

# Ritual sacred space: temples and culture in Bali

by Luc Sala, 2012

In the context of an extensive book about magical ritual ([www.lucsala.nl/ritual](http://www.lucsala.nl/ritual)) A visit to Bali was used to look at the culture, the rituals and the buildings. This is a report about that trip.

I am interested in the quantitative aspects of ritual and magic, and use dowsing (a pendulum) to gauge what the actual energy or holiness of acts, places, tools etc. is. In this note about a field study in Bali I will explain how my work in looking at ritual and extra-dimensional (sometimes called metadimensional) phenomena actually yield practical results and insight. How observing a culture (and its monuments) using the approach that I outline in this essay at least yields a different insight into the mechanisms and structures of a society, and in this case in how temples are constructed. One has to place this in the context of the Balinese mind, and of how their society is and has been organized: very layered, still with much caste difference, very structured, and in essence very fearful. The happy faces, dances and generally good mood of the Balinese is an intricate cover, a way to deal with brute natural forces of volcanos and tsunamis, earthquakes and of course human enemies.

Bali is different from the rest of Indonesia, not only because of the Hindu faith (Indonesia is predominantly Muslim) but also because of its richness. It has always been a fertile place, there was silver, and it has abundant greenery, forests and natural beauty. The Balinese believe that the island is owned by the supreme god Sanghyang Widhi, and has been handed down to them in sacred trust. These days Bali is a magnet for tourists, more tourists come to Bali than to any other place in Indonesia and bring good money and work for many. Balinese are thus envied by their neighbors



from Java and other islands. Terrorist threats and attacks have much to do with this, the tourists are seen as evil and unholy, especially by the Muslims.

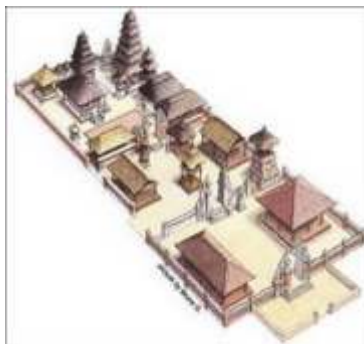
The major role played by fear of natural disaster, notably from the volcanic

mountains, is illustrated by the orientation of the temples, shrines and thrones, that are everywhere on the island. The Balinese word for temple is pura, in Sanskrit meaning 'space surrounded by a wall', puri is used for palaces. An orientation towards the mountains (Kaja) is the most significant, the one towards the sea (Kelod) is reserved for death (Pura Dalem) usually with the graveyard attached. In a village, the main (ancestor-founder) Pura Puseh temple is located on the side of the village facing the mountains, to protect against forces coming from there. Most temples elsewhere are located to the East or West, but the volcano-orientation of Balinese temples is unique. One might say that there are more temples than homes in Bali, ranging from a simple altar or rice paddy shrine to enormous royal and state temple complexes. They are usually quiet and uninhabited, except at festivals when they become community centers of worship, dance and music (gamelan), with the now illicit cockfighting and gambling going on nearby. Temples are not solely intended for worship, they are pleasant resting places for the Gods, and festivals are a kind of entertainment for the Gods.

Bali is a magical place, and the Balinese religious activities are often magical. There is an underground level of sorcery, spells and fear of the dark underworld forces, daemons and human witchcraft. The festivals also show how fear is an intrinsic part of Balinese life and how offerings to the Gods, the sea and the mountain are all-important. At



the Melasti spring equinox festival, at the start of the Balinese lunar New Year, large effigies of the gods are carried to rivers and the sea for ritual bathing, prayers and religious offerings. Ugly looking Ogoh-Ogoh papier-mache evil monsters are carried around, with much noise to scare the daemons away. The following day it is Nyepi, and then everyone in Bali including tourists must remain silent, it's a day of stillness. The evil spirits will then leave the island alone, thinking that the place is uninhabited. The restoration of balance between good and evil is also commemorated, notably at Eka Dasa Rudra with washing of all statues in the sea, the island's most important festival originally held every hundred years, last time was in 1979.



