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On an Island near Bali, Hinduism, Animism and Islam Overlap Side By Side - Religious Friction is Unknown

I find it a wonder that some 180 million people of the vast archipelago of the Republic of Indonesia - deriving from 350 ethnic groups and inhabiting over 13,000 islands - can hold a common national identity and live amicably together. The principle of panca sila, or "five pillars," seems to be a key. These are: belief in the one and only God, belief in a just and civilized humanity, belief in the unity of Indonesia, belief in democracy and belief in social justice.

When I consider the first pillar, two experiences come to mind as vital, colorful examples of the tolerance it creates. One was visiting the Lingsar temple on the island of Lombok and the other was attending a wedding where the groom was Muslim and the bride Balinese Hindu. When I confessed surprise on the ease, warmth and tolerance apparent in both families, my Indonesian friends smiled and murmured, "Yes, panca sila."

The island of Lombok lies due East of Bali. Of two million people who inhabit it, nearly 80% belonging to the Sasak race. The Sasaks are thought to have originated from northwest India or Burma. Close to twenty percent of the inhabitants are Hindus, originally from Bali. The remaining population is comprised of Balinese Hindus arrived in Lombok early in the 17th century and kept their uniquely Balinese customs. However, Lombok's majority is Muslim. Islam reached its shores in the 13th century through Gujarati traders. Eventually a blending occurred, creating the Wektu Telu religion, a mixing of three faiths - Balinese Hinduism, Islam and animism. Although not official, most followers of Wektu Telu consider themselves

Muslim.

The principle of trinity is basic to Wektu Telu. Allah, Mohammed and Adam comprise one trinity; the bodies of the sun, moon and stars another. Three main duties are encouraged: belief in Allah, resisting the temptations of the devil and co-operating with others by being helpful and loving people.

The Lingsar temple beautifully illustrates Wektu Telu. Built in 1714, it combines both the Balinese Hindu and Wektu Telu faiths and is divided into two sections on two levels. In the Hindu section, a shrine faces towards Gunung Agung, the sacred volcanic seat of the gods on neighboring Bali. In the Wektu Telu section, a pond dedicated to Lord Vishnu keeps a population of sacred eels. Visitors make offerings of hard-boiled eggs to coax these eels out of the shadows of the pond. Nearby on an altar rest numerous mirrors donated by Chinese business people to bring good fortune. A number of stones wrapped with strips of cloth, connected with some aspect of animism, reside there also.

This temple is fairly startling. During an annual ceremony celebrated as the rainy season approaches, both Islamic Wektu Telu and Hindus go to the temple to give offerings and pray. When they have completed their devotions they come out to pelt each other with ketupat, sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves. Apparently no one quite knows the purpose of this custom although some suggest it is to invoke rain, while others say it is to give thanks for rain.

This playful custom certainly serves as a symbol for light-hearted release of energy or perhaps a mock-battle. Would that other people, struggling to resolve differences at this perilous time, could reduce their conflicts in such a symbolic format and learn to expand enough to accept and include the beliefs of others, rather than contract so as to exclude and try to destroy them!

In Bali I was invited to attend the marriage of one of the daughters of the owners of the hotel, where I lived. The family is Balinese Hindu. The groom comes from a Javanese Muslim family. Both families are prominent and well-to-do and no expense had been spared in celebrating the union. In fact, three wedding ceremonies - a Muslim ceremony, a Balinese ceremony and a special Javanese ceremony - had already preceded this final and fourth Balinese Hindu ritual.

What made this event most remarkable was the way the date fell in the religious calendar. Two very major festivals coincided. Considerable confusion abounded because of this. On Nyepi, people must fast, stay indoors and be completely inert so that the forces of light and dark may be brought into balance. In contrast, Galungan is lavish and requires the most elaborate preparations. Everyone in Bali was preoccupied with how to accomplish this. To further confuse things, the day of the wedding was also the first day of Ramadan, so that all the members of the groom's party were fasting!

Preparations were intense and went on for many days. Brightly-colored cloth, beautifully painted with gold designs, was wrapped and festooned over practically every square inch of our living space. All areas were scrubbed, cleaned and adorned. Household deities and guardians were robed in festive sarongs and wore gaudy hats on their heads with blooms behind their ears. Neighboring women came over to help. I joined in. We rolled a sweet paste, dyed in brilliant shades, into little bails and strips and constructed flowers, figurines and various symbols incorporated into beautiful and impressive structures. Handfuls of ducks came into our complex, gripped by the neck, to become part of the special feast.

The whole ritual could be viewed as a "grounding" ceremony. Its purpose appears to be to balance out the more glamorous and romantic spirit of the previous nuptial ceremonies. This one prepares the bride and groom for the more earthy side of marital experience. Agricultural tools are employed as well as fruits, vegetables, eggs, coconuts and a basket to be carried on the head for marketing. Symbolically, the couple went through the paces of their future diurnal duties - the groom walked with a hoe over his shoulder and the bride with a basket on her head. Nothing impressed me more than how this marriage ritual literally brought "to earth" the loving union of a man and woman of different faiths.

Backstage: No Privacy, no Egos, Just Family-Like, Pure Artistic Joy

Going backstage before a performance in Bali takes you right into the heart of the culture. Here the visitor can appreciate that art and performance are offerings to the Divine. When I witnessed dancers preparing for performance, I was humbled to see how much we can learn from these people - their bearing, the way they interact and engage in tasks with a simple and natural attitude. The lack of ego and fuss is so evident, so far away from the "star" syndrome of the West, with private dressing rooms, primadonnas, divas and tempers.

In Bali, I watched everyday villagers and townsfolk transform themselves into celestial beings, clowns, demons, nymphs and frogs. Usually this takes place in a small section of floor with men and women sitting in groups but not far apart, with minimal privacy and little light. Glasses of tea and small snacks sit amidst baskets of fascinating paraphernalia: piles of fresh frangipani and hibiscus blooms, golden hair ornaments, gloves complete with fingers hairy with goats-hair and ending in giant nails, gold-painted costumes, jewelry and masks. Here, in a quiet, unhurried way, the cast prepares. One assistant dresser who winds strips of cloth in tight bands around the torsos of the women above shimmering sarongs. Trembling crowns of flowers or gold are fixed into black hair above radiantly beautiful faces. Make-up is applied before tiny hand-mirrors. Then, suddenly, the entire troupe, in magnificent array, is ready. Throughout the process no-one is directing anyone. Each person seems to know just what to do. The harmony is palpable.

I found myself thinking often about the harmony I experienced in Bali, both while I was there, and since I have left. Somehow the scene of the dancers backstage has become a metaphor for me of the way people can harmonize, rather than clash and be in chaos, reflect that this was achieved through respect and mutual dedication to a common task.

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