3 Bali

All over the world Bali is known as 'the island of the gods'; the paradise on Earth that supposedly inspired its inhabitants in their strikingly refined cultural achievements. How surprising reality is: the Balinese too, has his worries. His daily life is full of pitfalls; paradise is a long way off. And it turns out that in Bali the key to a better existence lies not in this, but in some other, invisible world.

Ancestors, residing in this invisible world, play a major role in the island. Henk Schulte Nordholt shows how important their presence is in the pursuit of power and status. Especially in the higher strata ancestor worship proves to be a formidable political weapon.
In addition to this, a good relationship with one's ancestors is seen as a condition for a safe course through life. Fear and insecurity are removed by communication with this invisible world. To many the trance medium, the *balian taksu*, is indispensable. Annemarie Verkruisen describes a consultation.

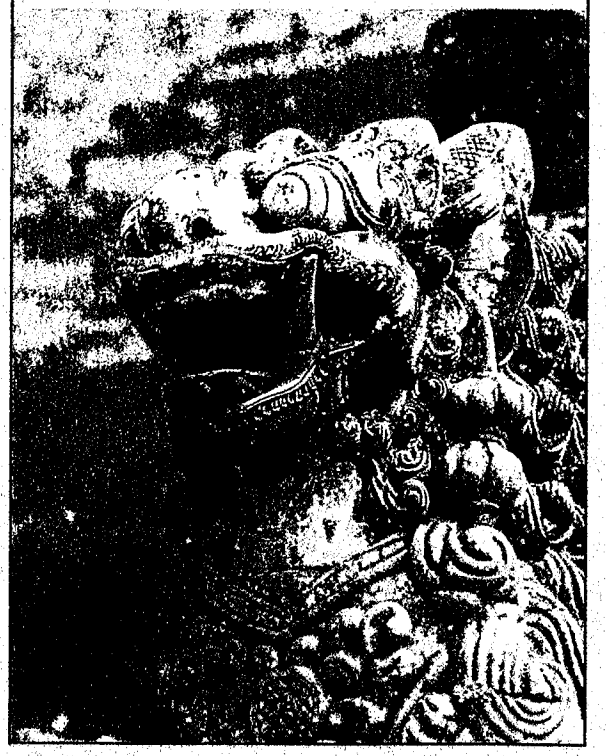
Status and ancestors

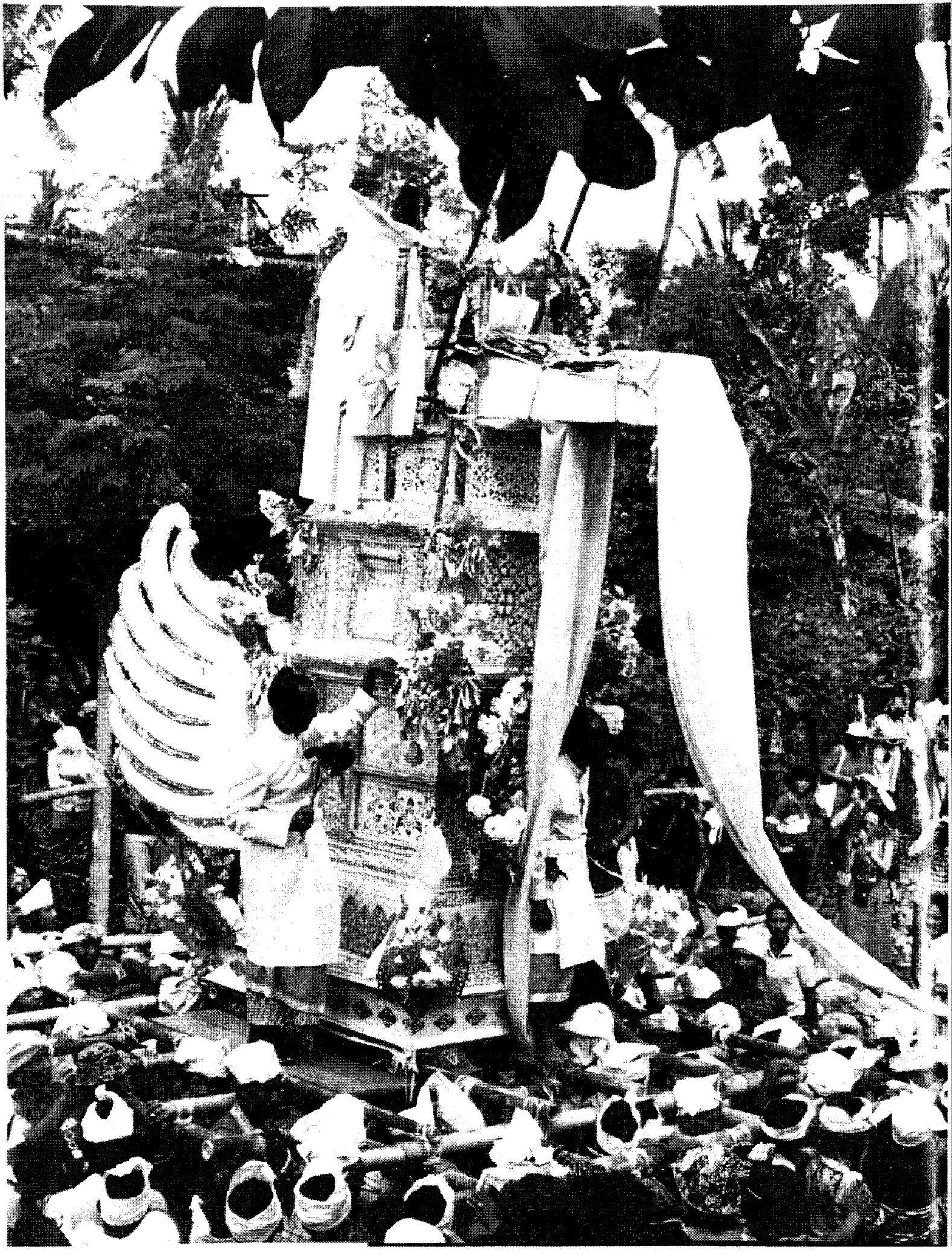
Balinese society has a very hierarchical structure. Few Balinese think they are on a level with others. Instead, they actually emphasize their mutual differences, pointing out that one person ranks higher than the other. These differences in status are reflected in their language, among other things. It befits a higher person to be addressed in polite (high) terms, and a lower person to be spoken to in neutral (low) terms. That social order is also revealed in a gathering of people of different rank. Those of higher status sit in a more elevated position than those of lower class. Higher and lower seats are embedded as it were, in the surrounding landscape. In Bali, a higher position is referred to by the term *kaja*, meaning 'to the mountains', whereas the term *kelod* (to the sea) refers to a lower position. Thus the Balinese landscape reflects the hierarchical relations.
Highest are the mountains cutting straight across the island: the dwelling-places of the gods. The wooded mountain slopes gradually blend into a gently sloping, fertile plain running down to the sea. The sea is where the demons dwell; they can cause disease and other calamities to descend on the land. Between the mountains and the sea, between gods and demons, between 'high' and 'low', live the people.

◂ *A balian taksu beseeches the gods to help her, while in her yard a few visitors are already waiting for a consultation. Soon, in a state of trance, she will reveal to her clients the wishes and advice of the gods and ancestors.*

Gods, ancestors and demons

Balinese religion, *Agama Hindu Bali*, is a mixture of pre-Hindu, Buddhist and Hindu elements. This religion, professed by over ninety percent of the Balinese population, is based on the worship of a vast number of gods, deified ancestors and demons.
The gods can be distinguished into two categories. The first comprises gods from the Hindu pantheon who were given a niche in Bali's original religion. For instance Vishnu, the deity who sustains the universe. In the second category we find gods and goddesses who are linked to nature.
The Balinese worships not only the gods, but also his deified ancestors. Their souls need never return to the world of the mortals, they have forever been admitted to the realm of the gods.
The demons finally, are the opposites of the gods and ancestors in every respect: their appearance is frightening and their intentions are purely evil.





