



Once-In-A-Lifetime Event At The Temple

Reconsecrating a temple, writes **Annemarie Hollitzer**, involves colourful celebrations spanning two months. Photography by **Annemarie and Holli Hollitzer**

The pale white disc of the full moon is fading into the morning sky when the first worshippers arrive at the holy temple of Tanah Lot. In rhythmic repetition, the huge waves of the Indian Ocean pound against the dark, jagged rocks which form the temple's base. Tanah Lot, at high tide, floats like an ancient turtle in the deep-blue ocean.

Pennants and ceremonial umbrellas in red, white and yellow decorate the steep and narrow path leading to the shrines at the peak. On the sandy beach a group of bare-foot young female dancers have gathered. Dressed in white sarongs and yellow sashes, their slender waists have been tightly wrapped in lengths of golden *songket* cloth. On their heads sit tall decorations woven from fresh, pale-green palm leaves. With serene faces, they line up opposite the island temple and offer their homage to

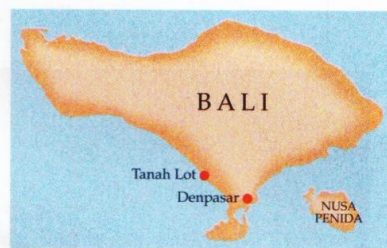
Nirartha, Tanah Lot's founder, and to Sanghyang Widi Wasa, the Supreme God who inhabits the five-tiered *meru* (pagoda-like multi-roofed tower).

Meanwhile, a throng of white-robed priests and their attendants have descended from the island temple to the water's edge. Here they stand receiving the tribute. In monoto-

In 1546, according to legend, the founder of the temple had crossed the sea from Java on a leaf from the keluwih tree

nous tones a group of women chant sacred songs in the ancient Kawi language.

A simple raft made from bamboo, buoyed by large oil drums, waits at the shore to take the dancers and the swelling crowd of worshippers out to the holy shrines. A Tanah Lot *odalan*



(temple anniversary) is always a big event, with Balinese pilgrims coming from all over the island.

However, the Agung Mamungkah ceremony, held in the middle of last year, was unique. With celebrations stretching over almost two months it was a ritual on a scale that only takes place every 50 years. The ceremony was deemed necessary to reconsecrate the temple at the completion of major restoration works undertaken with the help of the Indonesian and German governments.

There is an air of excitement and frenzied activity all along our walk down the steep hill to the beach. Rows of women sellers line the entrance walkway offering mouth-watering traditional sweets and cakes to the passers-by. In an enclosure, perhaps 50 men sit surrounded by mountains of brown stringy coconut husks. They laugh and chatter while they energetically grate the white fleshy meat. Mixed with the all-pervading smell of coconut comes the appetising aroma of freshly-ground

Left: at dusk, worshippers return from Tanah Lot

spices. Food preparation for religious events is traditionally done by teams of men.

Perched high on a rock shelf overlooking the temple, men in white glistening satin shirts and red and gold headdress have assembled around their gamelan instruments. Their brass kettles, gongs and metallophones are resting in ornately-carved wooden frames. They lift wooden mallets and the rhythmic tones of the familiar *gamelan* ring out over the water.

In an open courtyard, sarong-clad women plait young pale-green palm leaves into artfully constructed shapes intertwining them with colourful flowers. The women are *tukang banten*—specialists in making offerings—and, following ancient rules, they will skillfully produce the most complicated *banten*. At the bottom of the stairs, a *pemangku* (lay priest) stands in front of a small stand, labelled “Genah Tirta”, busily dispensing holy water to the long stream of pilgrims.

No Bali Hindu ceremony would be complete without generous libations of holy water.

On the black rocks, mounted on a flimsy bamboo platform and sheltered by a thatched roof, stands a huge multi-coloured rice dough *sarad* offering. This elaborate and attractive artwork is inhabited by figures, a garuda bird and scores of brightly-coloured flowers. *Sarad* offerings are created especially for major temple ceremonies by groups of women, supervised by a ritual expert from the brahmana caste.

Down on the dark sandy beach, facing the temple, a haze of blue-grey smoke almost covers a small group of elderly men. From a distance it looks like bunches of white flowers sticking out of the fire. But as we get nearer the smell of roasting pork is unmistakable and the “flowers” are in fact artistically-carved pig’s fat. This artwork is also an offering for the gods.

All through the day the pilgrims keep arriving—a constant stream of kaleidoscopic colours winding its way down the hill to the ocean shore. Wading knee-high out into the waves they scramble onto the rocking raft and in no time it’s jammed full with a thick mass of children, men, women and offerings. When not even one more tiny

