Rites of Passage: Setting Souls Free with Fire To Reincarnate in Paradise
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Rites of passage

Setting Souls Free with Fire To Reincarnate in Paradise

Balinese Hindus believe proper cremation is critical to cutting earthly bonds and ensuring the soul's unfettered passage into its next birth--back in heavenly Bali

By Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

From the moment I landed in Bali I kept hearing about Bali's extremely expensive and colorful cremations, known as ngaben or pelebon. Part of my assignment from Hinduism Today was to personally attend a cremation ceremony. I had two opportunities. My guide, priest Ida Rsi, took me to the cremation of an old, wealthy farmer. We also attended the post-cremation purification ceremonies for a priest's family. In addition, we were given photos of a royal cremation held in August 2011, just a month before I arrived (shown below and on the next page).

Unlike India, where cremation is a private, extremely somber and sorrowful affair, in Bali cremations are spectacular and festive. And, to my surprise, tourists and journalists like myself are more than welcome to attend. Here there is no question about life after death, and it is the duty of family and community to spare no cost and effort to set the soul completely free. The passage to swarga (heaven) is not a simple journey. Great care must be taken to ensure that a loved one is not caught in state of bondage in the lower astral realms but free to travel on. Anything less would be disrespectful. Further, since he or she is destined for union with God or a new body in heavenly Bali, it is a joyous celebration, the bigger the better!

A Wealthy Farmer Sent to Heaven

I Pekak Wayan, a farmer from Banjar Kaja Sesetan, had passed and was cremated on September 20, 2011, during my visit. We arrived at the outskirts of his village around 10am. The streets where the procession would pass were barricaded. Villagers waited on all sides to bid their last farewell to the departed soul. Hectic

activity was going on at the home of the deceased. A large number of relatives, village friends and neighbors had gathered outside, attired in colorful Balinese dress, unlike in India where you would see only white or black. The overall atmosphere was festive and joyful. Many of the women who were close relatives, all formally dressed, carried beautiful flower offerings on their heads. One told me the deceased was an eighty-year-old farmer. He had a happy, large and prosperous family from his two marriages. They were well off and therefore able to cremate him within a few days of his passing.

With the priest chanting mantras, half a dozen young men took the body out of the home and placed it on a palanquin called wadah or bade, made of bamboo and colorfully decorated with paper, silk cloth, mirrors and flowers. On the back of the bade, prominently displayed, was a photograph of the deceased. The number of tiers of the bade depend on the caste and background of the deceased--seven for kshatriyas, nine for royalty and eleven for high-caste brahmin priests. Since this old man was a farmer, he had only one tier. Men pulled the tower on a cart. Women pulled out a white sheet to cover those who marched ahead of the wadah. A gamelan band played, while the priest kept sprinkling holy water all on around the dead body. On the beat of the music the body of the deceased was vigorously shaken by those carrying the bade, to ward off the influence of unholy spirits.

We covered several kilometers in the scorching heat. After forty minutes we arrived at the cremation grounds, where I was surprised to find booths selling cold drinks and snacks to the participants. This certainly would be forbidden in India. Even here, at the cremation grounds, the atmosphere was festive; the people chatted happily with each other as the priest prepared the body.

All the floral offerings and gifts were placed on a large platform. Finally the body was placed on a platform and cremated to the sound of priests' chanting and traditional Balinese gamelan music, played by over a dozen musicians in a nearby covered area.

In India, no petroleum product is normally used to burn the body. But here, they make liberal use of pressurized kerosene to ensure that the fire lights easily and completely consumes the body.

Why Mourn for Those Going to God?

Prof. Dr. Litt I Gusti Putu Phagunadi explained the Balinese Hindu attitude toward death. "Even today we are following Brahmanism. The basics have not changed here. Our Vedas tell us there is no need to be sad. Muslims and Christians are sorrowful at death--but not Hindus. We are going to heaven to meet God. We have to be cheerful. That is why music is played. We live in bondage on Earth and perform our karma. We believe in punarjanma, reincarnation, karma and moksha. We have come here from heaven and go back to heaven. If a young one dies, we are sad for some time; that is natural. But finally we have to be happy, as the soul has been released. According to orthodox Hinduism there should be no mourning. In fact, if your mother dies and you are weeping, she will not be able to go to heaven. We believe Ganga Ji is going to merge in the sea. That is why after cremation the ashes are immersed in the sea. Nobody is allowed to keep the ashes at home."