The life cycle

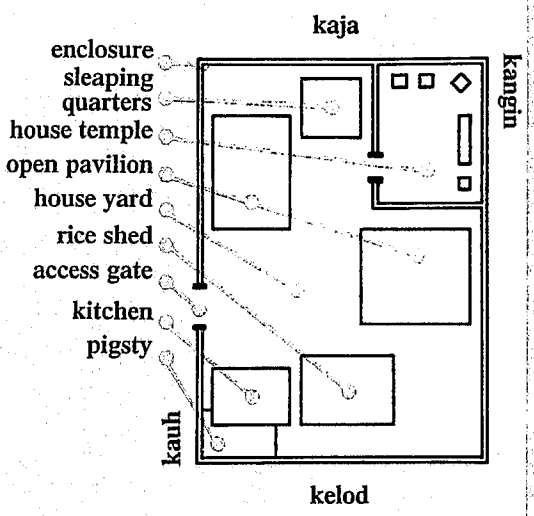
Analogous with the water cycle, human life in Bali proceeds in a constant cycle between the mountains and the sea. From the mountains, the water cascades down through deeply eroded gorges. There it flows out into countless little streams spreading across the rice fields and ending up in the sea. Water evaporating from the sea rises to the mountains to descend again, fertilizing the land.
The human soul follows the same cyclical course. After death the body is burned to free the soul from all earthly bonds. Next of kin ritually take the soul out to sea, from where it ascends to the mountains to join its ancestors. Like the water, the soul in turn descends from the mountains: again a human life commences on Earth. This cycle of birth and death must be repeated several times before the soul can join its deified ancestors forever. In an attempt to maintain the hierarchical order and to avert any dangerous disturbances, temple rituals accompany this uninterrupted cycle.

What am I

If a Balinese is asked *who* he is, he usually won't immediately give his name, but respond by telling *what* he is. In other words: he will first indicate his position in relation to his fellow Balinese. Only then will he give his name. The position he has in society becomes clear by referring to the family context he belongs to. The status of this family group determines the position of its members in the social hierarchy. Family contexts are most clearly expressed in a network of small temples. Every yard has its own house temple, situated in a 'high' spot: 'towards the mountains'. All house temples of a family group are linked to the temple in the 'mother yard', from where in due course various sons departed to found yards of their own. Regularly, a family gathers around the ancestral shrine in the 'mother yard' to express their mutual bond in a fixed ritual.
Usually, a family also has a central ancestral shrine which it shares with many other families. This is the *kawitan* (literally: stock, origin), where the common forefather is worshipped. This *kawitan* is the summit of the hierarchy of family temples, and from this the Balinese derives his identity. Joining in the ritual around the *kawitan* shows that one belongs to a specific group.

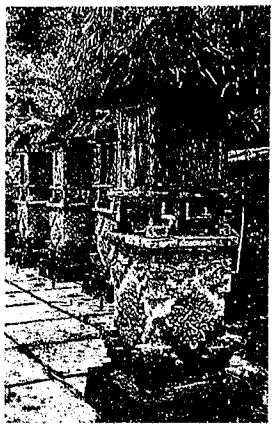
Living in the right direction

The Balinese orientates himself in a way that differs from the Westerner's. He doesn't speak of north, south, east and west, but of the direction of the mountains (kaja), the direction of the sea (kelod), the direction of sunrise (kangin), and the direction of sunset (kauh). Kaja and kangin are considered auspicious directions; kelod and kauh are associated with disaster. We also find this idea in the spatial ordering of the house yard or premises:



In the yard, the house temple must always occupy a kaja-kangin position: as close as possible to the mountains and the rising sun. In contrast, the pigsty is invariably orientated kelod-kauh.

