

INTRODUCTION

What at first glance is further from the Florence of Marsilio Ficino than Calcutta and Benares? . . . Nevertheless, I found myself there because, as was the case with the humanists of the Renaissance, a provincial image of man did not satisfy me, and because, ultimately, I dreamed of rediscovering the model of a "universal man."

—Mircea Eliade,
No Souvenirs, 1957–1969

This book is the result of a very personal relationship with a work of art. Like the very circumstances out of which the book was born, it represents a singular experience at a time and in a place—an experience that not even I can ever hope to repeat. As such it is not the work of a professional scholar of literature or of a trained art historian, but of a storyteller who happened to fall in love with a masterpiece of classical Balinese art. I did not reflect on the controversial difficulties inherent in every translation of an Eastern work into Western form, or on the complex matter of transposing an oral tradition to a literary one, or, furthermore, on the fact that the story depicted on the ceiling of Kertha Gosa is an offshoot of an oral experience expressed through the medium of visual art, and that this fact alone is alive with dangerous ambiguities. Had I been a trained scholar, and therefore conscious of all the implications of these difficulties, I might have embarked on this adventure in a very different way.

This book, therefore, should not be viewed as the ultimate wisdom on the paintings of Kertha Gosa—although I do hope that it will contribute to scholarship—but rather as the work of a storyteller, fascinated with the wondrous mysteries of the human condition, with the wisdom transmitted through the ephemeral method of word of mouth and, in this particular case, through both word of mouth and "image of eye." During the moment this "transmission" happens it is real and tangible. When this singular event at a time and in a place is over, it becomes like a dream or an illusion, living on only in one's own imagination.

The following notes are an attempt to inform the reader about the nature of my adventure, the unusual process of my research and the circumstances out of which this book was born.

The tiny island of Bali, lying immediately to the east of Java and appearing as a minute speck in the Indonesian archipelago, is a complete universe unto itself, a microcosm of Hindu culture in the midst of a Muslim-dominated world. When I first arrived in Bali, in December 1973, I found that not only did it satisfy all the expectations my imagination had conjured up but that, in fact, it far exceeded them. As my readings about the island had led me to anticipate, Balinese life is still permeated by belief in a divine, omnipresent force. In every gesture of a musician playing his *gamelan* instrument, in every whirl of a temple dancer, in every motion of a farmer sowing a rice field, in every shadow cast by a puppet in a shadow play, the Balinese perceive a manifestation of this supernatural power. The paintings and wood carvings, the stone sculptures and temples that dominate the landscape of daily life in Bali are not merely artistic reflections of a rich cultural heritage but are, in fact, an organic outgrowth of the people themselves, a special dimension of their being—as natural a part of them as their hands or eyes. In Bali, the gap between "myth" and "reality" does not seem to exist. The religious, the mythological, is acted out in life. It seems to grow spontaneously, with the same lushness as the vegetation itself. During a shadow-play performance, the Balinese do not regard the characters merely as entertaining puppets but endow them with flesh and blood and identify with them completely. The tales of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the great Hindu epics, are embedded in the psyche of every Balinese, whether peasant or prince.

Living among the Balinese on and off for over six years put me in daily contact with a society that I only began to make sense of slowly.

The Balinese are Hindu—a fascinating phenomenon, considering that the rest of Indonesia has been so strongly influenced by Islam—and traditional Hindu society

exhibits one of the clearest examples of hierarchical stratification in the world today. However, the Balinese have evolved a form of Hinduism that differs in many ways from that of India—a form that appears to be less rigid in its structure.

Traditionally, each person's *dharma*, or duty in life, is delineated by his hereditary social class, and one of the gravest infractions of the law is to cross the boundaries of one's own class. What to the Westerner appears as a rigidity that stifles individualism, the traditional Hindu regards as a perfectly natural reflection of the cosmic order of things. Just as each of the four elements—fire, air, water and earth—and each of the four seasons—spring, summer, autumn and winter—is assigned its own special and necessary function in the natural cycle, so in precisely the same way each of the four castes is entrusted with its own sacred responsibility: *brahmins* are the priests, the learned spiritual leaders; *ksatrias*, the warriors and nobles, the secular rulers; *vaishyas*, the merchants and businessmen; and *sudras*, the farmers and laborers, who perform the other menial tasks which are absolutely necessary for society.

In Bali, the four-caste division is not so rigorously delineated as in India:* the *brahmana*, *satria* and *wesia* castes tend to form a group of their own, referred to as the *triwangsa*, while the rest of the population belongs to the *sudra* class.¹ Far from agitating against the inequity of such a hierarchy, the traditional Balinese possess such a deep, implicit faith that their society is the earthly manifestation of the divine, universal truth that they consider it their holy duty to fulfill whatever this earthly hierarchy, the mirror of the gods' own hierarchy, requires of them. If they do not, they believe the effects of their error will not only tarnish their own individual *karma* (an accumulation of deeds that accompanies them through every successive incarnation) but will also reverberate throughout the universe, resulting in cosmic chaos.

The sense of belonging to a group, of communal identification, is so deeply ingrained in the Balinese from infancy onward at every level of human interaction that

their capacity and desire to blend harmoniously with the group is virtually instinctual. However, Balinese society, which in one sense absorbs the individual, in another sense emphasizes individuality to a great degree. Going hand in hand with the idea of *karma*, whereby a person is responsible for his or her own destiny—literally “making” or “unmaking” oneself—is the implicit assumption that the individual alone must effect his or her own salvation. In Hindu terms, this is tantamount to realizing the Self, the universal force (*Brahman*) that dwells at the center of every individual's being. The soteriological function is assigned not to a redeemer figure who, literally through divine grace, will rescue a soul from eternal damnation but, rather, to each individual.

