ELEMENTAL PRODUCTIONS

ngaben:

emotion & restraint in a balinese heart

FILM GUIDE

ELEMENTAL PRODUCTIONS presents NGABEN: EMOTION AND RESTRAINT IN A BALINESE HEART
a film by ROBERT LEMELSON director of photography WING KO
consulting editor PIETRO SCALIA edited by WING KO ADIA WHITE
original music score by MALCOLM CROSS
produced by ROBERT LEMELSON ALESSANDRA PASQUINO
directed by ROBERT LEMELSON

www.ngabenfilm.com

info@elementalproductions.org (310) 454-5902 www.elementalproductions.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1
Balinese Religion 2
Ngaben 3
Perspectives on Personhood, Grief, and Emotion Regulation in Bali 8
Interpretations of the Cremation Ceremony: Social, Cultural, Political, Personal 11
Further Resources 12

ngaben: emotion & restraint in a balinese heart
FILM GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

The Balinese cremation ceremony, or *ngaben*, has primarily been known in the West as either a major tourist attraction that dazzles visitors with the splendor, intricacy, and drama of its performance, or as fodder for long-standing anthropological arguments about personhood and emotion that debated whether or not Balinese people expressed, or even experienced, grief. Yet an impressionistic look at *ngaben* from the perspective of a mourning son, Nyoman Asub, reveals the intimacy, sadness, and tenderness at the core of this funerary ritual and the feeling and force that underlie an exquisite cultural tradition.

BALINESE RELIGION

While expressed, performed, and experienced in various ways by the people who participate in them, Balinese cremation ceremonies are part of Balinese Hinduism, the result of a syncretism between local Balinese animist spirituality and cosmology and Hindu beliefs and practices, which were brought to the Indonesian archipelago as early as the 1st century and spread to Bali as early as the 4th century and reached its peak of influence during the Hindu Majapahit Empire in the thirteen hundreds.

The richness and complexity of Balinese Hinduism is worth detailed study of its own but two of the key beliefs of Balinese Hinduism are *karma phala*, wherein positive or negative behavior has the capacity to influence the fate of oneself or one's family members in the future, and reincarnation, or the process of a soul's rebirth after death.

Cremation is one of the most important steps in a person's spiritual life, because it is through cremation that the physical body is returned to its five constituent elements, or *pancamahabuta*, which are the earth (*pertiwi*), water (*apah*), fire (*teja*), air (*bayu*), and ether (*akasa*), and the soul is cleansed and released from the body to ascend to heaven and be reincarnated. As they are responsible for carrying out the cremation, the family bears a significant responsibility in this process and must ensure that the crossing over and spiritual elevation of their loved one is done properly. These Balinese Hindu beliefs about reincarnation provide the backdrop for the cremation ceremony known as *ngaben*.

NGABEN

The *ngaben* is part of a complex ceremonial funerary process that begins long before—sometimes even years before—the actual immolation takes place. It can be divided into a number of stages.

The first of these stages is the funeral, which occurs shortly after death. Most Balinese who pass away will be buried for a period of time before they are exhumed and cremated. The burial is an important element in the progression of the deceased person's soul in that here the *prethiwi*, the "solid" or material elements of the body, are returned to the earth and begin to be broken down. Burial is also often required as an interim between death and cremation so that the family of the deceased has an opportunity to raise the money required to hold a proper *ngaben*, which may cost between two and three thousand dollars. As such, the length of time the body remains buried will vary due to the financial position of the family; priests from the high Brahmin caste are never buried but kept in the house until their almost immediate cremation, rich families may be able to cremate their relatives very soon after they have died, but less well-off families may have to wait years.

Some families who cannot afford a cremation may wait for the *ngaben* of a member of royalty, as the preparations for these ceremonies will be the best, in terms of comprehensive planning and offerings, auspicious date, and holiness of the priests and blessings, reassuring relatives that the soul of their loved one will be guided to heaven. Other families will gather together with a group of other families, sometimes as many as ten or more, to share the financial and other burdens of hosting a cremation.

Until there are sufficient funds to carry out the cremation, the deceased will be purified and buried in the part of the family temple complex known as the Pura Dalem, or "the temple of the dead," which is built facing the sea. Once interred, the deceased will be brought daily offerings of food that are placed on a small adjacent shrine. Family members will also place

small coconut leaves at the head and feet of the grave because it is believed that the spirit of the deceased roams at night and the leaves serve as markers to guide the spirit back to its body. If there are no leaves the spirit will be left to wander forever with potential negative effects on the family or even the whole village.

