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Festival

## Bali's Annual Day of Silence

A time of purification and reflection for the whole island--with no exceptions

In Bali, the start of a new year is not marked by fireworks or a ten-second countdown; ritual here is much deeper and more ornate than the celebrations of the West. For the Balinese, the dawn of each new year is a time of purification, reflection and spirituality, a day when complete silence descends on the island, as if no one lived there.

The Balinese follow two different calendars, forming a system almost incomprehensible to uninitiated foreigners. In the pawukon calendar, a year lasts 210 days. The saka, a lunisolar calendar, is used to calculate Nyepi, the new year. In 2012, this falls on March 23rd.

Dr. V. Ramesh Sastry, a Vedic scholar and secretary general of the World Hindu Youth Organisation, explains, "Nyepi marks the beginning of a new lunar year. It occurs at the beginning of spring, between the last week of March and early April."

Gathering on beaches a few days before new year's day, beautifully dressed in ritual clothes, the Balinese perform a ceremony called Melasti to honor God as the owner of both land and sea. Balinese Hindus purify their bodies and souls in the presence of their Deities with ritual and pujas at seaside temples, where offerings are made. Water is blessed as amreta (amritam), a gift from Gods Baruna (Varuna) and Wisnu (Vishnu); it is used to purify other parts of the island in the days ahead, cleansing all spiritual defilement.

On the next day, known as Bhuta Yajna, the people dedicate time to getting rid of all the evil thoughts and spirits that have accumulated during the year. Vanquishing

all negative elements, the aim is to create a balance between God, mankind and nature. This connection is an integral part of Balinese Hindu worship, the foremost goal of which is to uphold cosmic harmony. On Bhuta Yajna, offerings are made to appease upset spirits and ancestors. "All the bad karma accrued in the year is supposed to be removed by these rites," explains Puneet Malhotra, an Indian who has lived in Indonesia and Bali for more than 22 years and is the general secretary of the Bali Indian Friendship Association.

For truly demonic forces, asuras and evil thoughts, the Balinese perform a ritual banishment to drive away the forces of darkness. The Balinese do all they can to instill fear in their spiritual foes. On the day before the new year's day of silence, in a ritual known as Ngerupuk, local Hindus march around their villages with bamboo torches in their hands, making as much noise as they can to scare demons away. In a recent but widely-loved tradition started in the mid 1980s, Balinese youths parade ogoh-ogoh, giant figurines of paper and bamboo, spectacularly decorated, scary representations of the demons, with fangs and bulging eyes. Famous local politicians are sometimes also recreated as ogres on this day, causing embarrassment to the leaders and laughter on the streets.

Ngerupuk is a joyous carnival. Loud street parades feature the famed, traditional percussion instrument, the gamelan. The processions are usually managed by the Seka Teruna, the youth organization. Families merrily attend together; children are at both fascinated and scared by the event. Author Janet De Neefe, who lives in Bali, recalls, "The boys in our street made a terrifying demon with a huge snake wrapped around him, more than three meters high. The perfect snakeskin was made from layers of thinly cut foam, then painted in shades of green and brown. The monster was red, black and white. Music blasted from its mouth (there was a transistor radio connected inside) and its eyes flashed. When seeing these monsters, small children often cry with fear, or hide behind their mother's sarong; but slightly older kids love it. My two boys were in awe of its creators." Finally, most ogoh-ogoh are taken to the intersections and burned to the ground, in a clear message of what will happen to any malevolent ones who dare to stay.

After that, the island falls silent. Nyepi, as that day is called, begins at 6 am on the day after Ngerupuk.

Demons expelled, evil purged, the Balinese lay quiet. If any bad spirit decides to come back, the idea is that they will find the island uninhabited, not worth

occupying; and, confused, the demons will leave forever.

Nyepi is a day reserved for self-reflection. Pecalang (traditional Balinese security men), wearing a black uniform and a ceremonial hat, secure the streets and stop any activities that disturb Nyepi. No vehicle or foot traffic is allowed, save for medical emergencies.

At home, no work should be done. Many fast and perform religious practices. It is a particularly good day for meditation. Fires are also proscribed. Electricity is turned off in most places and all public lighting is shut down. Stars are strikingly visible on that dark night, a spectacle that does not go unnoticed when there is no television or radio to distract--even sex is not supposed to happen on Nyepi's eve.

"When we first came here we did not know the full rules about Nyepi," shares Puneet Malhotra. "My wife was pregnant and we switched on the light for safety. Immediately people came asking us to switch off the lights."

"Nothing is happening on Nyepi," recounts Bhubneshwar Sharma, deputy director at the Indian Cultural Centre of the Embassy of India. "Even dogs stop barking. There is pin-drop silence. Everything is closed. It may seem like a wasted day, but it is really great. Something like this cannot be imagined in India. But these people have a lot of patience."

Although Nyepi is primarily a Hindu holiday, non-Hindu residents of Bali observe silence out of respect for their fellow citizens. Tourism is the lifeblood of Bali's economy. Still, on Nyepi, tourists are expected to understand and respect the tradition. While not bound by law to obey the holiday disciplines, they find the hotel staff reduced and striving to remain quiet. Visitors are free to do as they wish in their hotels, but no one is allowed on the beaches or streets, and the island's solitary airport is closed. Tourists may turn on the lights in their rooms, but their windows are often draped and curtained to keep the hotel inconspicuous. Most find the day charming rather than a nuisance; in fact, many schedule their trip to experience the peace and quiet, when one need not retreat from the bustling city to find silence. Hotels offer special package rates for the three days of new year.

The day after Nyepi, social activity picks up again. This is a time known as Ngembak Geni, when families and friends gather to ask forgiveness from one another and perform certain religious rites together. Harmony prevails. The Balinese have done their part, through sadhana and worship, in hopes that a wonderful new year has begun.