The most obvious differences between Balinese Hinduism and present-day Hinduism in India are that there is no untouchability in Bali, no cow worship (the Balinese, except for the priests, eat beef) and less prudery, and men and women interact much more freely and treat one another as equals (widows sometimes remarry, and women may divorce).

The most important feature of Bali's communal ethos—not unique to Bali, but belonging in some degree to any traditional society—is the sanctity of the family. For example, a woman who is barren (even if through no fault of her own) is looked down upon, and a man who has produced no offspring is considered, figuratively, to have remained a child for his entire life because he has not been able to replace his childhood name with a “real” man's customary name, “father of . . .”² Similarly, spinsters and bachelors are looked upon with reproach. Marriage is the social norm and therefore “required,” mainly because in popular belief the great-grandparent is normally reincarnated as the great-grandchild. In Bali, therefore, social legitimization cannot be achieved without proof of fertility. Sterility is interpreted as a threat to social equilibrium, to the possibility of reincarnation, and consequently to the equilibrium of the entire universe.

As one would expect in such a family-oriented culture, parents are accorded the utmost respect. By the same

*It should be noted that the following terms differ from their Hindu counterparts above. These Balinese spellings will be used in the remainder of the text.

Drawing by
William Blake
from Dante's
Inferno.



token, every newborn baby is believed to come into this world directly from Heaven and is therefore treated with the reverence due a god.

This picture of Balinese society arose from my experience of observing the Balinese while sharing their daily life.

Then, one day I visited Klungkung, Bali's former nominal royal capital, and there, in a building called Kertha Gosa (a name literally meaning "the place where the king meets with his ministers to discuss questions of justice") I was utterly overwhelmed by the paintings I saw on its ceiling. Although I knew nothing about the subject matter of these paintings, I was astonished by what were clearly depictions of an enormous variety of punishments—in graphic, gruesome detail. I recall how Dante and his *Divine Comedy* came to mind. This was

perhaps a normal reaction for a Florentine finding herself gazing at a Balinese ceiling with the same awe and wonderment with which, as a schoolgirl in Florence many years earlier, she had listened to a nun's voice describing, with what seemed perverse relish, every horrific detail of Dante's vision of Hell and Purgatory.

After that day, my curiosity about these Balinese paintings grew until it took the form of an obsession. I began researching Kertha Gosa, but could find no specific information about it other than a short paragraph in Miguel Covarrubias's classic book *Island of Bali* mentioning that the pavilion of Kertha Gosa had served as a court of justice and that the story painted on its ceiling was called *Bhima Swarga*.

This legend, I learned, is an offshoot of the great Indian classic the *Mahabharata*, which one might call the

Hindu counterpart of Homer's *Iliad*. This epic cannot be dated with any certainty. It developed gradually between 400 B.C. and A.D. 400, undergoing the elaborations common to epics in an oral tradition. Although a great many anonymous authors undoubtedly contributed to the composition of the *Mahabharata*, the poet Vyasa is often credited with its compilation. Consisting of 100,000 verses, the *Mahabharata* deals mainly with a war of succession between two royal families, the Pandavas (five brothers, of whom Bhima is one) and their cousins, the Kauravas,³ who struggle over the rulership of the ancient kingdom of Kuru in northern India. It is essentially a moral epic, extolling the rectitude, wisdom and perseverance of the noble *satra* caste and stressing integrity, filial devotion and the ultimate triumph of virtue over vice. For centuries, the *Mahabharata* has held a central place in Indian culture; even today it is recited to huge audiences just as it was hundreds of years ago—for it is said, "He who with fervid devotion listens to a recitation of the *Mahabharata* attains [hereafter] to high success in consequence of the merit that becomes his through understanding even a very small portion thereof. All the sins of that man who recites or listens to this history with devotion are washed off."⁴

The *Mahabharata* came to the island of Bali by way of eastern Java, which is separated from Bali by only a narrow strait. According to old Javanese records, the first translations of the epic from Sanskrit into Kawi, the ancient Javanese language, appear to have been made about A.D. 900, during the reign of Dharmawangsa. The epic was gradually transmitted to Bali, probably between the years 1019 and 1042, when eastern Java was ruled by Dharmawangsa's nephew, Airlangga, one of the greatest monarchs of ancient Java. By this time Java had already been under Hindu and Buddhist influences for more than 400 years. Airlangga's mother took as her second husband a prince of Bali, and that was the formal connection that seems to have opened Bali to cultural exchange with Hindu Java.

But the massive cultural penetration of the island

came three centuries later, in the year 1343, with the conquest of Bali by the Hindu-Javanese Majapahit dynasty. The Hindu-Balinese trace their original ancestors to members of the Majapahit court and army who took possession of their island in the fourteenth century.

