An island of mist and smoke. An earthly heaven. The people who inhabit this lush and fertile land know they live in a state of grace. They respond with a grace of their own. They celebrate their island’s beauty and honor the powerful forces that govern life. Listening to the gods of the mountains, praying to be cleansed by the waters, the people of this island see the handiwork of their gods all around them. Every place and everything is sacred on Bali, the island of a thousand temples.

[On screen] ISLAND OF 1,000 TEMPLES

CREATION

MYSTIC LANDS

From dawn’s first light through day’s end, religion influences every aspect of Balinese daily life. It’s as inescapable as gravity. As regular and unrelenting as a heartbeat. But this is not a faith burdened by somber ritual. The Hindu faithful of Bali express their devotion through music, dance and processions of beauty.

Such celebration does not mean that the people of Bali take their beliefs lightly. Prayers are at the core of daily worship for a pedanda, a high priest of Balinese Hindu religion. It’s believed that pedandas have lived many lives. Their souls are so evolved they know neither hunger nor thirst. They are only one step away from perfect enlightenment. Virtually every Balinese aspires to this goal, the end of all earthly cares, nirvana.

Balinese Hindus follow the basic tenants of their faith but in a version all its own. It includes elements of ancestor worship and animism, the belief that not only people but all things possess a soul. From a single flower to the summit of a mountain.

The island is so lush and vibrant, it’s easy to understand why it’s people believe everything has a vital, living spirit. The island of Bali is part of Asia’s island Malay Archipelago. The chain of islands stretches from Malaysia to Australia separating the Indian and Pacific Oceans. A province of the Republic of Indonesia, it’s less than two miles from its sister island, Java. Located in the midst of a nation of Muslims, 95% of Bali’s three million people are Hindu.

Thousands of Hindu temples dot the landscape – Batu, Tirta Empul, Uluwatu, and the 1000 year old mother temple, Besakih. Each temple faces the mountains that form the spine of the island. The peaks are home to the Hindu gods. To face them is to face Kaju (sp), the path towards light and righteousness.
Seven hundred years ago, when Islam became the dominant religion on neighboring Java, the angry Hindu gods stormed off that island and moved to Bali. Legend says Bali was a land of monotonous flatness so the gods forged a chain of volcanoes with enough majesty to become their new home. Sometimes the gods are content. At other times, they make their displeasure known with a bold, ominous warning.

To the Balinese Hindu, every event in life has purpose. The destructive forces of nature are interpreted as rage of the gods. In 1917, Mount Batur, one of the islands tallest peaks, exploded in a volcanic fury of ash and fire. Sixty thousand homes and thousands of lives were lost but the lava flow stopped mysteriously at the gate of Batur Temple and was considered a favorable omen. But some believe that the Balinese failed to properly thank the gods for saving their temple. Less than a decade later, the rage of the gods resulted in a second eruption which destroyed the temple forever. So a new temple was constructed at a different site on the volcano slope. Despite the potential for disaster, these mountains are sacred. They’re also the source of much that is good.

Fertile volcanic soil is fed by rains that descend the slopes into the valleys below nourishing crops, especially the most revered of all – rice. Along rice terraces called steppes of the gods, shrines honor this noble grain. According to legend, the Hindu god, Vishnu, took pity on starving humans and impregnated Mother Earth. From this union, rice was born. Rice nourishes body and soul, both as food for the family and as homage to the deities at the village temple. At planting and harvest, feasts and cock fights are held to celebrate this gift from the gods.

As rice is worshiped, so is water. It floods the fields and is considered the source of spiritual healing. The holy springs at the temple of Tirta Empul are believed to have great healing power. Pilgrims come to be cleansed and to honor the temple’s legend. Long ago, it is said, gods were led by a demon to a pool of poison. All drank and died except one. The survivor, the god, Indra, penetrated the earth and unleashed the spring of immortality. With its waters, he revived his fellow gods and defeated evil.

Today the Balinese use holy water, the fragrance of flowers, the smoke of incense, and rice and fruit to tempt the gods to descend to earth. With the offerings come the fervent prayers of the faithful. The struggle to preserve the delicate balance between good and evil is never ending. Offerings are placed on the ground to ward off demons and witches who live in the underworld. The islands dogs, considered to be possessed by evil spirits, devour the offerings.

The Balinese Hindus also believe that evil lurks at the furthest point from the mountains, along caloid (sp), the bad path toward the sea. The seashore is seen as the edge of the abyss. The people fear the sea because the underworld lies just beneath its waves. Dangerous tides and currents, sharks and poisonous sea snakes, are considered proof that among these waters lie misery and sorrow. A few fisherman dare to venture out - usually in the shallows or only at nightfall. They sail in spider-like outriggers with eyes painted on the bow to guide them through the darkness. Yet these waters also possess restorative powers. Several of Bali’s most sacred temples overlook the sea. Uluwatu hovers 250 feet above the ocean. Built of coral and limestone, it honors the great god, Rudra, the dissolver of life and the maker of storms but also the kindly deity of medicine and healing. Scores of monkeys roam Uluwatu. Some believe they possess the ability to see into a heart and know whether a person is good or evil.
The perpetual battle between good and evil is the theme of one of Bali’s most popular dance plays. During the kacak dance, a chorus of one hundred men come to the rescue in a fight to overcome evil. Drawn by the voices of the kacak singers, Hindu gods and spirits descend to the island of Bali. The kacak monkey dance comes from a tradition of Balinese trance dances. The dancers work themselves into a hypnotic dance so profound they must be brought back to consciousness by a specially trained priest. Only he can safely break the potent spell. According to the dancers, the risk of losing one’s consciousness to a trance is a risk worth taking. They believe the trance will give them the same serenity bestowed on their highest Hindu priests.

