

Death in Bali

Cremation taught lesson in living

BY DR. MEL BORINS

EVERY aspect of daily life in Bali is full of celebrations and ceremonies. We were set to leave Ubud, a small town known for its incredible painters, when a fellow traveller mentioned there was to be a cremation.

My wife, three children, a Torontonian named Karen, our host Agus, his wife and child packed ourselves into a small compact car around 11 a.m. and travelled seven kilometers along a narrow perilous road to the tiny village of Deng where the cremation was to take place.

We felt lucky to be invited to attend this small family celebration and relieved to learn we were the only foreigners present.

Fourteen years before when Bali was relatively untouched by mass tourism, my wife and I had attended a simple cremation in Ubud where there were only a few tourist faces in the crowd. On our second trip there six years later, we were shocked to discover that organized tours were lugging busloads of camera-laden tourists to cremations.

Can you imagine being at the cemetery burying one of your close relatives when a busload of tourists in thongs, singlets, sun hats, sunglasses and video cameras come marching up to the grave site and begin taking photos, talking and laughing, completely oblivious to the solemnity of the occasion?

I have always been amazed at the openness of the Balinese people. Many countries suffer from xenophobia or the fear and distrust of foreigners or anyone different. Not the Balinese. They welcome foreigners — even at the time of their ceremony for the dead.

Bali is a Hindu island of 2.7 million people in Indonesia, the largest Moslem country in the world. The Hindus believe that humans are composed of two parts — the body and the soul. When the body dies and is burnt then the spirit is released to be reincarnated in paradise. Those with good karma or right deeds and actions will be released from the cycle of birth and death to join the cosmos or be part of God.

If your karma or actions are good but not perfect, then your spirit will return to earth to be reborn in another human being and you will have another opportunity to work on any unfinished business. If your actions in life have not been good then you might be reincarnated as an animal.

Most of the time, the cremation is a release of the soul to a higher spiritual plane and freedom from the world of pain and suffering in which we all live, so the Balinese do not mourn.

The man whose cremation we attended was in his sixties and had been sick for 17 years. He was married but childless, and there were no tears displayed and no one appeared outwardly sad, except his wife. In Balinese society tears are not acceptable even from young children. It is especially considered bad for the spirit if tears fall on the body during the ceremony.

It is customary for family members to return home in order to see the dying person before he passes away. Close relatives will fly in from all over to bid a final farewell and be there when death occurs. The 100 or so participants at this particular cremation came with offerings to the home of the deceased



Cremation in Bali: Body wrapped in white sheets and placed in basket-like container

and the whole day was spent around the family temple.

There is a temple in every home. This makes religion and worship more personal and part of every family. It is believed that ancestral spirits inhabit the family temple. Since these spirits watch over the day-to-day life of the family and provide protection and guidance, it's extremely important to care for, honor and maintain the temple.

When we arrived, the women were sitting on a central elevated concrete area (the bedroom) where the body was resting behind a curtain. They were busy folding palm leaves to make small trays and decorations for the offerings. Other women were in the temple itself arranging food on trays, lighting incense and making preparations for the meal and ceremonies to follow.

Tea and sympathy

The men were dressed in sarongs, a piece of rectangular cloth wrapped around the waist with a sash tied on top. Most also wore a piece of cloth as a headband. They were grouped sitting cross-legged around the verandah of the house. Tea and cigarettes were passed around while everyone talked.

Some of the men were busy chopping wood; digging holes for posts; building platforms made of bamboo; roasting pigs; sacrificing chickens and ducks; and helping with the preparation of the funeral pyre.

Off in the background behind the kitchen, about 20 men with black-and-white checkered cloths around their waists and white headbands sat cross-legged. They made up the gamelan orchestra — an ensemble of xylophones, gongs, flutes and percussion instruments particular to Indonesia. They played the entire day — giving the ceremony a kind of festive air.

After a buffet style lunch, the body was brought from behind the curtain and placed on a home-built bamboo platform. All the family gathered round and touched the un-

covered body. Older men chanted a sort of lament, while priests' assistants washed the face and head, combed the hair, symbolically clipped the nails, and laid flowers all around.

