

# Life is one continuous celebration in Bali

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BALI, Indonesia

**B**ALI IS A SMALL Hindu island of two and three-quarter million people in Indonesia, one of the largest Moslem countries in the world. It is only 140 kilometres by 80 kilometres and lies just south of the equator, north of Australia and southeast of Singapore. It was my third visit to this remarkable island, which integrates religious festivals and celebrations into every aspect of daily life.

Not only are the Balinese supposed to pray three times a day in their family temple — which is in every household — but there are special prayer days every five days, every 15 days, every full moon, every dark moon and especially every 210 days on the anniversary of the founding of every temple.

As well as the household temple, every village has at least three temples, one for Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma.

In addition there are clan temples, ancestral temples, and temples for different organizations like rice growers, carvers, and fishing co-operatives. Each one of the thousands of temples has a particular anniversary date when an *odalan* — festival — is held.

The family temple makes religion and worship more personal. It brings God and spirituality into the daily experience of every family. Most life-cycle ceremonies, like births, marriages, birthdays, and



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prayers for the sick, are celebrated in the family temple.

Often family members will come home from all over to gather for these special occasions. This strengthens family ties and maintains a strong extended family unit.

The most exciting thing for me, and why I'm drawn back to Bali, is the continual celebrations and festivals that are happening all over the island. Not a day would go by when I didn't see Balinese women dressed in colorful temple dresses, balancing baskets of food, flowers and offerings high on their heads, walking single file on their way to some celebration.

It seems the Balinese take any opportunity to celebrate and during my stays I went to store openings, tooth filing ceremonies, as well as cremations and temple festivals. A unique and interesting group of anniversaries are those called *tumpeks*. These are special days to honor inanimate objects, secular articles of culture and animals.

For example, on special days offerings are made to all weapons such as swords, daggers and spears. Other *tumpeks* honor trees; articles of culture, like instruments, masks, puppets and dance paraphernalia; jewelry and objects of gold silver and precious stones, and even domestic animals.

I was fortunate to be in Bali on a day devoted to Saraswati, goddess of wisdom. Special prayers are said regarding learning, education and books. On this day, theoretically, people are not supposed to read or write. Students gather at temples to ask Saraswati for success in their studies and special ceremonies are held at schools and libraries. Everyone offers thanks for the books they own and for the privilege of learning.

I would meet Ketut Liyer in Pengosekan, a village outside the city of Ubud, one of the main centres for art. Ketut is a Balian Usada — healer — who relies on healing texts called *lontar*. These *lontar* are manuscripts incised on elaborately carved palm leaves in Sanskrit or Kawi language and contain the religious knowledge that has been handed down from one generation to another. There are specific *lontar* that are concerned with healing and these are treated as sacred possessions, possessing the wisdom of the ancestors.

Ketut's grandfather was a famous healer and teacher of *lontar*. He prophesied that Ketut would also be a healer. However, Ketut had always wanted to be an artist, so he started off being an artist and while young he became quite ill.

He sought the assistance of a *Tetakson*, a Balinese healer who goes into an altered state or trance to receive messages from spirits.

These *Tetakson* have the power to foretell the future or discover what is wrong with people when they are sick. The *Tetakson* told Ketut that he was ill because he was not following his real calling, which was to be a Balian.

Ketut went home and began reading his great grandfather's *lontar* and began healing himself and soon others came to him. Now, he reads *lontar* daily and administers the leaves, flowers, roots, and bark of medicinal plants. The *lontar* help him to diagnose and treat illness and provide mantras, and incantations, to ward off evil spirits and deal with spiritual problems. Many people come from all over Bali to receive his advice.

**O**N SARASWATI I visited Ketut. Before entering his home my wife and I put on sarongs, which are 2.5-metre cloth worn wrapped around the waist. Another thin piece of rectangular cloth is tied on top as a sash. This is required dress to visit any temple.

Ketut was dressed all in white, with a white scarf around his head. His wide smile bulged with teeth as he welcomed us into the area of the compound which housed the temple. All the books of the household, as well as his collection of *lontar*, were piled high in the centre, on the wooden altar. Everywhere there were offerings of flowers, fruit, and palm-leaf decorations, while incense sticks in every nook and cranny filled the air with a sweet fragrance.

All day, members of the community and all his patients came to his temple, bringing gifts and offerings, and placed them on the platform next to the books. Ketut rang his temple bell, chanted prayers, while ceremonial gamelan music played on his tape recorder in the background.

People were on their knees facing the altar in lines and Ketut came around and sprinkled holy water on their heads while chanting prayers. Holy water was also poured into people's palms and they drank while uttering prayers silently to themselves. There was a steady stream of people all afternoon and a festive atmosphere in his home.

Similar kinds of ceremonies were occurring all across the island. By setting aside that special day twice a year to honor books and learning, the Balinese show their respect and high regard for knowledge and literature. Aspects of life often taken for granted then become special and are given reverence. They take the mundane and elevate it to

a level of celebration, giving thanks for every part of their life.

I used to be reluctant to write about Bali because I worried that my articles might stimulate a rise in tourism and hence help to destroy this island paradise. Many argue that the attention to ritual, the strong family orientation, and their spiritual awareness, will help the culture to survive.

I advise you not to wait and see. Travel to Bali and go out into the rural areas where their culture is still very much alive. Then be on the lookout for celebrations. If you keep your eyes and ears open then it will be impossible not to stumble on some festival, cremation, or anniversary. More than any place I've been, Bali keeps the spiritual aspect of existence a vibrant part of daily life.