

Living Leadership: Lessons from the Balinese

A Study for the Powers of Place Initiative

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Late last year I had the privilege of spending five days in Bali, Indonesia, in conversation with a group of people planning the future of The Bali Institute for Global Renewal. Invited by Marcia Jaffe, founder/president of the Bali Institute, twenty-five people representing various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, ages (from 25 to 76), and professions met in a variety of venues in Bali to help create future program offerings for the institute, specifically in the area of leadership.



The focus of my time and effort there was to attempt to understand and capture the philosophical underpinnings of Balinese indigenous culture and put them into language to share with an English-speaking audience interested in leadership principles and practices. I am interested in indigenous wisdom because of my work with The Powers of Place Initiative, a project dedicated to exploring the potential for transformation when people and place are in right relationship. Indigenous peoples all over the world have much to share about deep relationship with place because they live it every day. The social organization of the village, in Bali, has maintained its culture and tradition relatively intact, although the forces of modernity are fast encroaching on this remote island. Urban and Western lifestyles are seducing islanders, particularly the young, but at the time of this writing, traditional Balinese culture, rooted in Bali's indigenous and religious (Hindu) past, is

still alive. By being in deep conversation with the Balinese for five days, listening closely to stories that told of their love for their land and culture, some of the basic values and principles that underlie their traditions and way of life became clearer to me.

This paper is a reflection on what I learned from a diverse group of Balinese people who were part of the strategy group, including several business people, a former Indonesian government official, a farmer and holy man, a prince in a local royal family, and a leadership consultant now living and working in the U.S. I also spent time with a leading Indonesian architect (Balinese) and several hotel owners and general managers. All were members of villages, the basic social unit of life in Bali. The variety of perspectives was important because there was broad agreement on traditional Balinese values despite the variety of backgrounds, activities and professions. My insights below are offered in the form of underlying principles I discerned, including what was communicated explicitly and what I experienced through casual interaction with my colleagues and other Balinese I encountered during my visit.

A caveat. While I focus on the positive aspects of Balinese tradition, I am well aware there is a darker side to life in Bali, including its past, present and future problems. My intention is not to suggest there is only good, this would run counter to a core value of the culture, that of balance and wholeness in everything. Rather, I have come to know there is much of great value to Western and other cultures who have lost connection to indigenous ways and I offer what I have learned in this spirit. I am also not suggesting that Balinese indigenous culture be grafted onto Western concepts and practices of leadership wholesale. That is not possible or beneficial, but that there may be aspects that can be incorporated into existing practice if the desire is there.

Principle: Being in Service

Underpinning thought and action in traditional Balinese culture is a stance of being in service to something beyond oneself. The principle of Tri Hita Karana, basic to Bali's spiritual (Hindu) belief system, is service: to God, to man, and to nature. It is also known as the Balance of Life Principle and has been depicted as a triangle.

Service to God, or fundamental connection between man and divine, is communicated in nearly everything one observes in Bali, from the way one is greeted, with hands in prayer position indicating a meeting



of the divine in two human beings, to the many rituals and ceremonies that are performed throughout the day in the seemingly endless Hindu temples throughout the country. Eighty percent of Balinese people are Hindu, in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world. Hinduism is more a philosophy and a way of life than a religion. Its pervasiveness is apparent in all arenas of life including the social and professional.

Service to man shows itself in the way the Balinese treat others.

Traditional Balinese maintain a posture of humility when interacting with guests, in verbal and non-verbal communication. I observed, and am told, that Balinese want to please and that they receive pleasure from knowing their efforts are sincerely appreciated, perhaps even more than from monetary reward.

Service to the earth shows itself in continuing connection Balinese have with nature, through farming and agrarian activities and through their religious beliefs that consider places – natural and man made – integral to the fabric of life. Balinese Hinduism is different from Indian Hinduism. Although it came from India, it mixed with the indigenous philosophy and practice of Animism when it arrived in Bali, creating a unique hybrid. Both Hinduism and Animism are deeply rooted in human connection with place, and this particular mix is interesting to those of us exploring the powers of place.