As Islam overwhelmed the Hinduism of Java in its eastern sweep, resulting in the establishment of the Muslim state of Mataram in the sixteenth century, the local rulers of Java adopted the new religion and proclaimed themselves sultans. The Hindu princes of Bali, however, remained untouched by Islam. How and why Bali managed to develop and preserve the Hindu culture and religion over the centuries, during which most of Indonesia became a bastion of Islam, is an intriguing historical puzzle to which there are no fully satisfactory answers. Perhaps the most persuasive explanation is advanced by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who finds great significance in the geographic position of Bali. In his view, Bali lay outside the mainstream of the spice trade that exploded in this part of the world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. "Bali," states Geertz, "faced south toward the Indian ocean where, given poor harbors and rough seas, there was hardly any trade, rather than north toward the Java Sea, the Asian Mediterranean around which Chinese, Indian, Arabic, Javanese, Buginese, Malay and European merchants shuttled like so many itinerant peddlers. Much of Bali's reputation for seclusion and isolation stems from this fact."⁵

It is thus that the *Mahabharata* came to be incorporated into Balinese culture. Its influence is felt in several art forms: dance, drama, wood carving, sculpture, painting and the plots of the *wayang kulit*, or shadow-puppet theater.

In Bali, however, the Indian title *Mahabharata* has never been formally employed; instead, the eighteen sections (*parvas*) of the epic are treated as independent episodes—each a story unto itself, with its own title. Moreover, through the centuries, the Balinese came to emphasize the dramatic aspects of the exciting exploits of the several major heroes, rather than the more sophisti-

cated philosophical nuances of the original Indian epic. The *dalangs* (shadow-play puppeteers), in particular, have been central catalysts for the popularization and secularization of the individual stories, although painters, sculptors and dancers have also been important. Whatever the medium, the various episodes of the *Mahabharata* transmit their inherent traditional ethical values and aesthetic codes to the popular consciousness. In Bali, the traditional stories are a mirror of both the worldly and the spiritual concerns of the people. There are obvious parallels between the impact of these epic stories on everyday life in Bali and the impact of Old Testament heroes and villains on life in medieval Europe. But while such figures as Lot, David and Goliath have lost much of their immediacy in the modern West, Bhima and his brothers are alive on the Balinese stage.

The story of *Bhima Swarga* is a particularly fascinating case in point. The title itself illustrates, linguistically, a departure from the original Sanskrit conception: it is an abbreviated form of *Bhima ka Swarga*, which in Balinese means literally "Bhima goes to the abode of the gods." *Swarga* refers to *any* place where the deities happen to reside, whether Heaven or Hell. The original Sanskrit *Swarga* is a term reserved exclusively for Heaven and never used in connection with Hell, which is called *Naraka*. Curiously enough, the Balinese tale of "Bhima goes to the abode of the gods" cannot be found in the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*. The only feature of the original related at all to this story is a brief passage in the epic's final portion, *Svargarohanika*, describing the journey, not of Bhima but of his elder brother Yudhisthira, to Svarga on a mission quite different from that of Bhima in the *Bhima Swarga*.⁶ Clearly, *Bhima Swarga* is purely a creation of the Balinese popular imagination.

Stripped of all its marvelous details, the story's basic plot is quite simple. Bhima, second oldest of the five Pandawa brothers, is charged by his mother Kunti with the mission of rescuing from Hell the souls of his earthly father, Pandu, and his second mother, Madri.* After saving them from Hell, he must secure their admission

to Heaven, which involves the ordinarily impossible task of wresting from the gods the water of immortality (Tirta Amrta) for them to drink. Throughout his journey to both Hell and Heaven, his two loyal servants, or "aides-de-camp," accompany him. These strictly Balinese inventions figure, in actuality, as the central characters of the story, for they represent the ordinary Balinese, and it is with them that the people identify.

The reason for doing a book about the *Bhima Swarga* story depicted on the ceiling of Kertha Gosa was not to record the history of yet another monument. The idea came alive gradually, the inevitable result of my questions. In fact, without being fully aware of what I was getting into, I found myself caught up in the process of unraveling the "mystery" of these paintings. Not only their beauty, but their universal human message, had profoundly moved me. Ultimately, I devoted an important period of my life to this fascinating Balinese work of art; I was propelled into it and carried along by sheer curiosity, by a strange feeling of identification and by the immense pleasure I found in the difficult process of the search itself. The fundamental questions that motivated me were the obvious ones: What did these paintings *really* represent? How had they been made? By whom? And, most of all, why did they appear on this particular ceiling?

Finding out what Kertha Gosa was about was like trying to reconstruct a puzzle, the pieces of which had been lost over time. The entire experience operated on different levels simultaneously. Luckily, in a culture as alive and self-renewing as that of Bali, nothing ultimately is lost. Everything is always present and therefore does not need to be frozen in time or recorded for the future. If religion is alive and deeply felt, then culture is alive as well. History intermingles with religion, and religion with art, and art is life.

Although my research fed on these same timeless qualities, with nothing ever completely certain to hold onto and the facts of history mingling at all times with more esoteric and differing interpretations of the paintings, I will try to introduce Kertha Gosa to the reader as

*In Bali, Pandu's second wife becomes Bhima's second mother.



Painted ceiling
of Kertha Gosa.

one introduces a special person: first by describing the appearance, the features, the outward personality, and only afterward by uncovering the inner character.

Kertha Gosa and the History of Klungkung

Entering Kertha Gosa and gazing at the ceiling for the first time, one is struck not so much by the individual paintings as by the impact of the ceiling as a whole—its colors, figures and lavish patterns.

From the apex of Kertha Gosa's roof, four equilateral triangles slope downward so that their bases, each 33 feet (10 meters) long, join at right angles to form a perfect square. Covering the ceiling are a total of 267 panels of polychrome paintings in the traditional *wayang* style,

arranged in nine rows depicting four different sets of narrative material.