When looking at Bali and its rituals I will first address the somewhat limited issue of holy or sacred (energy), the so called power spots or holy places. I will also consider how human holy places are layered and stratified, how temple offerings are related to offerings to the mundane hierarchy (bribes), and how temples are laid out and constructed. In the context of ritual, where sacred space plays an important role, this is a logical first step. All places have a certain energy, one could call it spiritual energy but I will use the more common term holy. Certain places in nature have a higher energy than others, some places are real power spots, and many visitors feel that. Sedona, Jerusalem, Stonehenge, MontSégur, Mount Tamalpais, Mount Kailash in Tibet, there are many well known sites. I am sure there is a strong spot nearby for you too, visited by many people to meditate, contemplate, pray, sacrifice there, or just feel. One could rank these spots in many ways: tourist boards for example like to count visitors, and religions put a high value on spots related to their own faith, but can we not measure in some way their holiness or energy levels? This is exactly what I but also many others with dowsing rods, pendulums or otherwise do, yielding subjective results in the eyes of "science", but giving insight into differences, patterns and qualities of the energy in and around these holy places, temples, monuments, historic places, leylines, etc.

The holy quality of a place has two components. The first is the natural, some geological or geographical situations are more special than other, notably high and overpowering mountains and peaks are usually considered holy. But there are many more special features: impressive sights and grand vistas, confluences of rivers, underground rivers, deep canyons, special flora or fauna, special biodiversity, safety and defensibility, that are factors in the natural energy of a place.

Manmade energy or holiness can add to the natural, and often does so, as humans are attracted to some place, live there and over time build up the energy level there. People leave meta-dimensional traces, their happiness or misery stays at a place, as a visit to Auschwitz or Verdun for most people makes quite clear. Understanding this has wide implications, but let's keep for the moment to what holy places and their setup and layout reveal.

In early 2012 I made a trip to Bali, the Indonesian tropical island and visited many holy places. A few weeks on Bali, at the end of the monsoon season, is a hot and humid experience but also allows, next to the sun, surf and disco opportunities, a dive into a cultural and spiritual society with many lessons and warnings for our 21st century complacency. There is no doubt Bali is a great place, it offers a combination of natural and human treasures that is quite unique and allows us westerners a comfortable taste of the tropical. Many fall in love with the island and come back again and again. The eerie beauty of the rice fields along the hillsides, especially when the thick monsoon clouds color the sky and the volcanos are just barely showing themselves, is a sight that stays with you.

I was particularly interested the energy layout of the temples, as there are so many and most of them are laid out in a similar, classic pattern, devoted to the Gods of the Hindu pantheon with some local adaptations, and here and there a bit of Buddhist influence. Despite some 2,5 million foreign tourists annually, Bali has retained its own culture

with a strong religious Hindu-dharma focus, and probably more shrines, sanctuaries, protective offering altars and temples than inhabitants. It has great beaches, mountains, volcanos and rice-paddy vistas. Economically it relies on handicraft and



*very old temple near Ubud*

tourism, but outside the cities and beaches is still very much a traditional agricultural (rice-paddy) society. The 4 million or so Balinese are friendly, cooperative, clean and focused on aesthetics, more craft oriented than artistic, concerned with living now, not in the future. They are tightly knit into family and village structures and very concerned with the "otherworld" they see as balanced and reflected in the manifested. The anthropologists of the 1930's looked, with Western eyes and a soft spot for the primitive, at Bali, at the temples, rituals, gamelan music and aesthetics, admired the traditional art but failed to see the fundamental defensive nature of the culture, its complete lack of concern for whoever or whatever is outside of family or village, its escapist tendencies and the tight harness of agricultural seasonality. They see the ritualizing states of self-control as resulting in graceful and tactful behavior, part of religious expression among the people, not as escapism or hiding behind a mask.

Gregory Bateson however, (with Margaret Mead) by filming and photographing Balinese life and rituals in 1936-1938, observed the pre-occupation with balance in the postures and movements, he described this in 1949 as the 'tightrope walker' a 'corporeal metaphor' he recognized in the Balinese style of being nice (dadi) and defensive.

This seeing only the nice picture by most visitors and researchers is not an exception, we make the same mistake in admiring the Ankhor Watt temples in Cambodia as the summit of Khmer culture, and not as monstrous ego-monuments built by ruthless rulers at the expense of the people, and ultimate signs of disastrous decadence.

Balinese culture was and is seen as enchanted, magical, a paradise.