Tri Hita Karana extends beyond service to God, man, and the earth to include how Balinese relate to their jobs. Commitment and dedication to work is highly valued,

despite differences in status, responsibilities and compensation. I am told that young people starting their careers are counseled that the best path to positions of leadership is to let others notice and appreciate the quality of their work, rather than to tout their own capabilities. While some Balinese achieve success in terms of position and money, most seem content to do what they love and make enough money to help their families, their compounds, and their villages.

Principle: Being in Community

Feeling part of a web of human relationships is basic to Balinese indigenous culture. Starting from birth, the individual has a place in the social unit of the family and is named accordingly. One of four basic names is given to each new child – Wayan, Made, Nyoman, and Ketut – indicating birth order. A variety of other names are attached, indicating nickname, caste, and other factors of identity. If there are more than four children, the first four basic names repeat.

In addition to each individual having a place in a family, each family has a place in a compound with other members of the extended family. In turn, each compound is part of a village whose members stay connected with that village wherever life takes them. They may live and work on another part of the island, or abroad, but most return to their birth village for important events such as rite of passage rituals. The village is a collective, with important community decisions made in one of several local banjars, designated community centers or neighborhood associations. Every family is part of one of the village banjars, physical spaces where villagers come together in true democratic process to make community decisions that help them share the burdens of life.

The Balinese sense of self is first and foremost the collective self. The good of the whole is taken into account before the good of the individual, though the two are intimately woven together. The good of the whole is the good of the individual. And the collective is considered part of successively larger collectives, in a nested configuration. The individual is a part of family, a compound, village, island, country, continent, world and ultimately the universe. Everything is connected to everything else that together form One – a basic tenet of Hinduism. Hinduism is a monistic religion that considers all aspects of life part of a greater whole whose



essence is manifest in forms of life such as trees, animals, and human beings equally. Each has a divine spirit that is an aspect of the one God. The many gods and goddesses that are worshipped are actually faces or aspects of the one God, not divinities themselves. Therefore, if you are a Hindu in Bali, you are automatically a part of a

greater whole. Dualism – the essential separateness of man and God – is not a core construct of thinking as it is in many Western religions.

Principle: Being in Relationship

Balinese consider relationship primary, equal to if not more important than, individual financial gain. In the West there is a saying, “time is money”. In Bali, another exists, loosely translated as “time is relationship”. And since building relationship generally takes time, efficiency and maximum profit are not necessarily the highest aspirations for the Balinese. Former Indonesian Minister of Culture and Tourism, I Gede Ardika, a native of Bali, tells the following story to illustrate “local wisdom versus modern economics”.

Ketupat is rice wrapped in coconut leaves, boiled in hot water, and sometimes served with different accompaniments such as meat, vegetables, and chili. It is very popular among the people of the city of Denpasar, Bali, including myself. The vendor of this ketupat is an old lady who appears uneducated and occupies a very simple shop in Denpasar. She usually opens her shop at 6:00 am and closes around 9:30 am. Her shop is always very busy, particularly on Saturdays and Sundays when her clients triple. Many people, like me, are not happy because unless we get there early, she is completely sold out of ketupat by the time we arrive.



Based on the economics I learned at the university, as long as demand increases, supply must be adjusted to meet the demand to make a profit. It is very basic economics. Using this logic I suggested this approach to the old lady, for my own benefit of course, but also to help her make more money. “Madame,” I said, “why don’t you make more ketupat on Saturday and Sunday to serve your clients? It means you can increase the money you will take home and you will soon be a rich lady. I was proud of

myself for being a good teacher.

I was caught off guard by her answer. “Thank you for your kind advice”, she said.”The money I make is sufficient for me. I don’t want to work harder because I have so much else in my life. I don’t need more money.” Her soft and clear answer was like lightening in my head. The old lady understand clearly was ‘enough’ is. And more, she has been practicing this local wisdom for a very long time. What a wise woman, I thought. I feel ashamed of myself. She is the richest person that I have ever met. She knows when enough is enough.

Being in relationship takes many forms in Bali. The way guests are welcomed is one example. Greetings are warm and sincere, whether one is entering a local shop or a

palace. People look you in the eye and want to exchange ideas. There is a feeling that they are truly present in the exchange with you, something fading fast in a distracted world. Tipping for services, such as at a hotel or restaurant, while gaining popularity in Bali, is a recent invention. Expressed appreciation and gratitude for a job well done is valued as much as monetary exchange.

