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## BALI IN THE 90S WAS A COMPLEX PARADISE

By Cameron Cuchulainn, September 16, 2017



After surviving breast cancer in 1990, photographer Jill Freedman felt sure of one thing: she needed to visit Bali. "I went," she says, "as soon as I could walk after the radiation." Hell-bent on capturing beautiful images of life and vitality, Freedman flew blindly towards the island. She thought she knew what to anticipate; anything else she'd figure out on the fly. But the photographs Freedman took in Bali reveal a cultural learning curve. Her Western expectations of the island were shattered, giving way to tender portraits that document an ancient culture's idiosyncratic flirtation with a changing world.

Freedman hired a Balinese man named Nyoman Wirata and his wife, also named Nyoman, as guides and interpreters. As they toured the island, including Wirata's family home in a mountain district near Lake Batur, Freedman realized her preconceptions—that Bali, with its tropical climate and time-honored cultural traditions, would be free from the complications and tensions that permeated her life in New York—were wrong. The reality was far more intricate.

"Bali is not a simple place," Freedman writes in her notes from the trip. The island's lush exoticism belied encroaching globalism. Freedman was struck by how often conversations centered on money, "even worse than in New York," a fact that didn't square with being surrounded by natural wonders. Plastic waste stuck out around the island like a sore thumb, polluting the banks of beautiful streams, hot springs, and beaches. And in the 90s, almost a decade before the internet would alter human behavior yet again, Freedman thought TV was threatening Balinese traditions. "Television is here, and it is a great leveler and destroyer, causing envy among the have-nots for the things they see, and greed," she writes. "Also when people are sitting around a television set, they are not down at the meeting place, playing their gamelans [percussive ensemble instruments] or just bullshitting." While documenting culture in Ireland, Freedman had seen how people staying at home to watch television had diluted community activities around the pub scene there; she worried that connections among friends and neighbors would fade in Bali, as well.

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A combatant and friends laugh after one of the Mekare-Kare bouts fought with prickly pandanus leaves. However, the grace of ancient traditions was widespread enough throughout Bali to offset noisy reminders of consumerism. Freedman visited the village of Tenganan during the festival of Usaba Sambah to see ritual leaf fights known as Mekare-Kare. Freedman was told the village was Bali Aga, meaning that its people followed native Balinese ways dating from before the arrival of Javanese neighbors who introduced Hinduism and other customs in the 14th century. The leaf fights are a centuries-old warrior ritual honoring the god Indra, celebrating his defeat of an oppressive king, Mayadenawa. "Men fight with their fists wrapped in sharp-edged pandanus leaves, and a shield in the other hand," Freedman writes in her notes. "These leaves have sharp spiky edges, and the big point seemed to be rubbing these leaves into the opponent's back. Not only do they scratch and slice, but tiny barbs are left in the skin, sort of like if you sat down on a cactus."

From her pictures, you can see they hurt like hell. In one, a boy picks the needles from the flesh of another kid. But there was also a spirit of fun. "They laugh before the fight. Then men have to pull them apart, and they laugh when they are finally separated." Young fighters would try to impress women dressed in ritual clothing and golden headdresses by suppressing the pain inflicted by the prickly pandanus leaves. "The oldest men are like referees, grabbing the kids that get carried away, watching that things stay under control. A gamelan orchestra accompanies the whole proceeding, and when the gamelan stopped playing, the battle was over," Freedman writes.

Another stop on Freedman's journey presented a familiar scene. "Driving down the road toward Tirta Gangga, I came across a picture I had prayed for: this little dance class, in a little banjar [village community] in the country. It was adorable. Some of the kids were real klutzes, and the teacher had spent all the patience she had by the time I got there." The dance was ancient, beautiful, and foreign, but the teacher's manner was harsh and recognizable. "She really slapped their hands when they were wrong, kicked their legs like a wrestler, bent their little bodies around," Freedman reflects. "It's the same the whole world over and reminded me of my own dance class experience. I was seven and the teacher at the Jennifer Jones Studio of Dance called my mother and told her to take me home at once—I was a 'roughneck.' When my mortified mother came to pick me up, I refused to budge from under the piano."

Freedman also witnessed ceremonial processions, an important part of Balinese life. She saw women craft ephemeral offerings for traditional practices. They were often created with perishable items, like fresh fruit, made to be replaced by new offerings for subsequent celebrations. There was a rawness to the "here today, gone tomorrow" shrines that she found captivating. "The offerings are made with precision and flair; pigs belly and fat for decoration, fanciful towers, and funeral sarcophagi. That is what originally attracted me to Balinese art... Since perfection cannot last, you make something beautiful just for the moment, then throw it away and make something else."

There's irony in that sentiment, considering the altars are immortalized through Freedman's lens. But her dispatches from Bali at the end of the 20th century complement the island's enduring yet elastic culture. Freedman taps into a push-and-pull that feels intrinsically Balinese: the impulse to preserve, commingling with transient beauty.