On the lowest level of the ceiling is a row of small narrative panels with five stories from the *Tantri* repertory.⁷ Above this begins the main feature of Kertha Gosa: the story of *Bhima Swarga*, which occupies five rows and reads clockwise, starting at the far northeastern corner of the ceiling. The first two rows of the *Bhima Swarga* paintings represent Bhima's exploits in Hell; and the top three rows, his journey to Heaven. Separating these two sets of adventures—that is, between Hell and Heaven—are intervening rows of panels that afford a pause, an "intermission," in the *Bhima Swarga* narrative. In the first row of these panels is illustrated a story from *Adiparwa*⁸; and in the second row, the Balinese astrological calendar *pelelingtangan*.⁹ The panels of the ceiling's last

three rows, dealing with the Heaven portion of *Bhima Swarga*, decrease in number as the ceiling rises and narrows. The narrative sequence culminates in the ceiling's four largest panels—trapezoidal in shape and situated at the roof's peak—representing Heaven, with a god at each of the four cardinal points.

At the center of the ceiling, in the square space formed where the upper edges of these four panels join at right angles, there is a lotus surrounded by four doves, an auspicious motif carved from wood and covered with gilt, symbolizing good fortune, enlightenment and ultimate salvation.

When, why and by whom was this ceiling painted? The only available data allow us to sketch a rough historical outline relating to the Kertha Gosa pavilion itself but not to its ceiling paintings. When the palace of Klungkung—Bali's former nominal royal capital, located 26 miles east of the present capital, Denpasar—was built in the early eighteenth century under the Dewa Agung Gusti Sideman, first *raja* of Klungkung, the pavilion of Kertha Gosa quite probably was constructed at the same time. Since Kertha Gosa is located at the most sacred corner of the entire palace compound, nearest to the holy volcano Gunung Agung, we can be reasonably certain that the pavilion played a prominent role in the life of the *raja* and the entire palace community. It is highly unlikely that this most sacred site would have been left unoccupied when the compound was first built; therefore Kertha Gosa must have been part of the original palace complex.

As the seat of the Dewa Agung—the highest of all Balinese royal titles—Klungkung became both the nominal and the cultural center of Bali after 1710.¹⁰ Prior to that date, Bali's ancient capital had been approximately three miles south of Klungkung at Gelgel, toward the sea, where the most prominent line of Balinese rulers had finally settled after the Majapahit Javanese conquest of the island.

Although the invading *brahmana* and *satria* of the Majapahit dynasty had divided the island into several kingdoms, they were, like feudal lords, still subject to the

Dewa Agung of Gelgel, who as the most direct descendant of the Majapahit rulers ranked highest among the Balinese kings.

When Dalem Dimade inherited the title of Dewa Agung in 1665, Gelgel entered a period of turmoil. Dimade ordered his prime minister, I Gusti Agung Maruti, to reconquer the island of Lombok, east of Bali, which, aided by the Sultan of Makassar in the Celebes, had rebelled against Gelgel. A fine general, Maruti won back the island in 1678. But when he sent three members of his family to report the good news to the Dewa Agung, the king, fearing Maruti's ambition, had them executed. In revenge, the furious Maruti, with troops from reconquered Lombok, soon launched an attack on Gelgel, causing the Dewa Agung to flee. Maruti then proclaimed himself *raja* in 1686.

Several Balinese kings, notably the lords of Badung (now Denpasar) and Buleleng, refused to accept the sovereignty of Maruti and helped Dimade to regain his throne in 1705. At Dimade's death, a year or two later, the title of Dewa Agung passed to his son, Gusti Sideman, who for superstitious reasons transferred the court from Gelgel to nearby Klungkung in 1710.

A patron of the arts, the Dewa Agung Gusti Sideman took great pains in supervising the design and construction of his palace at Klungkung, the Puri Semara Pura, with the result that this royal compound stood out as an artistic jewel, an exquisite example of Hindu-Balinese architecture. Like all the Balinese kings, Gusti Sideman insisted on utilizing only the finest workmen and materials in building and decorating his palace. Masters of wood carving, painting and sculpture, silversmiths and goldsmiths, musicians and dancers, formed an integral part of court life. Here the traditional Balinese style of architecture and painting reached full maturity. During his reign, Kamasan, the nearby village of painters that had previously rendered service to Gelgel, became officially linked with the court of Klungkung. The flowering of Kamasan painting can be attributed to Gusti Sideman's patronage.

The splendor of the Klungkung palace exemplified

a trend seen in other courts throughout Bali during this era: a predilection for artistic precision, excellence and opulence. With the encouragement of these courts, artists blended the inherited Hindu-Javanese Majapahit motifs and techniques with indigenous forms, thereby evolving a genuinely Balinese art. It is noteworthy that during this same period—the golden age of Balinese art—other aspects of Hindu-Javanese Majapahit culture, particularly religion and philosophy, became fully localized as well, mingling with native pre-Hindu animistic practices and beliefs.

The palace of Klungkung was laid out in a square, each of the sides measuring 500 feet (150 meters). Viewed from above, the palace compound presumably took the overall shape of a *mandala*, for it was designed as a microcosmic reflection of the macrocosm.

