Book Excerpt: "My Continuing Love Affair with Bali"
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Book Excerpt

"My Continuing Love Affair with Bali"

In Fragrant Rice, transplanted Aussie Janet De Neefe shares her insight into island life as experienced with her husband Ketuk and their children

Balinese cosmology is based on the principle that the universe is divided into three spaces: the underworld, place of Brahma, lies to the south, in the direction of the sea; the middle space, place of Siwa, is where mankind lives; and the heavens, place of Wisnu, lies to the north, the direction of the mountains and lakes. The same cosmic laws that apply to the universe, the macrocosmos, also apply to humans, the microcosmos. They apply to all levels of life, the seen and the unseen: how the Balinese see their place in the universe, how they live their everyday lives, how they set up their homes and even how they prepare and eat their food.

The soul, or atman, is the venerated essence of the individual, the unseen and untouchable, everlasting spirit. The Balinese believe that a life of purity and virtue will lead them to their fundamental origin: God himself, or Brahma, the Supreme Being; but there are many steps of higher learning required for entry to this holy paradise. The body is the vehicle of the soul and represents the flesh and blood that can lead the atman astray. The penalty for straying is empowered by the law of karma: the fruits of our deeds that may be manifested either in this world or the next.

On the physical plane, the head is believed to be the spiritual center, the body is the home of man and earthly desires, and the feet are connected to the land of evil, illness and negative forces. The head is the seat of wisdom, knowledge and power; it is the temple of Brahma, the soul of our being. At the temple, it is the head that receives the holy grain that helps unite our spiritual power after prayer. The udang, the cloth that men tie around their heads to wear to the temple, is like an antenna that opens a direct link to God, a means of focusing on the soul and receiving blessings. Tied at the front, the knot of the udang points to heaven, the land of the deified ancestors and God. The sarong tied around the waist points to the

netherworld. Between these worlds, we must maintain balance and harmony by observing the laws of dharma, the way of virtues. The head is sacred and you should never touch the head of anyone older than you or of greater importance.

Although the body is the location of earthly desires, it is also revered as a symbol of worldly splendor. It seems that in striving to attain eternal liberation, or moksha, it helps if you are beautiful and well groomed, for the Balinese are surely one of the world's most graceful people and attention to personal hygiene and cleanliness is paramount. After washing, the aromatherapy ritual begins with the application of fragrant creams and oils to their soft skin and hair.

As in the West, the Balinese ideal of female beauty is a slim hourglass figure with tiny waist, slender arms and glossy black hair (not brown like mine). An overweight body is a sign of imbalance and lack of harmony, proof that worldly passions obviously prevail. The body is treated with great respect, and this is evident in the poise and grace of each person. Movement of the body is gentle and slow, and handshakes are a featherweight, a polite gesture of contact rather than a show of strength. In prayer, there is a certain way to hold your hands and even cross your feet when kneeling. The Balinese innate self-assuredness comes from knowing exactly who they are, where they are going and what happens when they get there. It is only people without that faith in their place in the universe who need to "find themselves."

In Bali, the hands create and receive magic and mystery and are sacred symbols of strength, creativity and skill. The right hand represents Brahma, the creator, and the left hand represents Wisnu, the protector. The right hand receives all that is good, and the left hand receives impure, suspicious things. When we unite our hands to pray, the union of the hands, called desa indria, represents the ten tools of the body.

It has taken me many years of observation to be able to verbalize the subtleties of how the Balinese use their hands. I've watched as they've gently ground spices, prayed with fragrant flowers in the temple, drunk scented holy water after praying, mixed and bruised vegetables, massaged the weary limbs of my children and made beautiful offerings from young coconut leaves. For the Balinese, the hands provide a link with God and the ancestors through prayer and the receiving of holy water, and a link with friends, family and others through love and affection. The powerful mantras and hand gestures of the chanting priest at a temple festival is a hypnotic

act of beauty and mysticism. The expressive gestures of a Balinese dancer or the graceful blessings of offerings on the night of the dark moon echo a thousand memories of ancestors and ancient times. When my children say the Trisandhya, or Gayatri ,at the temple, the sacred hymn from the Rig Veda, they unite their hands in a manner that echoes the shape of a lotus flower, the symbol of everlasting life. And from an early age, they were taught to receive gifts by cupping the right hand over the left, and to give in return with the same right hand. The magic of all these movements is an expression of love, respect and harmony with nature.