Even today this is the dominant view; go to Bali to search your inner child, use yoga, massage, art and of course the low prices to escape your Western problems, find peace. Spirituality is still the banner of Bali, although most young Australians at the Kuta and Seminyak beaches find that in their Bintang beer bottles and

pep-pills.

Of course, Balinese women spend sometime 30% of their time preparing offerings, placing them around their house, temples, rice paddies, on all the power spots they can imagine and participating in prayer and rituals. How impressive, how nice, how great for your holiday pictures and postcards! However, in the villages one can observe that these beautiful offerings are an industry in themselves, with mostly older people involved, an economic activity like tourism, handicraft and agriculture but hardly figuring in the statistics. Magic, rituals, offerings, they are part of the whole. Even though tourists' interest has made them commercial, (since every hotel has offerings as part of the Bali experience, dances and gamelan are entertainment), they also offer a way to understand the Balinese soul. This soul is far more defensive, far more focused on shielding against evil, danger and the magical powers of other humans than we think. The inner peace of Bali is a cover, a mask, easily deceiving the Western seekers.

### Angular and defensive building style of temples

An indication of what all that "theatrical and masked" holiness and friendliness of the Balinese hides, I sensed in the rather angular way their temples are built. Square corners, pointy stones, always walls and grating, like defending the sacred space against enemy forces. A Balinese temple is like a fortress, a safe place in the meta-dimensional sense. By looking at the Balinese temples I noticed how defensive they are, with strong architecture and pointing details, straight edges on the corners, no places to hide, entrances and portals of a specific form, copies of copies everywhere. And why is every statue again protected or shielded by a sarong, usually chequered for demonic statues, and white (with gold

band) for more pleasant deities? The chequered (poleng) sarong indicate the ever present polarities of the Balinese worldview very well. The intersecting black and white squares represents the world in terms of dualities, opposites, good and bad, day and night, gods and underworld, mountain and sea.

These are the temples of a fearful people, bowing to the outside pressure, pleasantly merging with intruders and invaders. They hide their unconscious fears behind smiles and great but not creative craftsmanship, sticking to traditions that served them well before. Not really bowing to the Hindu and Buddhist faith but merging, adapting, still retaining the old animistic and ancestor beliefs, much like the Tibetans incorporated the Bon in Buddhist/Lamaism with all kinds of demons, gods and devas.

The Balinese are flexible, they adapt, for example these days the temple rituals are no longer strictly planned according to the astrologer's divination, but take place at weekends and after work hours. With all their modern manners they are however still bound by the allegiance they owe to family and village (and no-one else, charity and social responsibility ranks much higher with Muslims), by the need to marry and have male children. Premarital sex is not allowed, but many wait to marry until a pregnancy guarantees a family future.

### Temple energy

As I went around the Bali temples I measured the energy by divination and checked orientations, power spots and what objects had the most energy. There were regular patterns, in fact the whole energetic layout of the temples and shrines was strikingly similar, usually with three items: an entrance, an activity and a holy "mandala". The architecture, sometimes dating back to the arrival of Hinduism which occurred when Islam came to nearby Java in the 11th-century and caused the leading Hindu nobility to flee to Bali changed very little over time. The Pre-Hindu temples however, are rare and quite different, and among the many, many Hindu temples there are also of course differences. Temples devoted to water for instance

had a different layout, but then again the surrounding shrines followed the standard pattern. There are small house temples, family or clan temples and a number of really large complexes dedicated to the moon, the volcano or the lake. The larger temple

complexes usually have more shrines for the various deities, sometimes for the deities of specific clans or families. As could be expected, the main path leading up to the shrines usually had higher energy, the height and size of the shrines was a good indication of their value (energy level). but one striking phenomenon was that although most of the worshippers go for the more modern and recognizable statues of Hindu Gods, and these are usually in a central place, there are also, usually in the North-East, shrines for statues or stones, hardly recognizable as statues,

that are obviously much older. These older stones had very much higher energies than the modern ones but very few people will actually go and pray to them. They were not ignored, had decent sarongs around them and in processions would have an honorary place but didn't seem to appeal to the ordinary folk. Some older priests or women seemed to be aware of this but not the common people, also indicating that ritual for them was less of a real contact with the extra-dimensional than a social task, a way to be seen as a loyal member of the clan, community or temple-group.



