



A regular meeting of a banjar in Bali. Seated at the low table are the "kelian" or traditional heads of the community. An offering is placed on the table.

Banjars in Bali

by Fred B. Eiseman, Jr.

The pivotal role of the *banjar* in Balinese life is seldom appreciated by the foreign visitor. Banjar activities tend to be low profile affairs that do not usually culminate in public displays that attract tourists. And so although guides and guidebooks usually mention the word *Banjar* and direct attention to banjar meeting houses, outsiders do not usually understand the great importance of the organizations to the Balinese community.

A banjar is a family neighbourhood organization that has several closely

related functions: religious, governmental, social and educational. These functions have evolved into a complex web of interlocking responsibilities, obligations, and benefits so that a considerable percentage of the time of an average member is occupied with banjar activities.

Cooperative neighbourhood organizations that were to evolve into the modern banjar must have been in existence since very early times. The demands of agriculture and religion have been such that single families could not

cope with life's problems without the help of neighbours who have similar problems. The life of a Balinese farmer involves a great deal of hard work. Because of Bali's long dry season rice fields must be irrigated, the water distributed in a fair manner, and the irrigation systems maintained. Planting and harvesting must be group efforts. At the same time, the practice of Hinduism in Bali involves frequent and complex ceremonies and places great demands upon the time and energy of its devotees. Important family ceremonies

may require the work of dozens of people for many days. The proper observation of village and provincial ceremonies is much more complex and time-consuming.

Balinese village, especially rural ones, are quite self contained, and villagers often have minimal contact with outsiders. This tendency to look inward for social contact must have had a considerable effect upon Balinese social structures and the role of the banjar in village life.

So, banjars developed as organizations of neighbours who engaged in group projects for the welfare of the community, worshipped in the same temples, and sought social contacts in each other's company. In many Balinese villages, the structuring of life around banjar activities is just as important today as it was centuries ago. Even urban families whose ancestors abandoned rice growing for commerce and government find that the banjar plays an important role in their daily lives.

Bear in mind that, just as with all other subjects of study in Bali, it is

dangerous to make broad, sweeping generalizations about banjars. Even in this small island there are differences in terminology, structure, and practice from place to place. In most Balinese villages all married males are required to join a banjar. The wives and children of these members are considered to belong to the banjar too, but only the male heads of families go to regular meetings and it is they who make the decisions. Sizes vary considerably. Some urban banjars in Denpasar have four or five hundred heads of families. many rural ones have as few as fifty. One hundred is about average. So, if the family consists of a husband and wife and three or four children, the average membership is about 500 to 600 people.

MEMBERSHIP

As soon as a man marries he is expected to make formal application to join his banjar — almost always that of his father — as an *Adat* (customary or traditional) member. Depending upon local rules, the applicant may or may not have to pay a fee in order to join. In some

areas only the eldest son joins the banjar. In most places all married males join. Thereafter his life is not the same, because he is now obligated to certain banjar duties and responsibilities that will occupy a great deal of his new life until his own sons can relieve him.

Since the banjar is also the smallest unit in the government of Indonesia, it is through this channel that government actually touches the individual. The appointed traditional heads or *kelian* of the banjars meet regularly with the *lurah* or *perbekel* (village headman). He relays to them information from the central or provincial or district government that has been transmitted to him. And, at the next meeting, the *kelians* pass the matters on to their memberships. These meetings are usually held once every 35 days. Members are obligated to attend and some banjars levy fines for those who do not. Meetings usually begin early in the morning. Dress is always traditional, never western. Discussions are always in the polite level of the Balinese language. Members sit on the floor of the *bale banjar* or village community hall, facing the *kelians* and the other elected

A ceremony in process where a "kelian" makes offerings (left) for a newly married couple.





Many banjars own their own "gongs", meaning the entire ensemble of percussion instruments.