I Gede Ardika has another story to illustrate how the introduction of the Western practice of monetary tipping for good service has affected the native cultural value of appreciation and display of pleasure (good relationship) as a sign of a job well done.

In the early 1990's I was in charge of the regional office of the Ministry of Tourism in Bali and had to host a welcoming cocktail party for a group of American yachters who were stopping over in Bali on their around-the-world tour. At that friendly party, an American woman approached me as host to tell me of her "uncomfortable experience" upon arrival at her hotel. Two room maids had welcomed her and her husband and brought their luggage up to their room. To express her gratitude, she gave them \$ 10 USD as a tip.

The two women refused her money with a smile. "No thank you, Madame," they said. The American woman thought the tip was too small, so she doubled it. Again, the room maids refused the money and went back to their work stations. The American woman felt very uncomfortable. The question in her mind was why the people of Bali had become so commercialized that the tips she had offered were too small to be accepted.

After listening closely, I apologized to her for her uncomfortable experience. But I could also see what the problem was. In the United States, tipping is common practice, practically a must. In Bali, however, tipping was not common at that time and most Balinese didn't accept tips. Money used as tips was interpreted as lack of respect for the person concerned. In Bali, spiritual value is more important than physical value and is part of the philosophy of the Balance of Life. One is supposed to be sincere in doing a job, not doing it for an expected reward. That is why the offer of tip money for a job well done could offend the pride of some.

Here's where different cultural values can create misunderstanding and hurt feelings. You see, the American woman was right, and the Balinese room maids were also right. They were just coming from two cultures with opposite values. Unfortunately, the American practice has become more entrenched in Bali and people now expect monetary tips more and more. To me, this is a shame because it contaminates our traditional spiritual values.

Principle: Being in Place

In addition to the relationship Balinese have with each other, there is a deep connection between people and place in Bali. Place provides identity, but more than that, it is an extension of the self that incorporates home and temples, village, nature, and landforms and topography of the island. Land is considered to be alive and inhabited by island gods. Family and village temples are sited based on direction and proximity to landforms considered holy, especially Mount Agung, a volcanic mountain in central Bali. The hierarchy of life is reflected in the terrain itself with higher elevations considered holier than those situated closer to sea level. The black coral shoreline, although attractive to tourists, is considered by natives to be the lowliest part of the island. Land is blessed before new construction begins and to exorcise evil spirits.

Man's connection to nature is one of three core aspects of the Balance of Life Principle, or Tri Hita Karana. Ecology, for the Balinese, is an expression of harmony, respect and love for the environment. There are ceremonies dedicated to plants and animals, particularly domesticated animals. These ceremonies include offerings of prayers to God, appreciation for what plants and animals give humans, and commitments to sustainability of the natural world.

Trees are also special in Bali. Everywhere on the island one can see trees draped with yellow, black and white fabric. This is a symbol of Balinese belief that man and trees are equal in spiritual stature, not, as some believe, that Balinese are worshiping tree spirits as God.

An award-winning Balinese architect told me that before he begins his plans for a home, office building, or other structure, he visits the land on which these are to be built to experience the "sense of the place". He stands on the land, alone, and notices from which direction the wind blows, how the light shifts during the day, what smells and sounds pervade the place, and where neighbors are. In this sense, he "listens" to the place. It is also common in Bali, he says, to ask for the land's permission to build and to provide offerings to the deities of the place.



Principle: Being in Attunement

Balinese indigenous wisdom accepts that there are invisible as well as visible elements in the world. There is a deep belief in magic and mystery and forces beyond the control of human beings.

In order to operate in a seen and unseen world, Balinese need to hone their ability to discern forces beyond the obvious. To do this, all the senses must be engaged – sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. Intuition, or gut feeling, is also valued and acted upon, as is sensing of energy and energetic shifts. One of our colleagues, who leads tour groups through sacred forests in Bali, describes how he knows where spirits are. He calls it his “sniffing skill”, an ability to gather and process information coming in through intuition, body sensations and a kind of knowing that is not logical.