Therefore, to indicate what he is, a Balinese will often refer to his *kawitan*. The *kawitan* acts as an important point of reference in life. In this spot, where the progeny meet their ancestors, one's position in society is, as it were, deeply embedded in the past. In addition, one's position in the social hierarchy is derived from the founding father's status. The *kawitan*'s status legitimizes the status that the larger family group wishes to enjoy.
If a Balinese does not know where his *kawitan* is, he does not know who his forefather was, and hence neither who or what he himself is. His position in the hierarchy is completely obscure. He does not know how he is supposed to deal with others, how to address



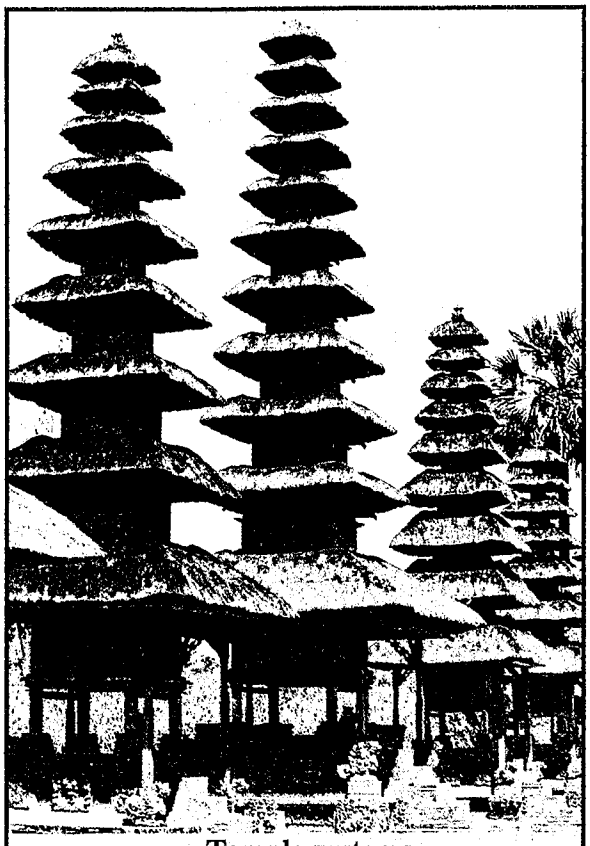
Shrine for the gods in a Balinese temple. ▲

The puri Mayun in Blahkiuh, an merajan gede or house temple of a noble family. ▼

Social classes or 'castes'

As a result of Hindu influences, Bali has a 'caste' division, but this concerns only a minority of the Balinese. Highest are the Brahmans, followed by the Satria, and last of all come the Wesya. Brahmans, Satria and Wesya jointly form the so-called *triwangsa*, the top layer of noble birth comprising a mere ten percent of the population. The large majority of the Balinese have a lower status. Their position with regard to the nobility is indicated by the term *jaba*, 'outsider'. But the *jaba* do not form one undifferentiated mass of 'caste-less' people. For there is a great variety of lineage groups, each claiming a separate status.

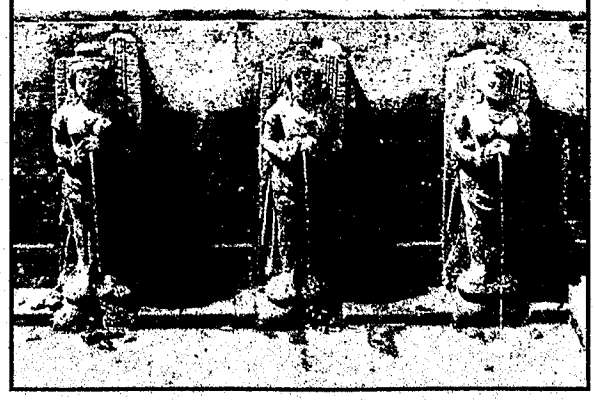
◀ *Many shoulders support a cremation tower, a bade, in conveying it to the spot where the cremation is to take place. The bade contains the remains of a Brahman priest. The tower has the shape of a padmasana, the stone lotus throne of the god Shiva found in many Balinese temples.*



Balinese shrine for the gods, built of traditional materials. Whereas the base used to consist of red brick or of stone, now – to save money – concrete is increasingly used. So is corrugated zinc, and for the same reason. Traditional materials, such as duk, the black palm fibre, and alang-alang grass, do last longer (some 25 years), but are more expensive. ▼