Within the compound were numerous courtyards, gardens and moats surrounding several *bales* (typical Balinese buildings, partly of masonry and partly of wood), with each *bale* serving a particular function. The sacred precinct of the palace complex, reserved for rituals and ceremonies celebrating the unity between men and gods, was distinctly separate from the areas associated with everyday life.¹¹

Among the *bales* erected in the sacred area two

seemed of particular importance—the *bale* of Kertha Gosa and the *bale* Kambang, or “floating pavilion,” both of which stood in the Taman Agung, or “sacred garden,” later renamed Taman Gili, or “garden with moats.”

Adjacent to the wall separating the palace compound from the town’s main intersection (where today the street Raja Gelgel meets the street Raja Suyapati), this garden extended on the east side of the main gate to the palace. Its frangipani, hibiscus and varied tropical plants were used as offerings to the gods, and its moats, which can still be seen, were filled with floating lotus flowers.

The rectangular *bale* Kambang, at the center of the Taman Gili, served not only as the royal guards’ headquarters but also as the antechamber for the *raja*’s visitors. Originally smaller than it is today, under the Dutch this *bale* was restored and enlarged to its present size. Its ceiling is intricately decorated with eight rows of narrative paintings in the traditional *wayang* style. Beginning from the bottom, the first row consists of paintings from Balinese astrology; the next row shows the children’s tale of *Pan Brayut*, the story of a couple who had eighteen children; and the remaining rows depict various stories about Sang Sutasoma, the archetypal wise old man of Balinese folklore.

At the far eastern corner of the Taman Gili, the *bale*

View of the *bale* Kambang with Kertha Gosa in the background.



Kertha Gosa is situated in the center of Klungkung, former royal capital of Bali.



of Kertha Gosa was erected in the most sacred area of the palace compound. From the high Kertha Gosa pavilion, the *raja* has a clear view of his palace as well as a panorama of the town and all the surrounding land. Sometimes he would note a pretty girl on her way to market or to the temple with offerings. He would then whisper an order to an aide kneeling at his feet, and the girl would soon disappear behind the palace walls, later to reappear as one of the many royal wives.

High up on Kertha Gosa, the *raja* would retreat to listen privately to a high priest (*padanda*) read aloud from a *lontar*, a sacred book etched on palm leaves, containing philosophical teachings of the ancient Hindu doctrines.

The Kertha Gosa pavilion's major function, however, pertained to matters of justice. It was there that the *raja* met with the *brahmana* judges (*kerthas*) to discuss issues of the law and human affairs. These would include cases of political conspiracy, special status infringement, ritual sacrilege, adultery, or the elopement of a commoner with the daughter or son of a *brahman* (still taboo among

the Balinese, for it is believed to pollute both the high- and low-caste families). Most such legal and social issues involved problems within the aristocratic strata of the kingdom, since the majority of cases—both criminal and civil—concerning villagers were resolved by the village priests themselves without prior consultation with the *raja*. In Bali the village priests, in discussing a case with the council of village elders, always acted as judges. Only in rare, important instances was a case dealing with villagers brought to royal attention and discussed at Kertha Gosa. When this occurred, three judges presided over the meeting, in addition to the *raja* himself.

During the centuries when Klungkung's royal family reigned supreme, Kertha Gosa was not a court of justice in the Western sense—that is, a tribunal where trials take place in the presence of the accused. It would have been inconceivable to permit a "criminal" to enter the sacred area, or, for that matter, *any* area of any royal palace, let alone the palace of the highest-ranking ruler of Bali, the Dewa Agung of Klungkung. This would have caused spiritual and social pollution affecting not only the king, his palace and the entire court but also the entire kingdom.

This much, then, can be ascertained as reasonably accurate historical background for the Kertha Gosa pavilion; but when we approach the issue of the pavilion's elaborate ceiling decoration, we find little concrete information.

Whether or not the king instructed his court painters from Kamasan to decorate the ceiling at the time Kertha Gosa was built is impossible to know with certainty. It is all but impossible to determine exactly when the ceiling was first painted, and also whether or not the story of *Bhima Swarga* was the subject of the first paintings. The earliest and, in fact, the only record of any paintings at Kertha Gosa dates from the year 1842 and is written in a *lontar* that belongs to the historical library, the Gedong Kirtya, in Singaraja.¹² Its author extols the beauty of Kertha Gosa's decorations, but does not discuss the subject matter depicted on the ceiling; nor does he mention whether the paintings were a permanent feature of the pavilion

or if they had simply been installed temporarily for the celebration he describes.

It is plausible that the *raja* might have deemed the story of *Bhima Swarga*, dealing as it does with moral and social questions and with justice in general, an appropriate subject for the ceiling of a pavilion where he and his ministers considered these very questions and attempted to administer justice. But this is pure speculation, which cannot be supported by any firm evidence. The Kertha Gosa ceiling decoration is unique, for in Bali the *Bhima Swarga* legend normally occurs only in connection with death: it appears, for instance, in the form of narrative sculpture on the walls of some temples dedicated to Durga,¹³ the goddess of death, and the story is usually recited by priests and *dalangs* on the eve of a cremation.

It is probable, then, that if any paintings were executed especially for Kertha Gosa, they were made on cloth and were either of two types: *ulan-ulan*, paintings attached to a wooden surface, or *ider-ider*, which are customarily hung around the eaves of ritual *bales* or small temples. Furthermore, we can speculate that these paintings would have been supervised by the legendary I Gdé Modara, the most important painter at the court of Klungkung during this period.

