



From One Paradise To The Next

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The din of metal gongs and excited voices gets steadily louder. Then, with a deafening roar, a group of 40 or 50 men appear. They are straining under a square bamboo structure supporting a large, black bull. The velvet-clad, golden-horned bull—cut from a single tree trunk—is the coffin for a Balinese nobleman.

Astride it, a young man clings on desperately as the carriers swing, shake and spin the bull. The movements are designed to confuse the dead man's spirit, ensuring the soul will not return to haunt the family. A shrill cry

of alarm goes up when the lofty structure lurches dangerously at a sharp corner leading to the cremation grounds, already filled with people. It is almost a



A grand Balinese cremation procession winds through village streets; once alight, the kerosene-assisted fire quickly reduces the bull to ashes and charred remains



Rows of towers line the street for the mass cremation, the only kind of cremation affordable for many Balinese families; a red lion sarcophagus; in preparation for rebirth, souls depart this life in a haze of ashes and smoke



carnival atmosphere. Everyone is smiling happily and talking to their friends. There is not a sad face in sight. A Balinese cremation is a joyful happening and the family is delighted it has been able to make all the necessary arrangements for the soul's successful flight to heaven.

Next in the rowdy procession comes the brightly-decorated *bade*, or *wadah*, a tower topped by several pagoda-like *meru* roofs. The colourful construction glitters in gold and sparkles from thousands of mirror fragments.

From its back the monstrous, fanged face of a *bhoma* mask stares out. At the tower's base, Badawang Nala, the world turtle, and two dragons represent earth and, at the top, the *meru* roofs symbolise the levels of heaven.

Inside, bound to a shelf in the *bale baele* (a square, house-like structure between "heaven" and "earth"), the body of the nobleman is carried to the cremation grounds for the grand send-off of the soul.

Ahead of the tower a green, white-fanged dragon is carried on a high platform, accompanied by a refined and frail-looking *pedanda* (high priest) and several *pemangkus* (lay priests).

Unceremoniously the *bade* is dumped next to the resting bull. Then a tall bamboo bridge is brought close to the tower and a group of men rush up the narrow ramp to remove the body from its shelf. Meanwhile a lid has been lifted from the black bull so the remains can be lowered into its torso.

To guide and protect the soul, a group of men dressed in magical black-and-white chequered *poleng* cloth perform the sacred *baris gede* dance. On their heads are tall, triangular hats and, behind their ears, brilliant-red hibiscus flowers.

With its back closed again, the bull is carried to a platform where it is placed under the shade of a white cloth. High above it, men in black T-shirts secure cans of kerosene with tubes leading down to the bull. Kerosene is also liberally sprinkled over the sarcophagus.

Then, with an almighty roar, the fire is ignited. Instantly huge flames leap up to engulf the bull and its contents. The relatives who have crowded around supervising the final rites are forced back by the intense heat.

All these rites are expensive. So poor families will of-



ten bury the body for years until the family has saved enough for a simple ceremony.

Mass cremations offer a solution to this financial problem. Bones are carefully collected, washed and wrapped in white cloth. The bones are no longer considered pure. So the family constructs an effigy of the body, which becomes the focus for the necessary ceremonies.

It is about noon and we have just arrived in a palm-fringed field scattered with discarded towers tilting at precarious angles. Rows and rows of animal-shaped sarcophagi, in black, white, red and yellow, stand on platforms under white awnings.

Then, in a perfectly-staged performance, a sea of fire suddenly envelops the animal effigies and their human remains. Animal coffins are reduced to eerie skeletons, heads hanging dejectedly, smoke and flames rising from their open mouths. Hollywood could not have choreographed a more impressive spectacle.

By late afternoon all flames have died down and family members collect any bones or ashes that remain from the blaze. After kneeling to pray they place the containers of ash on their heads and set off in a procession to the sea to release the spirit.

If the deceased has lived a good life there is every chance he will be reborn in the best of all places, Bali, and perhaps even within his own family. G

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