Danger and evil is symbolized by Rangda, a witch of staggering wickedness. Adorned with a necklace of human entrails, Rangda would destroy all of Bali and its Hindu faithful. She is prevented from wreaking havoc by a half lion, half dragon called the Barong Kadet. To learn the intricate movements and sounds of the play requires years of instruction and discipline. Only a few actors can handle the role of Barong or Rangda because it is believed they truly become the characters. The masks and costumes possess powerful magic. Between performances, they are hidden in the secret place at the temple.

At the heart of every Balinese artist is the desire to explain the meaning of life through the telling of complex myths and legends. An elaborate show is called Wayang Kulit. Shadow puppets become the actors in morality plays. Good characters play to the right of the puppet masters. Evil to the left. Out of chaos, good emerges triumphant during every performance. The puppeteers, an order of Hindu priests known as dalangs, require enormous coordination and stamina. Performances begin in the evening and often last until daybreak.

There is no word for art in the Balinese language, it is that deeply ingrained in the life and spirit of the island. The knives and chisels of the woodcarvers have no handles. These artisans believe this keeps their souls in direct contact with the spirit of the wood. The makers of batik fabric use dyes and beeswax to create layered patterns as rich and intricate as their faith. The Balinese display equal artistry in the never ending creation of religious offerings. These devotions are crucial. They ask the gods for favors and guidance in the face of evil, temptation, and sorcery because belief if black magic is powerful in Bali, witches are feared. They’re capable of throwing potent spells. Offerings help ward off evil but in extreme cases, the victim may need the good magic of a spiritual doctor.

This couple believes someone jealous of their success has cast a spell on the man to make him ill. The doctor attempts to cleanse his soul. She anoints him with sacred yellow rice and holy water. It’s believed that this will break the spell. The power of this water to revive, cleanse, and heal is taken as proof of its divinity but water can only be made holy by a pedanda.

For the grandest of occasions, pilgrims travel hundreds of miles to the most venerated temples to obtain water blessed by the high priests closest to the gods. The greatest of all places of worship is high in the mountains. The mother of all other temples. It’s as close as a pilgrim can get to the gods, as close as a mere mortal can get to the end of all earthly cares, Nirvana. A trip here is the most profound experience of their lives.

On the volcanic slopes of Gunung Agung, the mystery and reality of Balinese faith meet at Pura Besakih the oldest temple on the island. Many gods are believed to live in the mountains and at 10,000 feet, Besakih’s proximity to their home makes it the supreme temple of Bali. Besakih is a
vast complex of temples, more than thirty in all, with shrines and monuments to virtually every deity in the Balinese cosmos. Towering wooden and stone structures known as merus are silhouetted against the mountains they’re built to resemble. Merus are thatched with sugar palm fiber and are thought to be the doorway through which the gods descend to the earth. Because the buildings are not as important as the earth on which they stand, the temples are open-aired pavilions with platforms for offerings. The innermost courtyard is guarded by statues. Should demons somehow elude these sentinels, their path is blocked by a sacred wall. This wall must be stepped around to gain access inside. Because Balinese Hindus believe evil spirits can only travel in straight lines, even the craftiest spirit is baffled by a right hand turn.

Few things are simple in the beliefs of the Balinese Hindu. Every moment of life is guided by an intricate structure of rule and ritual including the very last. “Certain is death for the born” said the Hindu god Krishna, “and certain is birth for the dead. Therefore, over the inevitable, thou shalt not grieve.”

A woman who dies lies at home in a special cremation bed. Relatives and friends bring offerings, pray, and share happy memories. Outside, her burial tower is built. The body loses life but the soul cannot be slain. The soul returns again and again reincarnated until it reaches Nirvana, but to reach that perfect place, the body must be cremated. On the chosen day, final rights are chanted and bearers shoulder the mortal remains to the waiting tower. At the cremation grounds, bearers run in circles to trick the evil spirits and the deceased. It’s hoped her soul won’t try to find its way back to its earthly home before the funeral pyre can be lighted. The fires purify the body and turns it to ash. Later that night, the ashes will be scattered at sea.

On this island of 1000 temples, the people contemplate their world and their faith. Their perpetual cycle of life and death, good and evil. It’s as ethereal as the smoke of an incense stick yet tangible as rice. Water, earth, and sky.