I have watched many Balinese preparing food and have come to the conclusion that the hands are the element that brings life and vitality to the ingredients, be it through mixing, grinding or chopping. The deliberate circular motion of mixing the ingredients is an echo of an ancient Hindu mantra that protects all those within the circle, just as Lakshmana drew the circle to protect Rama's wife, Sita, in the Ramayana. The hands can assist in the delicate art of balancing textures and flavors through feeling and, of course, are the means by which the results are carried to the nose for the final appraisal.

If you wander into a Balinese compound, you will see that it is set out in a certain pattern. In the entrance way beyond the gates, there is usually a small pond to absorb evil spirits and a path that leads you right or left. This is a subtle trick to confuse evil spirits, who, luckily, cannot turn corners. Beyond the gates and temple, the compound unfolds into a network of small cottages, with wide verandahs and small windows, surrounding the central pavilion or bale dauh.

In the early hours of the morning, food and rice for the daily meal is transformed by fire and water. For this, the Balinese give thanks by making offerings. Small squares of banana leaf, called saiban, are graced with a few grains of rice and a tiny amount of cooked food. The blessings are then put in magically charged places around the compound. Only after rice and food for the offerings has been set aside may the people eat. The Balinese believe that if you don't share your food with the spirits, harm and bad fortune will certainly come your way. Therefore, good and evil spirits are treated equally.

Several families usually live together in the compound, including parents, aunties, uncles, children and the married sons. It is communal living, where everyone has certain duties and commitments to family. The sons stay with their parents and the daughters follow their husbands and set up house in his family compound. I often

wonder how we will accommodate our own daughters and whether they will live with their parents-in-law or choose to have a place of their own, as Ketut and I did. Ketut was from such a large family that they pooled their resources and bought land for each brother and sister to set up their own compounds.

Offerings are a way of life in Bali. Every day, small coconut-leaf trays containing petals, leaves and rice are placed at busy crossroads, outside shop fronts, in shrines and homes. A walk into town becomes like a spiritual journey, each step marked by a precious feast of Mother Nature's bounty and saturated with the perfume of incense, the holy scent that follows you from house to house. The dashboards of cars and motorbikes also enjoy these sacred blessings as a protection from the evil spirits that linger on the roads. On auspicious days, more elaborate offerings are made. In the afternoon of the full moon, you'll see smouldering coconut husks at the entrance of each compound, gently burning amidst bright flowers and decorative coconut leaves, their fragrance trailing quietly to heaven. The phases of the moon and sun determine the schedule and size of these offerings, and all Balinese Hindus follow these time-honoured rituals.

The five elements of air, fire, water, earth and ether are the catalysts to activate the spirit of the offering. The Balinese believe that the world is a place occupied by many beings, good and evil, seen and unseen. Great care must be taken to ensure that balance and harmony is maintained between all members of this metaphysical world. I heard a friend telling Ketut how she sometimes sleeps on the beach at night. He was very disturbed by this and replied that the world does not exist only for humans. The sea is not always a playground for people and it does not belong to us during the hours of darkness. Negative energies awaken after midnight and occupy areas such as the oceans, and they should be respected as they can create havoc with our health, mind and our energy, known as bayu. If illness or trauma disturbs the gentle force of our consciousness, then offerings must be made to revive the spirit and restore the troubled soul to normality.

The making of offerings is a way of quietly practicing the worship of God to cleanse your mind and control worldly passions. It is an act of love and respect that enriches a pure heart and helps us receive the wisdom and guidance of God. The essence of offerings is contained in Krishna's advice to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. He explains that the perfect gift to God should contain leaves, flowers, fruit and water in order to receive His blessings. Incense and flowers symbolize prayers, and water symbolizes spiritual purification. Whether great or small, this is the recipe for all offerings.

More than eighty offerings are placed around our compound each day in cosmic hot spots determined by the priest. These generally consist of small coconut-leaf squares laden with red, yellow, pink and blue petals, a slice of areca nut and betel leaves smeared with lime paste, fragrant shredded pandan leaves and some cooked food with a sprinkling of rice and fried shallots.

Before we built our house, we were instructed to make offerings to the spirits of the land in order to maintain the harmony of nature and safeguard our family. A daksina for building, an offering comprising a shaved coconut, Chinese coins, leaves and rice, along with several bricks wrapped in cloth, was buried in the foundations on a day chosen by the priest. Some people say the daksina ignites the spirit of the land; others say the coconut inside represents us, members of the human world. These offerings are nestled under every building on our property.

Larger offerings for ceremonies and grand festivities are spectacular displays of creativity and beauty. I will never tire of seeing Balinese women carrying offerings on their heads to the temple.

Janet De Neefe and husband Ketuk have four children and own two restaurants in Ubud. Her book Fragrant Rice is both a cookbook and a charming account of her life in Bali.