The Dewa Agung Gusti Sideman ruled until 1775; he was succeeded by his son, then by his grandson, and his line of descendants continued to reign until the beginning of the twentieth century. At the time when the ominous shadow of Dutch colonial power began to spread from Batavia across to Bali, Klungkung was ruled by the Dewa Agung Semarabhawa.

The kingdoms of Badung and Tabanan in southern Bali fell to the Dutch in 1906. On April 17, 1908, the Dutch attacked Klungkung, and fire broke out in the royal compound. To this day it is rumored the fire was started not by the Dutch but by the local people, who seized the opportunity of the confused state of affairs to rebel against the *raja*. Like the royal courts of Badung and Tabanan earlier, the Dewa Agung and his large

retinue of family, followers and retainers marched to their death in the face of the advancing Dutch army. The gold and silver decorations and beautifully colored ceremonial costumes of the royal procession glittered in the sun. In Bali, this form of collective suicide, expressing pride, dignity and royal majesty, is referred to as *puputan*, "a fight to the end."

By April 28, 1908, the Dutch had seized control of Klungkung, the last Balinese kingdom to fall. As far as can be ascertained, the only buildings of the royal compound to survive the fire were the *bale* of Kertha Gosa, the *bale* Kambang, the main gate of the palace and the *kulkul* tower. After the Dutch ordered the demolition of the palace ruins, these few buildings were preserved and restored, along with the Taman Gili, the sacred garden with moats. On the site of the palace itself the Dutch built several small structures that appear to have been used as prisons—in convenient proximity to the Kertha Gosa pavilion, which the Dutch turned into a full-fledged Western court of justice.

In spite of this disastrous turn of events, the Balinese kings and their successors still exercised considerable influence over their people. The Dutch allowed them to continue to rule, although on a less grandiose scale than before and with many of their former powers curtailed. The Dutch, in fact, did not install a full-scale government of their own in Bali, but were represented by only two officials: the Resident, based in the northern commercial port of Singaraja, and the Controller, who lived in Badung. Moreover, although the Dutch did install a court of justice in every major town of the island, they did not interfere dramatically with Balinese customs and ways of life.

In 1909, the *bale* of Kertha Gosa became the official court of justice for the region of Klungkung. According to I Dewa Nyoman Pater, the only surviving member of the Kertha Gosa tribunal, the court was presided over by the *kerthas* (now two in number), who still acted as supreme judges. But now, in addition, the tribunal included a Dutch representative, as well as two administrators (one of them being Nyoman Pater) responsible

for keeping written records of each trial. The heir to the title of Dewa Agung—who had moved with the surviving members of his family to new quarters in the western part of Klungkung—was still called upon to participate in the most important cases.

Because of the presence of the Dutch representative, unaccustomed to sitting on a mat on the ground, Western-style furniture was installed at Kertha Gosa: an intricately carved rectangular wooden table and six matching upright chairs. When the *raja* was present, he occupied the seat bearing the symbolic lion's head; the chairs with the sacred cow-head symbols were reserved for the *brahmana* judges; the Dutch representative and the administrators sat in chairs decorated with dragon-head symbols. This furniture still stands in its place in the center of the pavilion.

I Dewa Nyoman Pater recalled how unique the court of justice of Klungkung had been. The celebrated ceiling contributed greatly to that uniqueness, since the paintings of *Bhima Swarga* played a significant role in the administration of justice, looming overhead to be consulted by the judges much as one would consult a text of law.

Those who had broken the law, and who therefore had to be tried, were now obliged to attend their own trial. Their relatives were made to wait in the *bale* Kambang. The accused, kneeling before the mighty

tribunal, could not avoid the sight of the dreadful punishments depicted on the ceiling. But if he raised his eyes beyond, just a little above the horrors of Hell to the panels of Heaven, he could perhaps find some solace.

Because of the location of Kertha Gosa, on a corner near the busiest intersection of town, the populace of Klungkung could easily catch a glimpse of a trial from the streets below and could also have a fairly clear view of the ceiling paintings.

We do not know anything about the extent of the damages suffered by Kertha Gosa in the 1908 fire that destroyed most of the palace compound, nor—if there were then any paintings on the ceiling—whether they were completely ruined and replaced by new ones. In 1919, two years after an earthquake had devastated the entire region of Klungkung, another renovation seems to have taken place, also under the sponsorship of the Dutch. Again we have no records to give any clue about the nature of the damages.

The first known record of the ceiling paintings comes to us from a photograph, probably dating between 1930 and 1937, made by the celebrated German painter and musician Walter Spies. From this photograph it is evident that the theme of *Bhima Swarga* was depicted, but the paintings visible in it seem less elaborate than those

The kings of Bali in a rare photograph taken in the 1930s. The Raja of Klungkung is the first from left.



existing today. We know that in 1930 a great master from Kamasan, Pan Seken, directed major work on the *Bhima Swarga* paintings. Under his supervision, the project was carried out by a group of painters from Kamasan, including I Nyoman Laya, I Wayang Ngales, I Wayang Rambung, I Wayang Sempreg and I Nyoman Dogol. It was probably after the completion of this work that Walter Spies took his photograph; unfortunately, his picture is incomplete and shows only vaguely the eastern face of the ceiling and part of the northern segment. From the photograph, it would appear either that the paintings had been done directly on the wood of the ceiling or that painted wooden panels had been attached to the ceiling.