(Chandidasa) very old holy stone

### The cleansing gate: candi bentar

The typical entrance gate of a Balinese temple, called candi bentar, is quite characteristic and easily recognized. It has some connection with the mythical Mount Meru, its two sides representing two halves of Mount Meru. One of the interesting findings was that this gate or portal, consisting of two adjacent pillars with complicated forms on the outside but a sharp edge facing the inside, had quite a different function than indicated in textbooks and leaflets about Balinese temples. They describe the function of these portals as keeping the de-



mons out, because often there is a straight wall behind and demons are supposed to move in straight lines only.

However, as I measured a distinct energy dip in the portal, a zero-energy level, there was something else, not related to demons. I believe these portals, of a specific design and characteristic for Balinese temples, act as a cleansing device, a kind of energy shower for those who pass through it. Normally there is never a zero energy in nature, I have measured it only in situations, where there was strong (human) magic involved, like at places where treasures were hidden and magic was used to conceal such a location. Normally the energy level is about 20 on my scale, so a zero-energy situation is remarkable. Pass the Bali-

nese portal and you have to go through a zero-energy field, that kind of cleans your aura and soul. No water cleansing, or washing as in other cultures (the Balinese do have a healthy respect for what water can carry, they use holy water a lot in rituals) but just stepping through the cleansing gate. The underlying magical technology must be pretty strong and effective as we found no gates without that dip, at least in real temples, a make-believe Balinese portal in some garden exhibition (Floriade) in the Netherlands did not have this zero-energy effect.

This magical technology seemed related to the Hindu temples. However, we visited a rather hidden and hardly visited pre-Hindu temple near Ubud. It was a so called Chandi or Candi, the term for older tombs, temples and structures built during the 7th to 15th centuries. It turned out to be a very powerful and old place, protecting the village from the river. There were earlier uses of the zero-field cleansing technology, although not with the candi bentar. At a very ancient riverbed site, cut out from the rocks, the remaining statue in the middle had a similar zero-energy cleansing effect.

The villagers, respectful of the old site, went to pray there standing before that image and ignored the two stone altars at the sides. We checked the energy around and noticed that old statues, from those altars, were thrown into the river, by now unrecognizable except by dowsing.



My friend An-Jes felt they were thrown in the river at a time of utter despair, as flooding and maybe other disaster made the villagers try an ultimate effort to appease the gods. The settlement was probably there, in a hidden bend, because the river contained silver or copper. This disaster happened, I feel, somewhere in the 300-500 AD timeframe and it would be interesting to check this

against geological data, as a major Krakatau like event might then have dramatically threatened not only Bali but maybe also other places. I have always suspected that the relative dip in European history (the fall of the Roman Empire) had something to do with a natural disaster, and a major eruption could have had worldwide effects.

As we checked the newer temple in the village, not more than a few hundred years old, we found, like in many other temples, a few old stones in the northeast corner. Barely recognizable as statues, so old and worn were they. Neatly on their own pedestal/temple, sometimes with sarongs but hardly part of the normal rituals. Now the energy of these old stones was so high, outranking the normal objects of devotion, that it was stunning. These were objects of worship and reverence of formidable age, probably stemming from even before the Hindu waves from Java in the twelfth century and later. A thousand or more years of human worship (and the belief in the magical power of stone objects, so abhorred by the decidedly anti-magical Sunni Islam) had given these statues, now turned into unrecognizable lumps, immense energy. Some of the Brahmin elite must know about this, as the stones are surely respected and attended to in some way, but the common folks just do not know. Now there is much magic (guna guna) on Bali, it is still used a lot, and it partly explains why so much attention is given to the five times a day offerings. However the use of magic is also very much underground, and magicians, witches and such are at the same time valued and despised, and even persecuted.

We went to another old temple, at Chandi Dasa quite a bit above the newer village temple and again not even mentioned as an im-

portant site. We found a temple built or rebuilt in 1961 but with an altar containing one of those old stones of very high energy, no demon statues, only white and gold sarongs and a magnificent, quiet mood around. We found it to be much “holier” than the major temples mentioned as tourist attractions. In particular, some old stones had energy levels far in excess of what the villagers actually worshipped in the newer temple downstairs.