We found it quite moving to see the relatives directing all their attentions to the dead person. Everyone was so gentle and caring that it almost seemed to give the body life. After the preparations, which lasted about an hour, the body was wrapped in white sheets and placed in a basket-like container made from interwoven palm leaves.

In the West, the dead person is usually avoided. Even the act of identifying a dead body is repellent to many. Few would think of touching and caressing a corpse. In Bali, the cleaning, combing and touching the body offers everyone an opportunity to say goodbye. There is nothing scary or taboo about the dead person. He is treated with love and respect, and everyone who was close to that person has an opportunity to pay their last respects with reverence.

In our society, the distancing of ourselves from the dead person creates problems for those who have lost close relatives. Many times the process of the funeral is so fast and impersonal that people are left unable to believe that the person really died or with the feeling they didn't say goodbye properly. I have seen many patients who as children were not allowed to attend their parent's funeral and who feel quite angry and unresolved about their loved one's death.

At the cremation, the priest — dressed in white, with a long black beard — sat cross-legged on a high platform overlooking the body and the family. The religious ceremony took several hours with prayers and blessings interspersed with bell ringing and the sprinkling of holy water on all the participants.

Hindus believe that man is composed of five elements: Earth, wind, fire, ether and water. When the body is burnt it goes back to the five elements. The body first becomes fire, the ashes fall to the earth, the smoke becomes vapors or ether, and is blown by the wind or air. Finally the ashes are taken

and thrown into the sea.

After the prayers were finished, just after sunset, all the women gathered the offerings and piled them high on their heads. The men lifted the huge bamboo platform with the funeral tower on top. They all marched from the home, up alleys, through the main street of the town, to the cremation field.

The procession was followed by the whole orchestra playing as they marched. Members of the village lined the streets and watched as we marched past, stopping traffic in all directions.

At the cremation field, torches were lit and the body was removed in a ceremony from the tower and placed in a casket. Here again the family visited, bringing food, drink and saying prayers. Finally a propane torch lit the platform and the body went up in flames. The smell of burning flesh permeated the air.

Prayers and fire

The family of the deceased waited till the fire ended and then took the ashes to the nearest sea. This custom is the final purification, the washing away of all uncleanness. Many days after the cremation, a second funeral releases the body from all thought and feeling still clinging to it.

I was hesitant at first to have my three children attend this all-day celebration. I was concerned how they would react to death and was also worried they would get restless sitting around for so long without any real entertainment. Surprisingly, the experience was a valuable one.

By witnessing the dead body and the way everyone related to it without the tears and screaming that sometimes goes on in the West, the children could see the normality and acceptance of death as part of life. They could view the corpse without fear and seeing other people touching it, made it less scary. They became very curious, asking questions about where the brain goes after dying and why do we bury people in the ground. Allowing them to think of

their own mortality helped put into perspective how lucky we are to be alive.

My 11-year-old son Larry, was more disgusted when he watched one of the men sharpen a bamboo stick, slit the neck of a live chicken and drain the blood. My seven-year-old David was fascinated by the fire and how the body burned, while my three-year-old son Marc was surprised to see the naked body of the corpse, genitals exposed.

The Balinese cremation is a time for the family to come together to honor the departed. Everyone is busy with the preparations, and the immediate family is supported and comforted. The home rather than the funeral parlor, or cemetery becomes the central meeting place. Ritual and prayer is performed and everyone is touched in the process. For the one day at least, time stands still and people stop whatever they are doing to take part.

In the West we are always fighting death, sometimes forgetting that everyone must die. The medical profession, through our desire to help, sometimes even keep patients alive via respirators, intravenous and drugs long after the essence of the person is gone. Families sometimes suffer for weeks seeing their loved ones reduced to the "living dead" or are left with guilt that more could have been done.

Many people like the idea of a grave that they can visit. The Balinese believe that the soul lives on and resides in their family temple, so they can communicate and feel the presence of their ancestors every day.

I left the cremation feeling positive. The energy of the proceedings calmed me, offered me a chance to slow down and contemplate death. There were no black costumes — just music, color and festivities. This attitude toward death, I thought, is so much healthier in every way than ours.

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