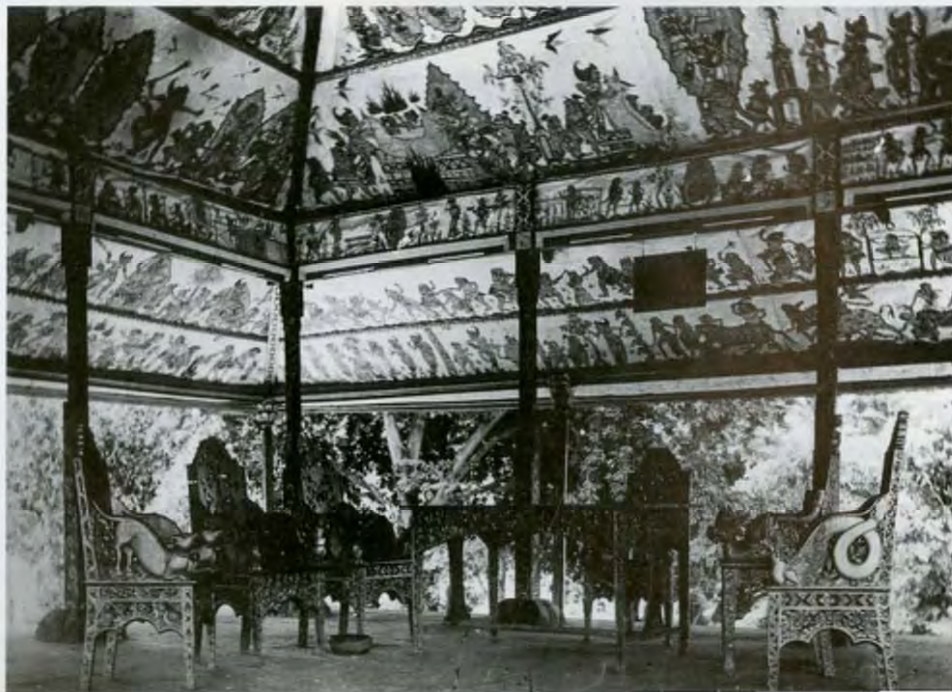
The latest renovation occurred in 1960, after the Dutch left Bali and Indonesia became independent. We have more precise information concerning this phase from Pan Semaris (son of Pan Seken), the painter who directed the work. Apparently, the entire ceiling was replaced in 1960, and new paintings were made, still depicting the story of *Bhima Swarga* but adding a great deal of detail. This time the paintings were executed on asbestos plates. Pan Semaris and his team took six months to complete the project. We do not know who sponsored

this work, since neither the Klungkung municipal office nor the Bali Museum in Denpasar has any records of the 1960 renovation.

In 1982 eight panels were replaced, but the quality of the new paintings is sadly inferior—especially the colors, due to the use of acrylic paints.¹⁴ The seasonal monsoon rains and the hot, humid climate cause rapid deterioration of the paintings and have, in fact, already begun to take their toll on the 1960 renovation.

The Balinese have always accepted the deterioration of art as an unquestioned fact of life. Artists and craftsmen create things of great beauty, not with an eye to posterity or permanence, but only with the intention that they should serve whatever special function is assigned them. Again, as long as tradition and religious belief are alive, the various crafts are alive as well; the Balinese serenely view the decay of a work of art as a natural process. When it has almost been destroyed, they replace it with a new work. Within this frame of reference, then, the Balinese can have little or no concept of restoration as such, but only of replacement. And in replacing a work of art, they always modify it—sometimes slightly, sometimes drastically. In the case of Kertha Gosa, although

A photograph of Kertha Gosa believed to have been taken by Walter Spies. The carved furniture still stands in its original place.



View of
Kertha Gosa
and
surrounding
ponds.



*This is not merely a wish to preserve a very special series of paintings, but also undoubtedly a response to the many museum-minded visitors who "collect" and preserve works of art.

the fundamental plot of *Bhima Swarga* seems to have remained constant throughout the renovations we know of, and although the iconography of the paintings is also a constant following strictly prescribed rules, certain visual details have been either omitted or further emphasized. In 1960 the panels were enlarged, the scenes of punishment in Hell were delineated more clearly, some scenes of punishments were added or replaced by others and paintings of the tree motif increased noticeably. In view of such continual alterations, no one can predict what the future may hold for Kertha Gosa.

The Kertha Gosa of Klungkung was used until the Dutch departed and Bali became part of the Independent Republic of Indonesia in 1950. Then the court of justice was transferred to a new location, for reasons that sound too simple for foreigners to believe but are perfectly comprehensible to the Balinese: the high pavilion of Kertha Gosa was too windy. In spite of this beautifully painted ceiling, the tribunal was moved to indoor premises as soon as they became available, thereby making Kertha Gosa the

unused historical monument it is today.

Until 1982, any visitor could enter Kertha Gosa unhindered, but now one must pay an entrance fee. The pavilion floor is surrounded by a wooden fence, so that visitors cannot go to the very center to look up at the ceiling paintings but can see them only from along the sides. Such pragmatic changes indicate that the people of Klungkung have begun to realize the uniqueness of Kertha Gosa, particularly the beauty of the 1960 renovation, in which no artificial dyes were used. They are now taking measures to preserve the building as carefully as possible.* Embodying as it does nearly every aspect of Balinese civilization—visual arts, literature, law, architecture, religious and philosophical belief, history—Kertha Gosa is, in fact, the most exquisite and complete example of Balinese art and culture. And most fascinating of all is its painted ceiling; in symbolically depicting the afterlife, this ceiling mirrors, on a multitude of levels, the Balinese view of the *present* life here on earth.