A Precise and Complex Undertaking

Dr. I Gusti Ngurah Sudiana, a professor of sociology, explained, "In India cremation is done as soon as possible, but in Bali we wait for an auspicious day. The cremation may not occur for seven days or even three to six months. We have two types of cremations: those done for a single individual and mass cremations. Wealthy families embalm and keep the body at home. Commoners bury the body at a cemetary and wait for the auspicious day. Then such bodies are dug up and as 100 bodies or more are cremated at one time."

On the chosen day, funeral rites begin at home with a complex series of ceremonies. The Balinese consider any remains that were buried as impure, so the exhumed remains--by now nothing but a pile of bones--are left at the cemetery, not brought to the home. Ida Rsi Bhujangga Waisnawa Putra Sara Shri Satya Jyoti describes the general flow of events: "At home where the body is kept, or using an effigy if the body was buried, the priest prepares holy water, known as tirtham. This water becomes like the holy water of river Ganga.

"The body or effigy is taken on a special palanquin in a grand procession to the cremation grounds. For priests or wealthy people, the remains are transferred to a sarcophogus fashioned in the form of a bull or other animal, depending on the caste of the deceased. The holy water is sprinkled or poured on the physical remains of the deceased, which is then cremated. The ashes and powdered bones are thereafter placed inside a yellow coconut with more priestly rites. This is treated as a living person and taken to the sea or a river for immersion. This stage, the initial cremation, sends the pancha maha bhutas (five elements) of the deceased back to their origin. The soul is now free of bodily form and is called a pitra."

But this is not the end. Later, more ceremonies must be done--as elaborate as the family's finances will allow. After a week, a month or even some years, a purification ritual, called nyekah or memukur, must be performed. I was able to take part in the nyekah of a priest family.

Ida Rsi says, "Nyekah serves to purify the soul by releasing it from all desire or need. Since the bones have already been thrown into the sea during the initial cremation, nyekah is done with an effigy of the deceased, a lingga sangge (symbol of the soul). The rites start early in the morning and go all day. On the evening of the purification ceremonies there is usually entertainment in the form of music, masked dances and a puppet show that entertains and instructs everyone with the Mahabharata story of Bhima's passage to heaven. Early the next morning, a final puja is performed, the effigy is burned and its ashes are immersed in the sea. The soul, now purified, is considered to have been transformed into Deity and has joined the Gods as an hygang pitara, a departed ancestor."

Later in the afternoon, the next day or next week, on an auspicious time chosen by the high priest, the ngulapan ceremony is performed. For this the family goes the sea and calls back the soul. Then they go to a temple, carrying a photo or effigy of the person. After various rites, they take the soul back to the home shrine to be worshiped along with other ancestors. Still, it is assumed that the deceased will eventually be reborn on Earth. Priests carefully note the times of death and watch the timing of new births to see if they can identify the reappearance of someone who has died.

Financial Challenges

Centuries ago, cremations were simpler. Over time rituals have grown more and more elaborate. I learned that wealthy families may, without strain, spend enormous sums on cremations, and this benefits the community. But common villagers have a more difficult time and may even go into debt to meet the costs. The relatively new mass-cremation procedure allows everyone to participate without excessive cost.

Currently, there is also a move toward simplification. Ida Rsi says, "I have tried to introduce simpler cremation procedures and have published a book about this. I believe in time people will adopt it."

But I did not find many criticizing the performance of this or other rituals. Most seemed committed to maintaining their traditions as they are. Dr. Wedakarna Arya, a prominent Hindu leader, notes that Balinese Hindus do need to find new means of prosperity to continue performing their cremations with the traditional pomp and show. He hopes that, through education, Hindu youth will increase their earnings and use their wealth to preserve and continue their rich and elaborate culture.