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At Royal Balinese Funeral, Bodies Burn and Souls Fly

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UBUD, Indonesia — In a roar of orange flame, the body of Agung Suyasa, head of the royal family of Ubud, was reduced to its earthly elements on Tuesday, liberating his soul to fly upward, in a spray of sparks, through the night sky to the heavens.

In the most spectacular royal funeral in Bali in at least three decades, the energy, mysticism and creativity of this Hindu island came together in the mass cremation of three royal figures and 68 commoners.

It was the highest moment — but not the final one — in months and sometimes years of funerary rites as bodies were buried or preserved waiting, according to local belief, for their souls to be freed through cremation.

The bodies of the commoners had waited to join Mr. Suyasa and two other members of his extended family in a royal cremation, although the pyres of the commoners were in a separate location.

All were on a journey of purification and renewal in which, according to Balinese tradition, the soul can return to inhabit a new being, generally a member of the same family, until, once again, it is freed through cremation.

In the coming months, more ceremonies lie ahead, to further cleanse both the soul of the departed and the people left behind.

“None of us is brand new,” said Raka Kerthyasa, the younger half-brother of Mr. Suyasa. Mr. Kerthyasa oversaw the cremation and is now the guardian of the ancient but symbolic royal family. “We are part of the cycle of life,” he said.

That ever-changing cycle may one day claim the cremation rites themselves, and some here say that in the face of a globalizing world, Bali may never again see a cremation ceremony to match this one.

“They’ll have things in the future, but elaborate and grand like this one, I don’t think so,” said I Nyoman Suradnya, an artist, whose older brother was one of the commoners cremated Tuesday.

“Cultures come and go,” he said. “It is just a matter of time. Don’t be afraid of change. There is nothing absolute.”

In that spirit, Tuesday was a day of raucous energy as thousands of volunteer porters in purple shirts carried the giant emblems of the ceremony like armies of ants bearing impossibly large objects.

Hunched under a giant bamboo platform, 200 at a time for 100-yard shifts, the porters bore an 11-ton tower, as tall as a three-story building, that carried the coffin of Mr. Suyasa under a nine-tiered pinnacle.

Whooping and laughing, sometimes breaking into a run, the porters swung the platform crazily from right to left

to confuse the spirits.

Along with it came a huge, undulating dragon, terrifying to behold with its bulging eyes and splayed teeth. After that came a giant black, wood bull, hung with gold necklaces, that would serve as the sarcophagus at the cremation.

“Strange as it seems, it is in their cremation ceremonies that the Balinese have their greatest fun,” wrote Miguel Covarrubias in his classic work, “Island of Bali,” published in 1937.

“A cremation is an occasion for gaiety and not for mourning, since it represents the accomplishment of their most sacred duty” to liberate the souls of the dead, he wrote.

For most of the time since Mr. Suyasa died on March 28, his body had been lying embalmed, as if asleep, in his palace. The family brought daily offerings and symbolic meals. Coffee and tea were prepared by the bier. A comb, toothbrush and mirror were kept handy nearby.

On Tuesday, poised between heaven and earth, his white and gold coffin entered the cremation site in the funerary tower, which glided on the backs of its 200 porters as smoothly as if it were on ice.

Porters carried the coffin down a soaring white chute, then paraded it three times around the waiting bull, trailed by men and women with pyramids of offerings on their heads.

On the crematory platform, the hollow back of the bull was opened and the body was placed inside, its final stop on its earthly journey. A second, smaller bull stood by its side holding the body of another royal relative, Gede Raka.

The sun was sinking as the back of the giant bull was closed and the crematory plaza, packed with thousands of onlookers, twinkled with the flashes of cameras.

Suddenly bright shoots of flame appeared under the belly of the bull, quickly caught the gold necklaces and traveled upward. Smoke seemed to pour from its nostrils and flames shot from its eyes. Its curved horns and ears were on fire.

As the bull fell away, the iron bars that formed its frame remained, and within them hung the burning skeleton, its skull tilted downward, its right foot spurting flames.

Acting with ritual disrespect for the now-useless body, workers poked and prodded at it with long bamboo poles to stoke the fire, and it swayed slightly in the flames.

The body disintegrated into its five earthly elements: earth, wind, water, fire and ether. Its soul disappeared into the night sky.

One of Mr. Suyasa’s sons, Indrayana, sat on the ground nearby, dressed in ritual gold, holding his hands in prayer toward his father. Then, fire to fire, he put a match to a cigarette, looked up, and inhaled.

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