



# Serendipitous Moments in Spiritual Bali

By Tricia A. Mitchell, November 11, 2011

A Balinese woman makes an offering at a temple.

The past days have been serendipitous in mystic Bali with moments that seemed as though the island's perpetually honored spirits were communing to make our stay incredibly special.

Two days ago, I started the shrimp-colored morning with a walk through unexplored territory to the east of our Jimbaran hotel, Villa Puri Royan, while Shawn went jogging on the beach.

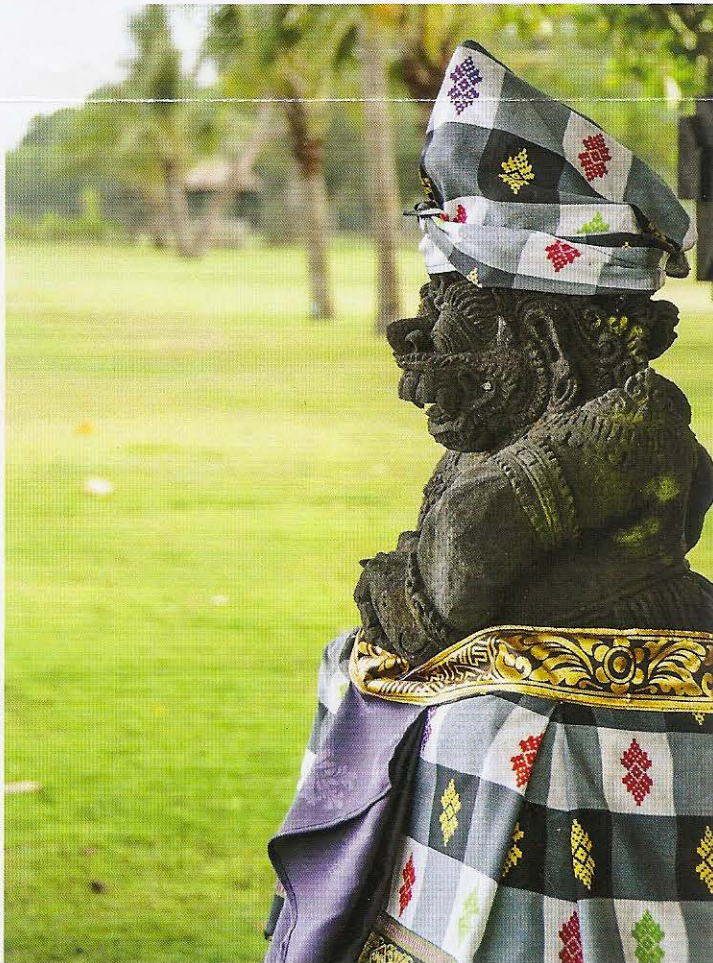
Though I was aware that Bali is a place with much spiritual practice prior to arriving, I was nevertheless still surprised to see that practically every home, temple and storefront entry, as well as all intersections, are adorned with spiritual offerings. They range from rice-filled rattan trays, to receptacles woven from banana leaves that are filled with dollops of saffron-colored rice and multi-colored flower petals.

One woman I saw on Tuesday gracefully carried a pretty tray on her head before kneeling down to place

a delicate organic vessel in the middle of a backstreet intersection. She shot a lovely smile my way and then inserted a smoking incense stick into the bundle before dancing off to another location at which to make a delivery. As the woman walked away, a little girl on a corner across the street placed a similar bundle of offerings in front of a neighborhood temple.

Stray, but overwhelmingly friendly and well-fed dogs roamed the back roads. Children in blue and white school uniforms walked home midday and temples made from black volcanic rock seemed to populate every other block. There were also an abundant supply of "hellos" and wide smiles. Balinese grins are the sorts that make the smile bearer's entire face smile. You sense that the smirk is genuine and the faces radiate happiness.

It took me several minutes to cross one of Jimbaran's busier streets. Cars, but mostly mopeds driven by soloists or families of two and even four passengers, weaved



There are statues of Balinese deities placed in many locations around Jimbaran.



Floral offerings are sometimes left where you wouldn't expect to find them, like this entrance to a temple.



A Balinese mother and child walk past a spiritual offering left on a street corner.



A roast pig feast is prepared for a ritual purification ceremony.

by from both directions. When I finally traversed the bustling road, I saw an increasingly larger number of schoolchildren. Around a corner, I found Jimbaran's Elementary School No. 5. When I walked into the courtyard, I was immediately introduced to Ms. Erna, the school's English teacher.

I was surprised that the young teacher shared the same name as my childhood piano teacher (whom you may remember from an earlier posting). Balinese Erna is the third person I've ever met to share the name of my special teacher.

Erna invited Shawn and me to the next day's Full Moon celebration at the school. As a prelude, Erna ushered me to one of the neighboring classrooms so that I could observe a group of children practicing a song to honor the goddess of education, who will be honored later this month. The students' male teacher stood at the chalkboard, prompting the young learners to vocalize each word.

In the early afternoon hours, following a stroll along the beach, Shawn and I returned to our guesthouse to catch up on online tasks and reading. When I heard intoxicating local music in the neighborhood, I instantly assumed it was coming from a car stereo. A hotel employee, however, explained that it was being performed live. My curiosity was instantly piqued.

With Shawn at my heels, the employee led us to a home compound across the street. In the home's courtyard, several families were performing a ritual purification ceremony for an infant boy and his mother. (In Bali, a child and his mother are considered impure until the child has reached 42 days old. Prior to this milestone, a mother cannot enter sacred places like temples. A child is also thought to be vulnerable to witches.)

When the family saw us peeking through the compound's gates that were carefully watched over by the elephant god, Ganesh, they enthusiastically ushered us in. Young men and boys, donning the traditional Balinese



A typical offering to Bali's gods consists of flower petals and rice wrapped in the leaves of tropical plants.

sari, sash and headscarf, played traditional instruments (lent out by the local community) while other family members watched the ceremony being performed by the family's holy man. The air was festive, the smells indistinguishable yet invigorating.

The work that went into the ceremony must have been incredible as evidenced by the impressive spread sitting underneath the family temple's roof. Trays after tray of offerings were studded with various exotic fruits and flowers. A roast pig, golden-blonde cakes, oranges and dunes of rice rounded off the overflowing table.

Our primary host, Mariana, was charismatic and philosophical, with excellent English. He explained that each tray contained items that would allow the child's soul to be purified from his "foundation" (feet) through his "middle body," to finally his mind and soul. The boy was at home in his mother's arms, but seemingly perplexed as a delicate red thread was tied first around his chubby ankle, then progressively upwards.

Family members snapped shots of the proceedings as if forming miniature paparazzi. As the ceremony drew to a close, a baby chicken was removed from a rattan cage and carefully cradled in a female family member's hands, as she and another relative rode off to the neighboring Indian Ocean. The couple headed to the beach to release the chicken—symbolizing the release of impurities and freedom of the child's soul.

Shawn and I were touched by the generosity and hospitality the family was extending us and we conveyed our emotions to Mariana. He explained the importance of doing good deeds for others, given Balinese Hindu karmic principles. "I am you, and you are me" he said, philosophically.

Mariana's statement succinctly illustrated why we are feeling so welcome on this beautiful island, among the banyan trees, roadways overflowing with flowers, and these gentle and beautiful people.

*Reprinted with permission from Tricia A. Mitchell.*