Banjar members carry a cremation tower.



officials. There are not many of the latter. Each banjar has several, often many, officials called *kasinoman*. This person is responsible for informing the group of members to which he is assigned about attendance at regular or special meetings, about forthcoming work parties, and about deaths among the membership, which require immediate attendance. There may or may not be a secretary and a treasurer. If the banjar covers a large geographical area there may be assistant kelians who are in charge of the several divisions.

There are many occasions when the members are called upon to perform manual labour for the village. These co-operative work projects called *gotong royong*, may involve such matters as cleaning up a street, planting trees, building a road, decorating a temple for a forthcoming festival, or building a school.

Gotong Royong is generally not involved with farming. The control of irrigated rice fields is handled by organizations, called *Subak*, that are quite separate from the banjar structure. Attendance at Gotong Royong is usually obligatory, and some banjars fine members for not coming, unless a suitable excuse can be provided. But, members do not have to be coerced into these group activities. There is usually a very strong feeling of responsibility toward the group. Balinese villages are very tight organizations. People depend upon each other a great deal for help. In a small town, one's absence is quickly noted. And next time you require help from others, it may not be forthcoming if you have not been generous with your own time. There are usually two or three times as many people in a work group as are required for the work to be done. One is not really needed. No matter. One must be seen participating. Good reputations are important when people live shoulder to shoulder. A lapse in civic responsibilities can be felt not only by him who lapsed, but also by his entire family, when it comes time for neighbours to do something, however large or small, for him.

MEETINGS

All banjars have a meeting hall, the *bale banjar*, almost always a large, open structure. Some are large and fancy, decorated with carved stone, and with a stage for performances. Many are quite



A "bale banjar" or community hall where several types of activities are held. Here a table tennis game is in progress.

After cooking all night, the banjar members lay out "ebat", a group of foods that are required at ceremonial feasts, into individual servings.





Preparing for the "odalan" or temple festival in a gotong royong efforts by a banjar group.

Making palm leaf mats to be used as shades for a ceremony.



a bit less magnificent. Bale banjars are social centres for ping-pong games, TV watching, playing with fighting cocks, or just chatting and resting. Some banjars conduct regular classes in reading and writing for illiterate members. Some have credit unions, whereby members may borrow small sums of money quickly, without the complex formalities of applying for a bank loan. There is normally a kitchen in the bale banjar, a storage room for dance costumes or musical instruments, a hollow log signal drum or *kulkul* to summon the members to meetings, and always a temple.

All have two subsidiary organizations that contribute to the influence of the banjar on everyday life and that bind the members together. One is the woman's group, involved in such things as family health and hygiene, birth control, raising children, making offerings, planting a garden, and adult education.

The other organization is the *Sakehe Teruna Te runi*, nowadays sometimes abbreviated to *Sakehe Teruna*, the young people's organization, to which both boys and girls belong from about age 16 until they get married and become regular adat members themselves. The word *Sekehe* means "club" or "organization" in Balinese, and it is sometimes spelled *Seka*, or *Sekehen*, or *Sekahan*. One of the most useful activities of the STT is raising money for the banjar.

A popular way of doing this is to convert the bale banjar into a temporary restaurant, called an *amahl*, invite the villagers to eat there, and donate the profits to the banjar treasury. Although this activity may be scheduled at any time, the most usual time is during all or part of the ten days between the important Balinese Hindu holy days, Galungan and Kuningan. Most villages have at least one *amahl* going during the Galungan holidays. The STT members decorate the interior of the bale banjar, serve as cooks, waiters, waitresses and cashiers, and, in some villages, provide entertainment in the form of music and dance programmes.

MUTUAL HELP

Thus far we have discussed banjar functions that are mostly official business, governmental or social. In the minds of many banjar members the adat functions are more important. The function of adat members that is most em-



A member of the "sekehe" ready to serve guests attending her organisation's "amahl", in an effort to raise money for the banjar.

phatically stressed is to provide help and companionship to a member's family in which death has occurred.