Temple systems

Balinese life is, as it were, embedded in temple systems. On many levels, temples act as social points of reference and are often interlinked. Every yard has its small house temple (*sanggah* or, among the nobility, *merajan*), which is related to the temple in the 'mother yard' (*sanggah gede* or *merajan gede*). In turn, several of these temples in mother yards are linked to a larger ancestral temple, (the *pura dadia* or *pura batur*), housing the *kawitan*. In addition to these, in principle every village (*desa*) has three temples: the 'navel' temple (*pura puseh*), the village temple (*pura desa*), and the temple of the dead (*pura dalem*). In the system, the village temples rank below the regional temples, which often date from the old reign of the princes, and cover much larger areas. Higher still are the temples covering all of Bali, such as the temple complex of Besakih. A separate system is formed by the irrigation temples; these have a network of their own.
In addition we find countless other temples. Every Balinese family has connections with some five to ten temples, where they regularly make sacrifices to ensure a safe course through life.



them, and where to sit. As his position is not embedded in the past, he feels utterly disorientated, adrift, hardly able to function properly.
Many large family groups have a written chronicle in which their origin and status are explained. First it offers a detailed account of the forefather's many heroic deeds and then, in an extensive genealogy, demonstrates his link with the present progeny.

The kawitan forgotten

An example will clarify the dynamics that this system of ancestor worship conceals. The chronicle of one of Bali's princely dynasties starts with the story of the first great ruler who, after many wars, had gained power over half the island. He lived around 1730, and was a successful warrior, feared everywhere. And yet, he struggled with a problem: he did not know who his ancestors were, so he did not really know who he himself was. Therefore he summoned his court priest and ordered him to write a chronicle. It was only then that the prince discovered that he had an exalted forefather, from whom his family could derive a lofty status. Thus the prince justified his acquired power by embedding it firmly in the past.
More than 250 years later: over these past centuries the dynasty has gone through turbulent times. After a tempestuous rise, periods of prosperity and crisis alternated at a rapid pace until, at the end of the nineteenth century, a fatal concurrence of circumstances spelt the fall of the principality. The dynasty was broken up and lost much of its former power.
Then modern times were ushered in: in the first half of the twentieth century Bali was under Dutch colonial Administration, and from 1945 the island has been part of the Republic of Indonesia. In particular the years between 1945 and 1965 were characterised by rapid changes involving great tensions. In this period the old dynasty lost its last remnants of coherence. An unchallenged member of the family then decided it was time for action. Under his guidance the family embarked on a quest for their *kawitan*, which had been neglected since the end of the nineteenth century. "We could have known", he told his relatives, "he who does not honour his *kawitan* and forgets his ancestors, will be pursued by disaster." Finally, in April, 1983, the dynasty was reunited in the old temple in which the *kawitan* was found. This not only restored the bond with the ancestors, but also the family's feeling of solidarity. True, the dynasty had lost its former power, but in the end it had managed to preserve its identity.

After its arrival at the place of cremation, the body of the deceased is taken from the bade, and laid in a sarcophagus to be burnt. The latter often has the shape of a bull or a cow, but may also be a simple coffin. A body is not always immediately cremated. Sometimes the next of kin have to save for years before they can afford the burning ritual. ►

▲ *For a cremation ritual that meets all requirements, a great variety of offerings is needed. The tall cylindrical offerings are called* **pisang jati**. *A main ingredient of these is a young shoot of a banana tree, symbol of a new life. A small piece of sandalwood with a stylized depiction of the deceased is also incorporated in it. The* **pisang jati** *too, is sent up in flames, and is to promote a good rebirth of the deceased.*