Bali itself is a place for the senses. On arrival, the visitor is greeted by a land virtually humming with sound, smell, color and texture. It is difficult to remain oblivious to the surroundings. The jungle is alive, and plants, animals, and even the heat and humidity encase their human counterparts. Plants are oversized in the jungle, providing a different scale of proportion relative to human beings, and this might serve to shift the physical and psychological relationship between them. Such resonance, I believe, demands that humans respond, honing their ability to attune themselves to their surroundings in ways not as necessary in other, more sterile, settings.

The ability to use multiple channels of input to inform thinking and decision making is natural to the Balinese and other indigenous peoples who have needed to depend on these while living deeply embedded in nature. As we have become urbanized, our ability to access these multiple, sensory forms of intelligence has diminished because it is not as necessary as it once was. We exert control over our physical environment in many ways, such as artificial lighting, heat and air conditioning, and indoor plumbing. While providing comfort and convenience, these also serve to insulate us from nature and we may have contributed to sacrificing our ability to absorb sensory information that can help solve some of the complex problems we face today. In my opinion, we have not lost our human capacity to access multisensory intelligence, it has simply atrophied from lack of use and we have forgotten how to access and process it.

Principle: Being in Beauty

Art, crafts, music and dance are integral aspects of Balinese culture and daily life. Art, for example, is so profoundly woven into the human experience in Bali that there is no word for it in their language.

The Balinese create beauty in everything. Intricate ceremonial offerings appear everywhere – in temples, on doorsteps and in the streets. Fine crafts made of silver, wood, stone, paint and fabric are available all over the island and skills are passed down in families and villages. For example, near Ubud, there is a particular village known for its silver and gold jewelry craft while another is known for its oil painting. The strains of chanting, drumming, or the gamelan (a native instrument similar to a xylophone) can be heard throughout the day, either as entertainment or as part of rituals and ceremonies.



Native dress, for men and women, is also beautiful. Colorful sarongs are worn by both sexes when entering a temple and the women wear ornate, intricately embroidered blouses. Flowers are everywhere, tucked into cracks in the pavement and on windowsills, placed daily as religious offerings. Such beauty, I believe, has an overall effect that goes beyond mere pleasure. Some believe that beauty, or aesthetics, are gateways to the divine because they inspire awe and tap into a different level of human consciousness than words and ideas.

Principle: Being in Story

Ask a Balinese to explain something and he will tell you a story. Indigenous people have an oral tradition, and this exists in Bali today. Hinduism is based on story, originally the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita, which are significant spiritual texts.

Sitting with my new Balinese friends, all accomplished people in a variety of fields, I noticed that the way they describe complex concepts was through stories that serve to illustrate the point. I Gede Ardika's stories, included in this paper, are good examples. This seems to me very different from what I am used to in professional, and even personal, styles of communication in the U.S. I became aware of my own natural communication pattern, which is more direct and explicit. The Balinese were painting

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pictures with their words, through stories, and I was learning a lot. A picture can, indeed, be worth a thousand words.

There is much to learn about leadership from the above principles of Balinese indigenous culture and I will explore these in another paper. For those who want to learn, what is required is more difficult than the mere acquisition of management tools and techniques. It involves fundamental shifts in attitude and approach to oneself and others, and to life. Being in service, in relationship, in place, in wholeness, attunement, beauty and story requires a personal stance and philosophy of life that many of us have not been raised with or have sacrificed to the requirements for success in Western organizational life.

Adding to the difficulty of adapting these principles to Western leadership style are the underlying assumptions and values that inform Western life. Individualism and independence are deeply held values in the West and an entire way of life is predicated on these, limiting commitment to others and to the community as primary. Efficiency limits relationship and beauty, because both take time to establish. Dependence on cognitive intelligence, figuring things out logically, limits knowledge of and dependence on “other ways of knowing” including sensory awareness and intuitive knowledge.

But difficult is not impossible. I believe that for all the contributions Western philosophy and culture – and its organizational implications - have made, we can and should incorporate what we used to know as indigenous peoples ourselves and learn from cultures, like the Balinese, who continue to live their traditional values.

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The people and places of Bali, Indonesia



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