

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

Bali ignites spectacular Hindu celebration of the dead

By Seth Mydans

Tuesday, July 15, 2008

UBUD, Indonesia: Tiny bits of bone, plucked from the ashes of a royal cremation, found their final resting place in the sea early Wednesday, empty of the soul that had been liberated by fire.

It was the last step in an elaborate cremation ceremony three months in the making, the most spectacular royal funeral in Bali in at least three decades.

In a roar of orange flames, the body of Agung Suyasa, head of the royal family of Ubud, was reduced to its earthly elements Tuesday in a mass cremation that included three royal figures and 68 commoners.

In a Balinese tradition, the bodies of the commoners had waited to join Suyasa and two other members of his extended family in a royal cremation, although the pyres of the commoners were in a separate location.

Some of them had waited months or even years, buried or mummified, for the spectacular rites that combine the energy, mysticism and creativity of this Hindu island.

Deep in the night, the bones continued to burn, when all the crematory superstructure had been demolished by flames. Once the embers had died down, family members plucked bits of bone from the ashes and prepared them for disposal in the ocean, a half-hour drive away.

The cremation and the disposal of the last bits of bone are part of a journey of purification and renewal in which, according to Balinese belief, the soul can return to inhabit a new being - generally a member of the same family - until, once again, it is freed through cremation.

"None of us is brand new," said Raka Kerthyasa, the younger half-brother of Suyasa who is now the guardian of the ancient but symbolic royal family and who oversaw the cremation. "We are part of the cycle of life."

That ever-changing cycle may one day claim the cremation rites themselves, and some here say that in the face of a globalizing world, Bali may never again see a cremation ceremony to match this one.

"They'll have things in the future, but elaborate and grand like this one, I don't think so," said I Nyoman Suradnya, an artist whose older brother was one of the commoners cremated Tuesday.

"Cultures come and go," he said. "It is just a matter of time. Don't be afraid of change. There is nothing absolute."

The culture, though, was vividly alive Tuesday as thousands of volunteer porters in purple shirts carried the giant emblems of the ceremony like armies of ants bearing impossibly large objects.

Hunched under a huge bamboo platform, the porters - 200 at a time in 100-meter, or 330-foot shifts - bore an 11-ton tower as tall as a three-story building that carried the coffin of Suyasa under a nine-tiered pinnacle.

Whooping and laughing, sometimes breaking into a run, the porters swung the platform crazily from right to left and back to confuse the spirits.

Along with the platform came a huge, undulating dragon, terrifying to behold with its bulging eyes and splayed teeth. After that came a giant black wood bull that would serve as the sarcophagus at the cremation.

"Strange as it seems, it is in their cremation ceremonies that the Balinese have their greatest fun," Miguel Covarrubias wrote in his classic work, "Island of Bali," published in 1937.

"A cremation is an occasion for gaiety and not for mourning, since it represents the accomplishment of their most sacred duty" to liberate the souls of the dead, he wrote.

For most of the time since he died on March 28, the body of Suyasa had been lying embalmed, as if asleep, in his palace, as the people of Ubud came to pay their respects.

On a continuous vigil, the family brought daily offerings and symbolic meals and prepared coffee and tea by the bier. A comb, toothbrush and mirror were kept handy nearby.

On Tuesday, poised between heaven and earth in the steep funerary tower, Suyasa's white and gold coffin entered the cremation site, gliding on the backs of its 200 porters as smoothly as if it were on ice.

Porters carried the coffin down a soaring white chute, then paraded it three times around the waiting bull, trailed by men and women with pyramids of offerings on their heads.

On the crematory platform, the hollow back of the bull was opened and the body was placed inside. A second, smaller bull stood by its side holding the body of another royal, Gede Raka.

The sun was sinking as the back of the giant bull was closed and the crematory plaza, packed with thousands of onlookers, twinkled with the flashes of cameras.

Suddenly, bright shoots of flame appeared under the belly of the bull, quickly caught its gold colored necklaces and traveled upward. Smoke seemed to pour from its nostrils and flames shot from its eyes. Its curved horns and ears were on fire.

As the bull fell away, the iron bars that formed its frame remained, and within them hung the burning skeleton, its skull tilted downwards, its right foot spurting flames.

Acting with ritual disrespect for the now-useless body, workers poked and prodded at it with long bamboo poles to stoke the fire and it swayed slightly in the flames.

The body disintegrated into its five earthly elements: earth, wind, water, fire and ether. Its soul disappeared into the night sky, escorted by a shower of sparks.

One of Suraya's sons, Indrayana, sat on the ground nearby, dressed in ritual gold, holding his hands in prayer toward his father. Then, fire to fire, he lit a cigarette, looked up, and inhaled.

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