Ideally, the cremation will not have to be postponed longer than three years after the deceased has been buried, because until the full cremation ceremony has been completed, the soul cannot rise to become a "purified ancestor" or be "brought home" to reside in the family shrine, nor can it be reincarnated. The experience of this delay upsets many Balinese family members, as they grieve for the soul of the deceased who is not yet able to reach heaven. Many Balinese believe an extended period of waiting causes the soul of the deceased to suffer, as he or she is forced to wander and wait in a torturous limbo. In their distress, such suspended souls may cause sickness in members of the surviving communities, or endanger their well being in other ways. If a family is experiencing illness or trouble they may consult a spirit medium and healer, or *balian*, who can contact the dead. If they have a buried family member they have been unable to cremate they might hear the plea, "Why have you just thrown me away? I want to be cremated." Meetings in such situations are often filled with weeping and feelings of guilt.

Once enough funds have been raised the family is ready to move on to the next ceremonial stage of exhumation and cremation. They will go to a priest who will determine the auspicious date for the cremation ceremony based on the Balinese ritual calendar and other factors. A week before the cremation, members of the *banjar*, or village organization, and family will start bringing gifts and offerings for the deceased. The family will in turn provide food and entertainment. Three days before the cremation, the body is removed from its temporary grave at the Pura Dalem. This is known as the bone taking, or *ngebet*. The remains, in whatever state they are in, are then purified and washed by immediate family members

while extended family and others in the village look on. In *Ngaben*, the recently deceased relative's corpse is still fairly intact, while the remains of Nyoman Asub's father, who has been buried for ten years, are now mostly just pieces of bone.

In certain cases, an effigy or effigies of the deceased may be built and placed atop the remains, serving as a symbolic idealized version of the human body which will take a new shape heaven—for example, the effigy might be given eyes made out of pieces of mirror so that in the next life the deceased's eyes will be clear and sparkling, teeth made out of nails so that they will be strong, and etc. The remains will then be wrapped in white cloth. Family members and friends may insert money into the layers of cloth wrapping the corpse or the remains in order to ensure prosperity in the next life. The bones will be kept in a temporary shelter, or "salon," for three days, and family members and friends will keep the remains company there, praying and celebrating.

Tending to the body and remains can be an emotionally intense experience for family members. As washing the corpse is the last intimate "work" one does for a family member it may elicit feelings of tenderness and care. If the body is recently deceased the family might still be in the throes of grief and loss and if it has been long buried these feelings might arise anew. Both pleasant and painful memories might be triggered, as well as a kind of mortal horror involved with handling the dead, or seeing a loved one in such a position. However, theoretically the *ngaben* is an occasion for joy because the family knows that they are both

fulfilling their most important obligation and allowing their loved one's soul to be purified, released from the body, journey to heaven, and then be reincarnated. It is common at funerals for family members to be subdued but non-family members to enjoy and encourage a festive atmosphere.

A day before the cremation is to take place, one final ceremony is held at the Pura Dalem, where people dress in their finest clothes and carry offerings to the temple. On the day of the *ngaben*, the body itself will be transported to the funeral grounds. The remains sit in a tower built from wood and bamboo. This tower can be striking, some as tall as 30 feet high, covered with bright decorations made of paper, string, tinsel, gold thread, silk, cloth, mirrors,

flowers and other bright and colorful materials. The tower has three tiers; the remains or the body is placed on a platform on the highest tier, and the priest stands next to it on this platform to escort it to the temple. The lowest tier, or the base of the tower, is supported bamboo poles and carried by a group of usually male family members or pallbearers. These pallbearers will twist, twirl and circle around with the tower to disorient and confuse the soul of the deceased, ensuring that it will be unable to find its way back home. The procession is accompanied by lively drumming, music, and dancing.

Meanwhile, in front of the procession another group of men carry a sarcophagus, which is often in the form of a black bull, although depending on the caste may also take the form of a winged lion, as is evident in *Ngaben*, or an elephant. The sarcophagus is the first to arrive at the temple, where it awaits the funeral tower. Once the tower arrives, the remains will be

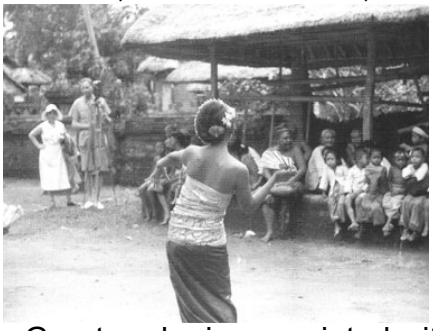
inserted into the sarcophagus through an opening in the back of its body. The final offerings are made and the priest, who sprinkles holy water on the sarcophagus, conducts the final rituals. The sarcophagus is then set on fire to purify and release the deceased's *teja*, radiance, or soul. This purification is only complete once the entire sarcophagus has been burned to ashes, signaling that the soul has ascended into heaven. The white ashes from the bones are then gathered and wrapped with flowers in a yellow and white cloth.