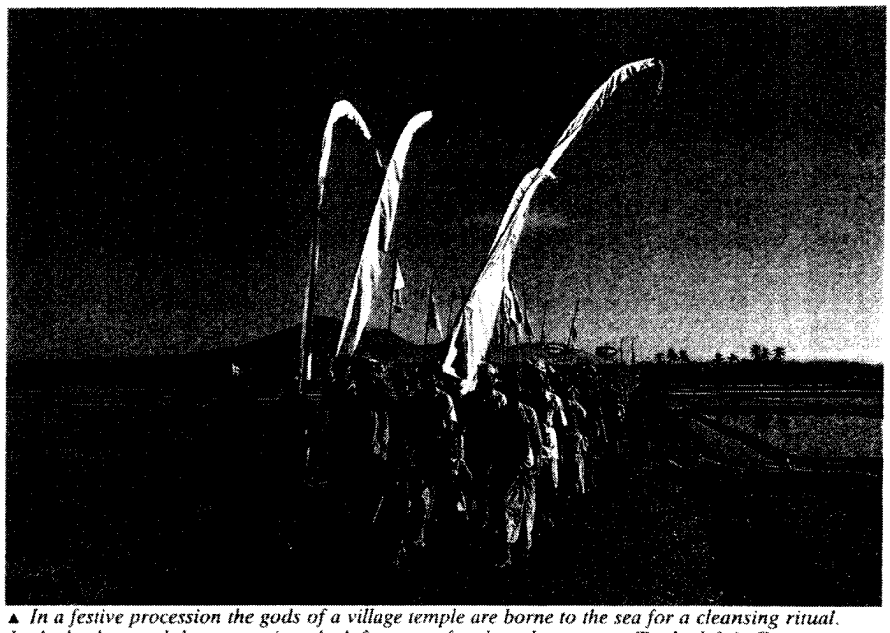
The interchangeable forefather

Changing political and economic circumstances have always influenced the size and status of family groups. Although this applied in particular to the nobility, groups of commoners too, underwent such fluctuations. Powerful families commanding respect, would usually introduce an exalted forefather as a justification of their position. Such families often had great attraction for outsiders who wanted to belong to them. Thus, powerful families increased in size and actually turned into some kind of alliance. On the other hand, such a family could also dwindle if it lost its power. Thus the Balinese was actually not so rigidly linked to one particular forefather. Depending on the vicissitudes of political fortune, he tried his luck with a different *kawitan*.

In old Bali, power and status were hard-won. This changed when, at the beginning of this century, the island came under colonial rule. Dutch Administration officials could hardly make head or tail of the maze of class differences they encountered on their arrival. So they tried to create some order by accomodating the multitude of family groups in one uniform 'caste system'. The result was a rather rigid system highly protective of the old nobility. Once a family had been assigned to a particular caste, it was stuck with it. And, once excluded from a higher caste, one could never hope for a better position and a higher status. At the beginning of the fifties this strict caste system became the subject of debate. Bali was now part of

▲ *Only after it is set free from its mortal frame, can the soul of the deceased return to its origin, the world of the gods. Hence to the next of kin it is a sacred duty to carry out a cremation.*

▲ *Gunung Agung slumbers, shrouded in mist. Heaven and Earth seem to touch above the temple complex at Besakih.*

