

THE GREEN EARTH SCORCHED

COLIN MCPHEE

WHEN in 1908 a Dutch expedition arrived in Bali to subdue the last rebellious little kingdom, the radjah, his wives, his court, and even the children came forth in their finest clothes, to charge against the guns with their krises waving, in a suicidal attack. Women threw gold to the Dutch soldiers, shouting to them to take it in payment for killing them. What has happened today no one knows.

Three years ago, when I left, Bali was a medieval, agricultural society that had changed little in spite of closer contacts with the outer world. Houses were still built from surrounding trees and grass, land cultivated and law administered in ways that had long since proven sound and practical. The Dutch had made roads, schools and hospitals, ruled firmly but discreetly, with a regard and even admiration for native law. A Balinese version of Hindu religion was still the force that held the people together and dominated every activity. It was an elaborate religion that demanded a constant honoring of gods and propitiation of demons. It called for endless ritual and festivity, for display and offerings, for music, dance and theatre. In it the Balinese found their life and happiness.

Culturally Bali was doomed of course in 1908. A new era had begun; the people were no longer isolated and independent; they had been caught in the net, and their fate was from that moment linked with the fate of all Indonesia. That they continued to live in an illusion of freedom for thirty years is due to fortunate circumstances. The island was small and mountainous; no gold or oil had been unearthed to lure the exploiters; there was no place for plantations of sugar or rubber. The people escaped notice until the beginning of the Thirties, when the steamship agents discovered it.

During the years I lived there I became conscious of a gradual and subtle change, of a spiritual disintegration not immediately apparent. Colonization got into its stride, and schools, heavy taxes, economic instability and tourists all contributed toward the slow undermining of an

older way of life. The Chinese, merchants of the island for centuries, had begun an exploitation of labor under the very noses of the government. They opened rice factories, bought up the harvests in advance at incredibly low sums. It was against the law for foreigners to own land; but under Balinese names large tracts were purchased by Chinese at forced sales from those who could not meet their taxes. There was also the menace of the missionary, clamoring ever more loudly that the heathenism of Bali was a blot and a disgrace to the fair name of colonization.

All this time the Japanese were invisible. In 1931 a photographer lived in one town, whose shop was strategically placed to command a view of both European and native streets. In the other town was a dentist. On his walls hung terrifying charts; glass cases exhibited pearly molars and bright sets of teeth made entirely of gold. Later, when depression seized the Indies, when sugar plantations closed and large stores in Surabaya stood empty, the Japanese moved in, bringing flashlights, cameras, celluloid goods and even pianos. Some opened small shops and did excellent business, since the goods, although they lasted only a week, were both cheap and novel.

In the schools the half-caste teachers were determined to eliminate native culture. In the children's art-classes everything was done to wipe out the national idiom, a blend of styles deriving from India, Java and China. Instead, the children learned the laws of perspective, and produced endless drawings in which a cat or motor-car travelled down the straight road to infinity. This road was bordered by perfectly diminishing telegraph-poles, and vanished from sight in the centre of the picture. Mood was given to the scene by flushing it with a lavish sunrise or covering it with driving rain. When a child drew without a ruler the teacher was upon him in a moment, to cut at him with a switch. They learned to sing European folksongs in nasal, expressionless voices. There were also the Pathfinder, or Boy-Scout organizations.

Many of the older boys were interested in machinery. When I stopped in a remote village they would gather round the car and comment.

Essex.

No; Buick 1925. An old model.

An old man would ask; How can it be? A chariot going like that alone, without horse or cow.

Unsympathetic laughter banished him to the dark ages.

Wake up, grandfather. You push in the foot, pull the handle and it

goes. White men know all the secrets, can make a ship fly or swim deep in the sea.

But in spite of increasing hard times there was intense artistic activity. It is true that art was partly on the decline. Painting and sculpture had become an organized industry, turned out in mass production for the tourist trade. The native style had been improved by European artists living on the island, who initiated the willing Balinese into the mysteries of foreshortening, the stylizations of Beardsley and Mestrovic. Dealers encouraged them to make obscene sculpture, while a psychologist offered to buy dream-drawings, which brought forth incredible nightmares.

III

The dance and drama remained on a comparatively high level, while music, that intangible art which no foreigner could meddle with, was still the pure and ecstatic expression of the Balinese temperament. There were few among the thousands of villages that did not boast of a gamelan of twenty players. Some of these were used perhaps no more than twice a year, on the most sacred occasions, but there were many groups of musicians who practised nightly to learn new and difficult music. This was a reworking of the classics; professional teachers reassembled old melodies, covered them with intricate arabesques, galvanized them with wild syncopations. The brilliance and speed of the music, the daring contrast in color and dynamics, the rhythmic energy and the perfection of ensemble were spectacular and unique. There is no doubt that the Balinese were among the truly musical people of the world.

It is hard to imagine how Japanese occupation will affect all this, for it depends on whether the occupation is to be temporary or permanent. There are enough gongs and metal keys in Bali to be transmuted into many machine-guns, if guns can be made of bronze. Deprived of these, the Balinese would still make amazing music, if room in their life were left for it, for they do not depend altogether on metal; they knew how to make resonant and economical orchestras of wood and bamboo. With old Japanese culture they would have had much in common; Buddhist priests of Bali and Japan would have understood each other, actors, dancers, musicians and architects would have met on common ground. Even farmers and fishermen faced the same problems. But today there is no time or place for understanding. Under Dutch rule the Balinese would soon settle down to a life of crop-raising and Christian piety. Under the Japanese the farmers will be regimented. In either case there will be no

more money for gold costumes, no place for ceremonial music and dances that took months to learn.

III

Everyone carries within him his own private paradise, some beloved territory whose assault is an assault on the heart. Some felt this when Paris was taken, others when Britain was bombed. For me it was Bali, for I had lived there a long time and had been very happy. And I can see the people now, watching on the beach and from the mountains the brilliant and unbelievable display that must have taken place at night off shore. Such an event would have been like an earthquake or eclipse of the moon. Throughout the island signal-drums and gongs surely sounded in wild alarm. This time the priests knew better than to make hurried offerings to the gods and demons.