Recall that, to a Hindu, life is cyclical. Birth is a capital crime, punishable by death. Yet, death is not the end of the line. Reincarnation is a very fundamental tenet of Hinduism. An individual spirit is reborn to the world in a form that is commensurate with the extent to which he fulfilled his duty in his previous existence on earth. One gains rewards, *pala*, for one's actions, *karma*, in fulfilling one's duty, *dharma*.

IN DEATH

Although death is the penalty of birth, nevertheless birth is the frustration of death. It seems incongruous to the Western mind that Siwa can be the Dissolver of Life, and yet, at the same time, one of Siwa's most widespread symbols is the *linga*, the phallic symbol of creation. There is no incongruity to the Balinese. Death is the beginning of another life, and life is the beginning of another road and leads to death. Siwa is really a re-cycler, not a destroyer, as he is so often pictured. Thus, death is

not simply a time when one loses one who is near and dear. More important, it is a time when the spirit of the deceased must be properly released from its body-shell, prepared for its wandering existence on the path toward heaven and purification, and provided with the proper credentials and prayers so that it may eventually be reborn in a fitting form.

All of this requires a great deal of knowledge of the proper prayers and offerings, a great deal of time, and a great deal of physical work — far beyond the capacities of even the largest family group. And into this gap steps the membership of the banjar.

And, of course, when death occurs in a Balinese family, it is bereaved, the same as many family would be. And it requires consolation. The banjar is there to provide just that. When a death is reported, a special rhythm is beaten on the *kulkul*, and all members within audible range are obligated to stop whatever they are doing and come to the house compound of the deceased. It is not long before practically the entire male membership of the banjar is on hand. This duty

is one of the most widely observed among banjar members. Few let any personal activities interfere.

Now, why such emphasis upon this seemingly morbid subject? Just this. Death to a Balinese is not just an end, but rather, the beginning of a new existence for the spirit. If the spirit is not given a proper send-off, it can bother the family and cause great problems until it is ultimately released from earthly existence by cremation and sent on its way toward heaven. In heaven the spirit then becomes associated with the spirits of the family temple.

A banjar member knows that, some day, his turn and that of his family members will come. And he wants to make sure that, when his day arrives, his own spirit will have the proper send off to another world and another existence. He knows that his own family is incapable of doing this single handedly. He knows that they will have to depend upon the help of others. And those others are the members of the banjar.

The time of a death is not, by any means, the only period during which banjar members contribute their time and efforts to their fellow members. Every Balinese must undergo a series of rites of passage — ceremonies that celebrate various steps along the road to infancy, babyhood, adolescence, maturity, and finally marriage. They are not just celebrations, in the sense of commemorations. They are also preparations for the next stage of life, and hence they require the proper purifications, prayers, offerings — and lots of work. One who has been behind the scenes of the preparations for even a rather modest ceremony cannot appreciate the enormous amount of detailed work and planning.

REJECTION

Rejection by the banjar means tragedy, not only for the individual, but for his entire family and their close relatives. They will be denied the enormous support of the banjar in time of need. They will be denied the services of the office of the village head. And, perhaps most important of all, they will be denied access to holy water from the village temples, which means that family ceremonies will be deprived of one of their most essential ingredients.

The adat law of a banjar acts as a kind of buffer against outside forces. Deviations from this law produce results that are so unacceptable to Balinese religious necessities that one does not dare to step over the bounds, no matter how tempting. To this buffer is added the educational function of the banjar. One of the duties of the kelians that is imposed upon them from above and from within is to see to it that young people are made aware of the pitfalls of outside influence and the possible consequences of adopting cultural patterns that are foreign to their own.

Some Balinese communities are acutely aware of these problems and are taking active steps to handle the situation.

Of course, this is primarily the job of the family. But, if it is apparent that the family is failing its responsibility, the banjar steps in and takes over.

And, in most cases, people listen and get into line. They know that, if they don't, they will be effectively abandoned both physically and spiritually. And if they do, they will be provided with what amounts to a cradle-to-grave insurance policy that guarantees them not only protection and help in the physical world, but also insures that the complex preparation of their spirits for future existence will be assured.