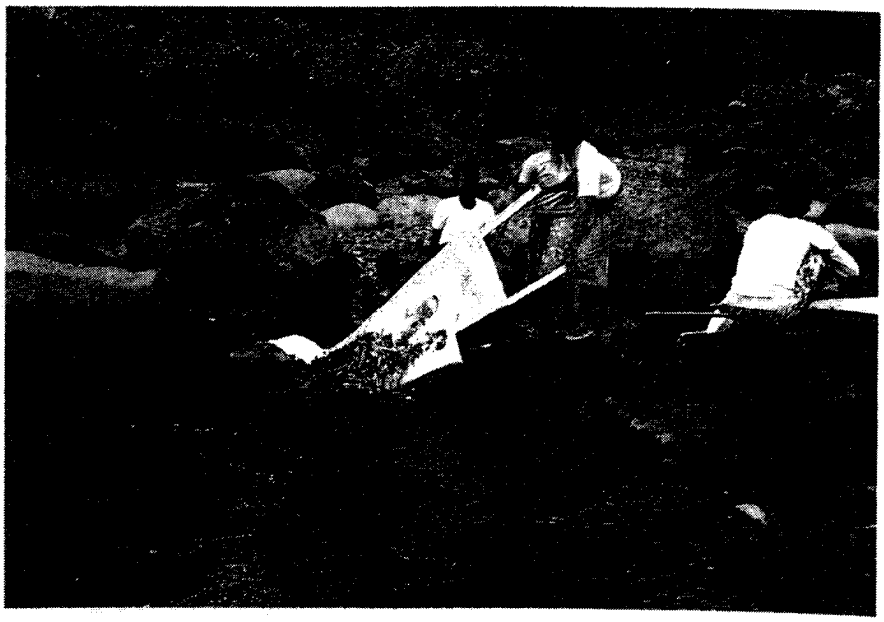


▲ *In a festive procession the gods of a village temple are borne to the sea for a cleansing ritual. In the background the mountains, the lofty seats of gods and ancestors. To the left is Gunung Batukau (2276 metres), the westernmost of Bali's three great volcanoes.*

the Republic of Indonesia, and a strong movement arose that wanted to get rid of the 'feudal' era. Class or caste barriers had to be razed, for henceforth differences in status were a thing of the past. Turbulent times began. Political parties appeared on the scene, and party-political conflicts deeply penetrated society. Identification with a political party became more important than the orientation towards a forefather. After all, unlike political leaders he offered no political shelter and did not bestow favours. Temporarily, the *kawitan* had to make way for the party membership card.

A turning-point followed in the first half of the sixties, when after the eruption of Gunung Agung, the escalating social conflicts also erupted, and old feuds between families (and often also conflicts within families) were settled at the same time. After 1965, under the new rule of General Suharto, a peaceful period set in. Party-political differences were pushed into the background and the people reorientated themselves toward the *kawitan*. There was a run on 'forgotten' forefathers, and entirely new 'family' contexts were formed and given a basis in newly written chronicles. The renewed identification with the *kawitan* seemed entirely a-political.

◀ *After the cremation, in procession, the next of kin take the ashes to the sea or to a river. There, by scattering the ashes over the water, they see to it that nothing of the mortal remains is left on Earth. Only then is the soul completely free, and can it return to the world of the gods.* ▼



Power presupposes a forefather

Yet the following example shows that ancestor worship may sometimes be of a political nature. In one of Bali's villages lived a wealthy man who together with his family had a considerable say in local matters. He owned quite a lot of land, and was involved in various trade activities. In addition, in town he was a high official.

At the beginning of this century his grandfather was still rather poor and his family belonged to the anonymous and marginal nobility. However, this changed. The family's wealth increased with its local power, so they wanted a status to match. And they succeeded: nowadays the family members adorn

Part of a ***merajan gede****, the house temple of a noble family.* ▸

themselves with exuberant noble titles, and the family possesses a fine chronicle to prove that they actually are of the blood.

Ironically, the measure taken in the fifties to raze caste barriers and limit the privileges of the nobility, has now resulted in an increasing number of wealthy families, especially in town, regarding themselves as belonging to the higher nobility. In doing so, they refer to a lofty forefather and pretend they have always belonged to the high nobility.

"The other day one of the newcomers addressed me as an equal, just like that!", complained the impoverished heir of an old, noble family, adding with a sigh: "but what can you do? They are rich and I no longer am."

In Bali, the relationship between the living and the dead, between families and their *kawitan*, is subject to constant change. New political and economic circumstances force the Balinese to redefine their identity time and again, and subsequently to express this surrounded with sacrifices.

A ***tukang banten****, a woman who prepares offerings, has finished her work.* ▿

A 'ground' offering, meant ▿ *to appease the demons.*

Offerings

In Bali, preparing offerings or ***banten*** *is a typical woman's job. At a very tender age, girls are initiated into this art by the adult women in their household. Out of palm-leaf strips the women and the girls make all kinds of constructions,* ***jejaitan****, that serve as a basis, but also as an ingenious decoration of the offerings. But their preparation also includes the moulding of biscuits out of rice dough,* ***sesamuhan****. These multi-coloured biscuits may have abstract shapes or may represent plants, animals or people. Time and again the sacrifice makers manage to create exceedingly beautiful tableaus. Flowers, fruit, rice, sugar-cane, coconuts, eggs or meat, are used for the finishing touch.*