit Empire used thousands of ships to conquer Parameswara, the last king of Singapore island. Parameswara fled with his court and personal guard to North Sumatra. There he created a new country, the Kingdom of Malacca.

His was a tiny nation, but Parameswara was a cunning ruler seething for revenge. Struggling to hold his position against old Majapahit enemies and several local tribes, Parameswara sent his ambassador to visit the Emperor of China, the superpower of that period, and the two sovereigns agreed to become allies.

The Ming Dynasty ruler of China sent one of his most trusted generals to protect his new ally and take hold of that area of the Pacific. This was Admiral Zheng He, a devout Muslim, a trusted eunuch, a warlord with wide autonomy. Islam had arrived in China in the 8th century through Persia and the Himalayas, converting a small following, including the admiral's ancestors.

Eager to please his new protector, King Parameswara converted to Islam and adopted an Islamic name, Sultan Iskandar Shah. He renamed the formerly Hindu kingdom of Malacca as the Sultanate of Malacca. Under the might and influence of the new local potentates, surrounding nations and tribes quickly fell to either the

Sultanate or Zheng He and his tens of thousands of soldiers.

Admiral Zheng He left a massive legacy. He is the sole reason why Islam is present in the Pacific. His personal religious choice, impressed upon several kingdoms, was never reverted. By the end of his life, China itself had changed. When the new Hongxi Emperor ascended the throne, he withdrew all expansionist policies, called back all ships and left the rest of the world to itself, initiating an isolationist policy that would last for centuries. With China absent as a cultural, military and religious influence, the only real powers in the South Asian sea were the Muslim kingdoms established by Zheng He.

Abruptly surrounded by hostile forces following an alien religion, the Majapahit fell quickly. In despair, those who could retreated to Bali, where the mountainous geography provided strongholds that were harder to conquer. The Hindus remaining in Java, though weakened, managed to defend themselves until the Sultanate of Malacca became distracted by invasions by Portuguese mariners in the North and left them alone.

Gathering the remnants of a formerly splendid empire, the refugees slowly built a nation, found a new life and created a new identity in the island of Bali.

The Kingdom of Bali lasted for hundreds of years, its kings deftly maneuvering among the warring powers that navigated the waters of the archipelago. Occasionally it allied itself with the Dutch and French against the British and Malacca, but forbade foreign interference on the island.

In the late 19th century, however, the Balinese kings' grip on the nation began to slip. The Indonesian archipelago became the Dutch East Indies. In Bali, the Dutch used the pretext of eradicating opium smuggling, weapons traffic and slavery to impose their control on Balinese kingdoms.

In 1906, claiming as an excuse the plundering of shipwrecks, the Dutch mounted large naval and ground assaults on Bali, leading to several massacres and the elimination of the royal house. The Dutch attacks were followed closely by the

media, and reports of the sanguinary conquest shocked the West. Afterwards, the Dutch governors exercised administrative control over the island, but under pressure from the outraged international community, they interfered little with religion and culture. In 1914, Bali was opened to tourism.

In the aftermath of World War II, when European colonialism lost its last claims to legitimacy, parts of the Dutch East Indies declared independence. When conceding, the Netherlands recognized all the islands under its influence as a single new nation, the Republic of the United States of Indonesia. Though this was a melange of nations with great cultural differences, such as West Borneo, Java, East Indonesia and Bali, it remains a united country to this day.