This is not yet the end of the cremation ritual. There is one final stage to the cremation and the purification of the soul, where the *apah*, or liquids, will be dispersed by sending the ashes to the sea. The gathered ashes will be placed, along with the cloth they are wrapped in, on a small bier. If the family lives close to the ocean, this bier will be brought and placed directly on the waves. If not, the ashes will be placed in a river, which will slowly carry them to the sea. This step is also accompanied by a ceremony that involves offerings and music. Ideally this occurs within twelve days after the cremation but again, due to the cost of such a ceremony, a family may be forced to wait longer as they gather the necessary resources to carry it out. It is only during this last ceremony that the soul is released from heaven to the highest level of being, from where it can follow the final stage of reincarnation, which is to be reborn. Balinese believe that the soul will be reincarnated back into the family, such as a great-grandchild but also possibly the first baby born after this final ritual is completed.

PERSPECTIVES ON PERSONHOOD, GRIEF, AND EMOTION REGULATION IN BALI

Bali has played an important role in the development of the discipline of anthropology, as some of the most significant thinkers in the field, including Margaret Mead and Clifford Geertz, did their fieldwork there. However, it has become clear that approaches to the theory and method of anthropology affect the conclusions anthropologists come to about the people they study. Nowhere has this been clearer than in the evolving ideas about personhood and emotion regulation in Bali.

Mead, and her research partner and then husband Gregory Bateson, were influenced by what has been termed a "culture and personality" approach which posited that cultural beliefs and practices molded its members, who all shared a fundamental "character," which was revealed and expressed in interpersonal relationships and aesthetic, artistic, and ceremonial expression. They believed the "Balinese character" was "curiously cut off from interpersonal relationships" and "existing in a state of dreamy-relaxed disassociation." Hence, even at funerals,



"Parting with loved ones is never emphasized and tears are inappropriate… Emotions that no Balinese display: tears at parting and death, broken hearts."

Geertz, who is associated with interpretive anthropology, thought cultural forms and practices acted as symbolic texts that could be analyzed to reveal their meaning. His own interpretation of the concept of Balinese personhood, based on systems of naming, calendrical organization, and ceremonial practice, was that Balinese were invested in maintaining an eternal, predictable, circular sameness where most behavior was codified and conventionalized. He concluded that Balinese people were more concerned with form, order, and categories of experience rather than actual personal encounter, hence they strive to become "stereotyped, abstract, anonymous fellowmen" to one another, the result being that:

"Individual Balinese are of no importance even to themselves, it is the masks they wear and the spectacles they mount that comprise the self."

In the late 1980's and 1990's anthropological methodology began to change; how anthropologists gathered information, from whom, in what contexts, and how this information was analyzed were all reconsidered. This sea change sought to understand how people feel; it emphasizes the fact that rituals, even and especially in the case of bereavement, are not just performed but experienced by the people participating in them, that such events don't just symbolize cultural beliefs but hold meaning and power in individuals' actual lives. Accordingly at this time, the pre-existing depersonalizing perspectives on Balinese personhood and emotion were forcefully argued against most famously by Unni Wikan in her book *Managing Turbulent Hearts: A Balinese Formula for Living*. Wikan illustrated the difference between the experience and the expression of grief in the Balinese community she studied, highlighting the great personal efforts individuals engaged in to manage their own feelings of sadness or anger and maintain the smooth composure that was indeed a cultural hallmark value and had been misrepresented in the literature as depersonalization or detachment.

Still, it is clear that this composure cannot always be contained in the context of grief and loss. Another anthropologist and Balinese expert, Linda Connor, observed a corpse washing during her fieldwork in Singaraja, Bali and witnessed not just pale, strained faces, but also uncontrollable sobbing from the adult children of the deceased. In *Ngaben*, as Nyoman Asub passes through the different steps of the cremation, he is seen to experience and express a variety of emotions; he is alternately laughing with his relatives, worshipful, concerned, choking back tears, fainting perhaps due to exhaustion, stress, or emotion, and weeping. As such his range of emotion is a touching testament to family ties and the feelings of love, loss, and regret that often accompany death.