### Inner child

The culture of Bali is clearly more interdimensional, accessing in daily life the extra-dimensional realm, more in contact with the otherworld, the unseen, the spiritual, the meta-dimensions. For me this means, in the context of the theoretical model of the psyche elsewhere in this book, that the Balinese have found in their belief system and rituals a way to escape harsh realities. They are more in contact with (parts of) their inner child than we are, and as a result less compelled to act, to create, to deal with the future. This means the Balinese, especially the women are more sensitive, tactile and show a delicacy of feeling. In psycho-anthropological terms, this is what sets Bali apart from our modern mindset, where we are very much less in that mode, we hide behind masks and ego's. Sex and dreams are how we now connect to this state, also because we have forgotten the link ritual offers here. This inner child mode also has an effect on the Balinese perception of time, and this on their economic stance towards the future, their (lack of) ambition. This of course is related to accepting what is, as a karmic condition.

Their sense of time is different, with correspondingly different ways of evaluating profits. They think short term: sell now at a high price, and if the customer never comes back that's not a worry. It is also charming, there is less need for durable masks, they are friendly now but don't need to stick to that. On the other hand, their friendly stance, also borrowing from their Hindu-Dharma spiritual practice, is a mask itself, an escape from a sometimes grim reality.



Escape from family, fate, caste, poverty is very hard, tourism (or crime) or marriage outside is the only way. But what if you finally manage to get a job on an international cruise-ship? You earn enough to save 600 dollars a month, but have to spend the proceeds of a year on your marriage feast when you return.

In my view of anthropology and ritual, the relation with the “otherworld” is crucial, and is mostly in the subconscious layers I call inner child (higher

self/soul). Recognizing the mask(s) and child modes in individuals as well as in larger social entities is essential to understanding them. As in individuals, societies tend to ignore or deny their unconscious drives, the traumas that have led to (sub)-personalities. However history again and again shows these hidden energies as suddenly erupting, and as the decisive forces and root causes of the big drama.

Indicating a deeper contact with the inner child might give the impression, that the Balinese are more holy, more connected than we in the West, where the inner child is more often ignored. This is not necessarily so, as the inner child too has levels of awareness, and it feels as if the inner child of the Balinese is not very developed towards the higher and really “holy” levels. It is like a wounded child, limited to dealing with the material things, praying for safety, constructing temples mainly aimed at survival and security.

### Religion and chakra focus

Looking at the Balinese they have an interesting mix of energies, quite different from the other Indonesian people. One way to look at that is the chakra focus of their religion and culture. The Hindu faith energetically relates most to the third chakra (truth-power), while the Muslim (and Jewish) are focused on the fifth (voice, ruling the reality) and the Christian faith has the fourth chakra (love, blood) as its main point.

So the Balinese combination of animistic (first chakra), ancestor worship (second chakra) and Hindu(third) indicates a fairly practical and survival stance on life, and yet the Buddhist (sixth chakra) adds the visionary accent. All together an interesting mix, quite different from the Java energetic spectrum, and the question remains whether it will survive the onslaught of modern life, modern technology and global tourism.

### Rosy image but a culture of fear

There is an image of Bali as a paradise, as a peaceful land of beautiful people mainly concerned with keeping the forces of nature and the spirits in other (meta-)dimensions happy. This is, however, deceptive, the Bali image is too rosy, too idealistic, repressing the reality of 80,000 deaths in the KPI-purge (the communist party) in the sixties, the volcanic threats forever present, the 40,000 orphans hidden from sight, the Hindu-Islam feud (and the bombings to make that real) and doesn't look much further at what defines the Bali mindset. Of course it's a good promotional image, Bali as a holy and blessed paradise, but this ignores the fundamental dissonances, the fear that is present, the anxious sticking to the traditional, the lack of real connection with the deeper layers of the psyche. Yes, a large part of the day, especially women, is devoted to offerings and seemingly spiritual activities, especially by women. But on looking and feeling beyond that, one sees a petrified tradition based on fear, fear of nature, the



volcano, the tsunami, invaders, foreigners, the gods and the higher castes. There is a high level of nearly pathological need for newness, cleanliness, an obsession to own new scooters, cars, have the correct clothes, to behave "correctly".