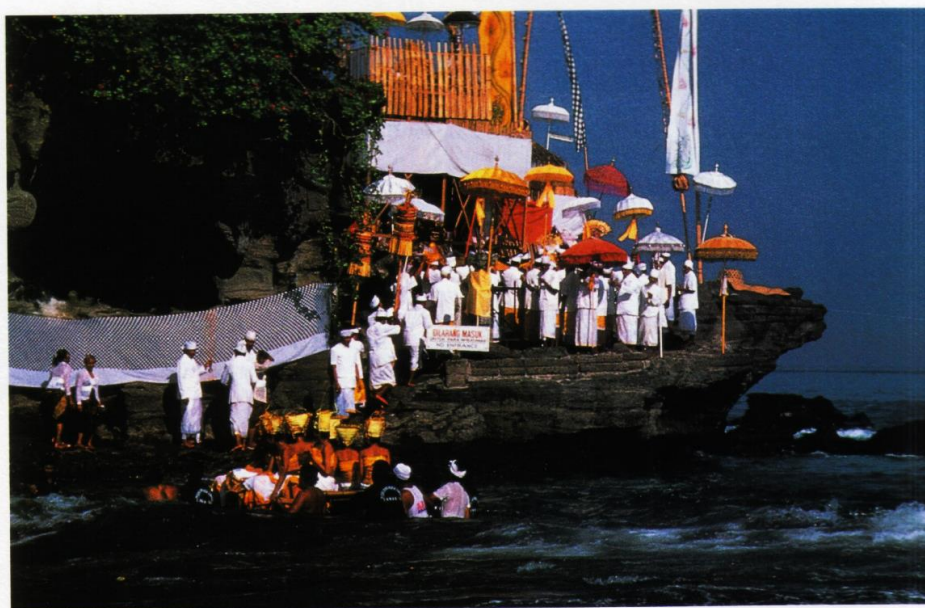
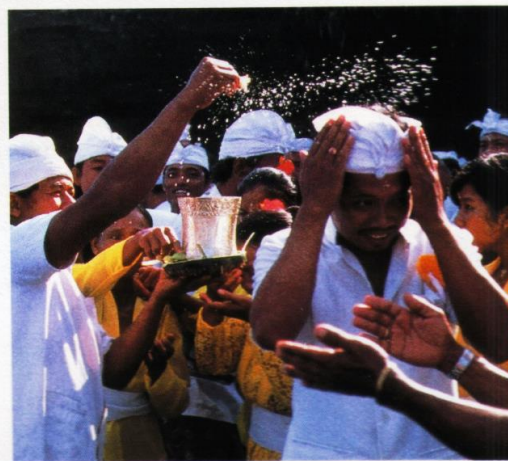
child will fit, burly black-shirted men push the raft out from the shore.

The temple of Tanah Lot was founded in the 16th century by the Siwa-Buddhist priest, Danghyang Dwi Jendra Nirartha, who later became known as Ida Pedanda Sakti Wawu Rauh (The Holy Priest Who Recently Arrived). According to legend he had crossed the sea from Java on a leaf from the *keluwih* tree when he landed at Pulaki on Bali’s north coast in 1546.

Nirartha travelled throughout the island spreading his teachings and along the way he also founded some of Bali’s most scenically located temples. He became known for adding *padmasana* (empty stone chair) shrines to the temples he visited. When his life on earth came to an end he achieved *moksa* (freedom from the cycle of reincarnation) from the *padmasana* he had built at Pura Uluwatu.

The origin of the name Tanah Lot is still hidden in obscurity. There are several theories, though. It could come from “Tanah Let” meaning “ancient land” or possibly from “Tanah Lod”, “land to the south”. A third possibility is connected with Nirartha. Already well into his old age, he left the temple of Rambut Siwi in the Negara region to follow a mysterious light

Top to bottom: women carrying offerings on their heads wait to be taken to the temple; the sprinkling of holy water is an essential part of a Bali Hindu ceremony; a throng of priests and attendants await the dancers at the foot of the temple





Tanah Lot at sunset (above); for the celebration of major festivals the rocks around Tanah Lot are crowded with worshippers

which brought him to a freshwater spring on the beach below Beraben village, just east of Tanah Lot.

Nirartha decided to settle here and started to spread his teachings to the villagers. But when his disciples grew in numbers the local religious leader, the Bendesa Beraban Sakti, felt threatened and asked him to leave.

Nirartha then used his spiritual powers to move the rock he sat on into the sea. Hence the third possible origin for the name of Tanah Lot—


“Tengah Lot” (“land in the middle of the sea”).

To guard his refuge Nirartha transformed his scarf into snakes and the descendants of these holy snakes are still found in the rock walls opposite Tanah Lot.

Rumour has it that one particularly huge snake has its home inside one of the holy shrines on the island. In time Bendesa Beraban Sakti converted to Nirartha’s teachings and until this day the freshwater spring still flows out

of the sands beneath a black rock at Tanah Lot.

But today’s pilgrims are not all Bali Hindu, nor do they all come for historical or religious reasons. At the end of each day a different pilgrimage takes place and they come in their thousands from Europe, the US and Asia, brandishing their latest camcorders and cameras. They climb the rock shelf along the shore, reach the peak and then squabble for the best vantage points.

Tanah Lot—perched on dark, glistening rocks, with its black, thatched merus silhouetted against the backdrop of a picture-postcard red and golden sunset—has become the ultimate romantic visual experience for today’s Bali travellers. Its spell is strong. But, despite the clicking of the camera shutters and the humming of the many video cameras, the merus of Tanah Lot remain serene as they reach skywards like a cluster of sails floating on the softly-glowing ocean. 

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