However, framed within anthropological discourse on personhood and emotion in Bali, such examples of the expression of grief assume a further significance providing compelling evidence that resists the construct of a depersonalized and generic Balinese person who is of no consequence to himself or others as an individual, a construct which threatens to exoticize and distance Balinese from those who would seek to understand study their culture. In fact, Nyoman's brief words on his father's passing reveals a perhaps familiar constellation of emotions: he misses his father's "good face," struggles with self-recrimination and regret, tries to be resolute, worries about his father's fate in the afterlife, and tries to accept the finality of death. At the very least we get a sense that Nyoman's father was of great importance to him, such that "tears at parting" still flow ten years after his loss.

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CREMATION CEREMONY: SOCIAL, CULTURAL, POLITICAL, AND PERSONAL

In another of his quite significant works, Clifford Geertz used the cremation ceremony as proof for what he describes as the Balinese *Negara*, or "theater state" that existed before the Dutch occupation in the early 1900's. He argued that ceremonies, such as the *ngaben* for high caste Balinese, were an elaborate form of political theater that through conspicuous consumption gave form to "an aggressive assertion of status" that emphasized spectacle for its own sake, where people secured the well-being of themselves and the state through "grandly mounted collective ceremony" where "power served pomp, not pomp power." He took a literal wide view of funeral participants, calling them a "choreographed mob."

Writing about contemporary cremations and using a phenomenological approach to zoom in on particular participants, Linda Connor addressed the emotional reactions to the corpse during the washing phase of one cremation ceremony in Singaraja as embedded in socio-cultural meaning that revealed some of the lines of contention and change in contemporary Bali and how these affected individuals. In seeking to understand who was crying and why, Connor's work revealed significant issues affecting families including conversion out of Balinese Hinduism and marriage with people from other cultures, and differences in experience between those Balinese who are still familiar with *banjar*, or village organization, practices and local *adat*, or custom, and those who are not.

Both Connor and Geertz's work illustrate the fact that the cremation ceremony exists and changes in relationship to the social, economic, and cultural changes of the world within which it exists. For example, before the influence of the Majapahit Kingdom, many Balinese would simply bring the bodies of the deceased to the forest, where natural processes of animal scavenging and decomposition would break the body down, thereby releasing the soul to heaven. This practice continues to this day in what is known as the remote Bali Aga villages, such as Tenganan and Trunyan.

Furthermore, up until 1903, when the process was banned by the Dutch colonial powers, in some areas it was not uncommon for Balinese wives or favored mistresses to throw themselves on their husband's funeral pyre, by climbing a tower made specifically for that purpose, in order to accompany and assist her husband in the afterlife. And it was not until a number of decades after that the

cremation became a major tourist attraction for visitors to Bali who were enchanted and amazed by the aesthetic splendor of the ceremonies. Common aspects of the cremation practices are currently being actively contested, such as the process of jostling or struggling over the corpse as it is transported, known as *ngarap*, which is evident in the film during the exhuming and washing of Nyoman's father's bones. Some religious and civic leaders are trying to eliminate it from the ceremony.

Amidst ample historical, interpretive, and political takes on the cremation ceremony *Ngaben* purposefully provides a personal, impressionistic, and poetic glimpse of the process and the complex emotions involved, emotions that are both experienced internally as thoughts and memories, and expressed externally through fainting and uncontrollable tears. Renato Rosaldo, in his famous essay on bereavement in the Ilongot culture of the Philippines and in his own experience losing his wife, reminds us that mortuary practices don't just symbolize or mean something, but they also carry and emotional force that cannot be elaborated or analyzed, but must be felt. Against the backdrop of rich history and symbolism that is part of the Balinese cremation ceremony, *Ngaben* allows some of this force to be communicated and shared with viewers.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Balinese Requiem. (DVD). 1992. Dir. Yasuhiro Omori. Documentary Educational Resources.

Bateson, Gregory, and Margaret Mead. 1942. *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*. New York: New York Academy of Sciences.

Connor, Linda H. 1995. The Action of the Body on Society: Washing A Corpse in Bali. In *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1(3), 537-559.

Geertz, Clifford. 2000 [1966]. Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali: An Essay in Cultural Analysis. The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books. 360-411.

_____. 1980. *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Releasing the Spirits: A Village Cremation in Bali. (DVD). 1979. Dir. Patsy Asch, Linda Connor and Timothy Asch. Documentary Educational Resources.

Rosaldo, Renato. 1989. Grief and a Headhunters Rage. In *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press. PAGES.

Wikan, Unni. 1990. *Managing Turbulent Hearts: A Balinese Formula for Living*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Written by Annie Tucker
Edited by Robert Lemelson,
Julia Zsolnay and Adia White

Produced by Elemental Productions
725 El Medio Ave
Pacific Palisades, CA 90272

(310) 454-5902

www.elementalproductions.org
info@elementalproductions.org