A policeman in Bali not dressed to perfection is not respected or even obeyed, the exterior and sticking to the tradition matters in a nearly absurd way. So much money is spent on having the latest model of scooter or moped (nearly everyone working has one), that hardly anything is left for education or escaping the fetters of family, caste and fate. New, beautiful, status comes with aesthetics and fashion, shabbiness is a sin, at least for the higher castes or those pretending to be.

So the young girls and boys in the tourism industry basically work to pay for their image of mobility (on the road and via their mobile), at low wages in the tourist industry, and continuing to rely on their free housing (the family compound or village doesn't charge for living there) and the low price of food. They are in fact slaves to the banks, and external factors such as the economic crisis (less tourism) or rising gas prices will threaten their whole existence and lifestyle. No scooter, no mobility, no work, as living in the tourist places is unthinkable, in cultural and financial terms.

### Corruption as an antidote to powerlessness

At the same time there is rampant corruption, everywhere. This makes me wonder what corruption really means, it might again be a sign that there is no decent way to escape from the harsh realities of family, caste, village or religion. You can't ignore it, as newspapers everyday report on officials involved in corruption and fraud, and usually blame the higher-ups. Not a single Balinese I spoke to has not heard about how former president Suharto and his family enriched themselves, but these are the same people routinely paying off the policeman, guard or official. As a tourist you are not supposed to see how the driver with some sleight of hand donates a little here and there, and how the police at road-traps desperately try to find some real or on-the-spot made-up cause to get some money. How the workers in the hotels have to share extra income with the higher-ups, how the corruption pyramids pervade everything. How the rich Javanese and smart westerners use the corruption to get



what they want, at whatever cost to the ecology, the culture or the poor. Caring for nature and the land is part of what in Hindu lore is called the philosophy of "Tri Hita Karana"; dealing with the divine, fellow man and the World, those are the three pillars. Sounds great, and has become official ecospeak, but the reality of stinking rivers, inadequate sewers and dirty beaches is more devastating than can be compensated by cheap labor sweeping and cleaning the fallen leaves in the hotel gardens. The rivers, where they entered the sea, were filled with debris and junk. The ecologically important mangrove swamps unseen by tourist eyes resembled junkyards and smelt really foul, as we noticed when we cycled a bit off the tracks.

Bribing and offering are, and I make a strange bridge here, maybe both psycho-social or even psycho-magical mechanisms to obtain and ensure magical power, so much the underlying sentiment in Bali.

The one to the worldly, the other to the intangible, both part of life on an island continually beset by threats. And maybe it's good to remember that Adam and Eve had to leave paradise after the first act of bribery, the apple of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, so corruption is the essential sin, of revolting against the overpowering force.

The Balinese are a proud people, and under stress act as foursquare and angular as their temples.

The Puputans (killings of whole Royal families by the Dutch when they ruled Indonesia) in the early nineteenth century illustrate this. Those were not senseless repressions by the Dutch, killing whole royal courts but the result of deep integrity issues. The royals were caught between old adat (customary rights) and the treaties they signed with the Dutch concerning Tawan Karang (kliprechten-beachcomber rights) and saw no way out.

Tradition and custom stifle the real development and progress beyond serving the tourists, building hotels and catering to the investment whims of the rich. The entrepreneurial spirit,

the creative spark is missing in Bali, and so progress and change are limited, again something the tourist board touts as the main asset of the island. There you can still feel the past, see the romantic primitive, look at what has elsewhere given way to western materialism. Great, but something is missing. We cannot progress without the wild and unruly, a fact that one comes face to face with in Bali, where the culture is so strict, repressive and stagnant. Remember the tame and the wild horse of Plato's Phaedrus as a model for the psyche. Now I wonder whether corruption is not a kind of



invisible protest, in the sense that it is the small man's need to bribe and therefore corrupt the system. Unconsciously maybe, but is this not the only way to preserve some sense of pride, of power over the system? Especially in Bali,

where on the one hand the caste system and the family dwelling and the old desa rule are prevalent, on the other hand the worldly power lies with bosses, investors and officials seen as foreign. The second economy of bribes and corruption seems to me a natural complement to an overpowering first economy. Corruption is the people, we are the corruption as we need at least the illusion of another way out of the corner we find ourselves.

Ir. L.Sala  
sala@dealerinfo.nl  
mindlifttv@gmail.com  
www.lucsala.nl