Balinese Traditional Painting

The ceiling of Kertha Gosa is painted in a traditional Balinese manner that conforms to a style called *wayang*, literally meaning "shadow figure." So closely do the shape and style of the painted figures resemble those of the carved-leather puppets of the *wayang kulit* (shadow-puppet theater) that if you were to cut a figure out of its painted background, you would have a facsimile of a shadow-play puppet in your hand. Paintings in the *wayang* style are related so intimately to shadow-theater art, both in terms of subject matter (namely, local interpretations of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* stories) and in basic aesthetic qualities, that one has the impression that these paintings come to life on the stage or, conversely, that the shadow-puppets on the stage become frozen in the paintings.

The shadow theater of Bali, like many other Balinese art forms, originated in Java and was gradually incorpo-

rated into Balinese culture during the period between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. To this day, in Java, just as in Bali, it is one of the most popular forms of traditional dramatic expression, and its sociopolitical impact is still as powerful as it was centuries ago.

The center of *wayang* painting is Kamasan, a village two miles south of Klungkung, near Gelgel; therefore *wayang* is alternately referred to as the "Kamasan" style. The formal link between Kamasan and the *wayang* style of painting developed in about the sixteenth century during the reign of Dewa Agung Renggong, whose magnificent court at Gelgel associated him with Bali's "golden age." Since that era, generations of Kamasan painters have perpetuated *wayang* painting, preserving it so faithfully that it continues today to reflect Bali's Hindu-Javanese heritage in its traditional iconography and content.

Until the early twentieth century, the *wayang* style was Bali's only form of pictorial expression. The "modern" Ubud style of painting, deriving its name from the central hilly region where it arose, developed only after the arrival of the Dutch. In both content and technique, it has little in common with the traditional style of Kamasan. Whereas the *wayang* style is concerned only with the thematic material of old Javanese and Javano-Balinese literature as contained in *lontar* texts, the style of Ubud tends to represent aspects and scenes of everyday life in Bali. Walter Spies and the Dutch artist Rudolph Bonnet, who settled in Bali in the thirties, are credited with development of the more individualistic style of contemporary Balinese painting. Today the traditional and the modern schools coexist and thrive.

Although modern Balinese paintings are usually produced intentionally for their commercial appeal, the Kamasan *wayang* painters, while not unaware of the financial benefits, are still concerned with the inner spiritual life that both inspires and is inspired by their art and with preserving the paintings' integral function in the context of communal ceremonies and rituals.

In the past, when Kamasan paintings were produced

on bark paper, they were displayed only on important occasions such as a temple festival, a tooth-filing ceremony,¹⁵ a wedding or a cremation. Afterward, the paintings would normally be taken down and safely stored until another ritual called for their exhibition. (Even today, this custom is frequently observed.) In Bali's royal palaces, however, Kamasan paintings would often remain a permanent part of the decor. Today, *wayang* paintings are executed not on bark but on handwoven cotton or machine-made cloth and, occasionally, on wood or canvas panels.

In viewing a traditional Balinese painting, one must bear in mind that, in order to be understood, it should be observed not simply as visual art but as a work of literature. All *wayang* paintings are essentially "poetic adventures" depicted visually. It is from this perspective that one should approach the *Bhima Swarga* paintings of Kertha Gosa. The panels must be examined closely and each image deciphered. Like a single frame or a group of frames within a complete filmstrip, or like the popular Western comic strips, each scene of *Bhima Swarga* constitutes an essential part of the whole narrative. It is a sine qua non for the viewer-reader to be familiar with the stylistic and iconographic "vocabulary" in order to be able to recognize the different characters or situations in the story.

The overriding rule of the Kamasan school is to cover every inch of surface with design. Since the gods of Bali are believed to take delight in opulence, decorations must be rich and colorful, indicating that man has offered his utmost in terms of artistic effort. One might say that the Balinese gods have a horror vacui; they are not pleased by an artistic gift that is scanty or stingy or that appears to have been done hastily and without proper dedication. The painter must fill the background with a variety of motifs reminiscent of the traditional Javanese batik's complex patterns: clouds representing the atmosphere, short wavy lines imitating heat haze, birds in flight, butterflies, flames, bushes, rocks.

The artists divide each scene or episode from the

Balinese contemporary Ubud painting. Here, the artist makes "tourism" the subject of his art.



next either by inserting vertical ornamentation or by placing adjacent figures in two contiguous scenes back to back. In the Kamasan school, various vertical ornamentations are employed, and one can find each of these decorative motifs in the Kertha Gosa paintings. Among the most frequently used are the wall motif, imitating the walls of Balinese temples, and an ornament that resembles a fighting cock's colorful comb; sometimes a sharp triangular rocklike pattern supporting the comb is added to this. All these ornaments run vertically, usually along the entire length of a panel, thus creating a genuine effect of separation.

In all Kamasan paintings, an extremely important leitmotif is the tree. Almost every scene in Hell is dominated by a massive tree, which serves to separate each punishment from the next. Trees also evoke the idyllic atmosphere of Heaven, where pairs of trees create a sense of balance and harmony. Spiral creepers wind around some tree trunks, while others are completely bare, with their branches ending in the colorful foliage of meticulously drawn triangular leaves joined in triads. Reminiscent of the sacred *waringin* (or banyan) trees found in every Balinese village, these decorative trees infuse the panels with an aura of sanctity.