

# TOOTH FILING IN BALI





5am in a little village of south Bali, Indonesia. For the last two days, the teens have been praying in a special place, now they are ready for the tooth filing ceremony. The whole village gather together for the ceremony to reduce the high costs.



There is a makeup session for the girls, even for the boys too. The young people are dressed up in gorgeous costumes with fancy headdresses that are rented for the celebration. The atmosphere feels more like a movie set than a religious scene.



This boy is in a traditional songket. Gold and silver threads are used in these textiles, while the earliest ones are made of silk. In the ancient times, they were used only by the princely castes. Now, anyone can wear them, but they are expensive.



Girls wear precious kemben (breast cloth), the finest the family can afford, with garments as ornate just like those of legong dancers.

Balinese tooth filing is an ancient tradition that predates Hinduism's arrival on the island in the 5th century BCE. Today, ancient tradition meets the modern techniques with metal braces that have been introduced into Asia for years.





The teeth of gods and spirits are always pointed and long. They are likened to those ferocious evils, wild animals and dogs. It's believed that a Balinese may be denied entry into heaven if the teeth are not filed, because he/she might be mistaken for a wild creature.



The tooth filing ceremony starts in the temple with the mebyakala, a series of purification with holy water ceremony hosted by the big priest (pedanda) to "cleanse" the teenagers before having their teeth filed.



The aim of the ceremony is to symbolically “cut down” on the six negative traits that are inherent in humans (like the 7 sins in Christianity) : lust, greed, wrath, pride, jealousy, and intoxication.



Tooth filing is a rite of passage into adulthood. The teens bow in front their parents and thank them for everything they have done since birth. An emotional scene.



The youth show respect to their parents in front of the whole family and many end in tears. When a boy's voice changes or a girl has her first menstruation, he/she will have to go through the ceremony.



Before the filing begins, the priest says superstitious sentences. A ruby ring that is believed to have huge power is used to protect the teens from the evil. The stone touches the teeth as the protection symbol, and the priest writes sacred inscriptions on their front teeth.



The files used for cleansing are blessed to render the operation painless. The hygiene level is not very high. In between two filings, the priest cleans the tools always with the same toothbrush.



As a foreigner, being invited to a tooth filing ceremony is a very great honor: only good friends and close family members are allowed. The reason is simple: at certain stages of the ceremony, the teens undergoing the transition from child to adult are very vulnerable to the forces and influences of evil. The foreigner may be one of them...



Tooth filing is scheduled on an auspicious day and performed by a priest in a Bale, usually behind a temple. A teen's canine teeth, regarded by the Balinese as animalistic fangs, will be filed flat so the teen may become fully human. It comes from the belief that there is good and evil in every person and the ceremony will serve as a way to balance between both.



The dentist, known as "sangging", places a small cylinder of sugarcane in the corner of the mouth to keep the jaws open.

Then he starts to use a little hammer to bang on the lime to break the teeth. In Balinese culture, the priest "kills" the teeth with a mantra. Later he will wake up the new teeth with another mantra.



The parents and relatives of the teen surrounds her to calm her down. They are supposed to give her spiritual support as evil spirits can come at any moment on the weak teen, but most of them are too busy filming the ceremony with their mobile phones!



The front two upper canines are filed so they are even with the upper incisors. The filing takes about only five minutes, as many other teens are waiting to have their new smiles! It is the most important event of adolescence, and Balinese teens must endure it with not a sound of complaint.



The ceremony is religious but priest likes to make some jokes while filing the teeth, to divert the attention of the teen, just like what a dentist would normally do. But only the family are laughing...



The boy is spitting in a special bowl full of coconuts. The teeth debris and saliva will be buried behind the ancestral shrine to keep the evil spirits away.



A mirror is provided to allow the teen to check the progress of the ritual. She can give her opinion and asks the priest to keep on filing as there is also an important aesthetic work that must be done.



When tooth filing is finished, if there is bleeding, some astringent betel leaf is rubbed on the teeth to staunch it.



By way of the tooth filing, the once child emerges as an adult, and is then regarded as an adult by the entire village. He/she is now ready for marriage. The ceremony will keep on with praying in the temples.



eric lafforgue  
[lafforgue@mac.com](mailto:lafforgue@mac.com)  
<http://www.ericlafforgue.com>