

Music in the Indonesian Sky

Report on a Kite Festival in Beautiful Bali

By John Stevenson

Because of Indonesia's current problems, the decision to hold the festival in the beautiful town of Sanur, Bali, could not be made until two weeks before the starting date. At such short notice, less than a dozen international participants were able to join in the mid-year event. Guests came from Brunei, Singapore, Japan, France, Austria, Holland, and the U.S. Bali itself was more than well represented. One hundred and sixty *banjars*, or districts each provided a traditional Indonesian kite, some as wide as twenty feet and requiring as many as twenty people to fly, plus a supporting *gamelan* orchestra. It took three days to fly them all on the large festival field, close to the sea to catch the best winds.

The festival was organized around the three most popular traditional shapes of kite (or *layang*) in Bali: The *bebean*, a huge fish-shaped kite; the *pecukan*, a graceful bowed shape with two prominent hummers; and the *janggan*, a kite with a head in the form of a *naga*, or snake, and a 100-meter-long tail.

The huge *bebeans* are basically festival kites and for this festival had to be a minimum of five and a maximum of six meters across. The *pecukan* (pronounced PEchukan) is the everyday individual Balinese kite-shape, but some of the *pecukans* at this festival were also up to six meters across.

Each participating *banjar* constructed a kite for this biennial festival, a big commitment of resources. To the cost of the huge kite itself would be added the cost of maintaining an orchestra to encourage the kite, matching tee-shirts for the handlers, transport by truck of the kite to the festival site, etc. The *banjar* is a basic feature of Balinese society, a kind of men's club with 250 to 300 members, that keeps alive local ceremonies and other traditional activities, including kite-



A village team heads for the festival with its giant kite.

flying. The ancient traditions are maintained not only in towns and villages throughout the island but even in urban settings such as Denpasar and Kuta.

At the festival, the judges used five criteria to assess the kites: shape, color, sound (from hummers attached to the kites), flight performance and the performance of the kite's supporting orchestra. The music could be very exciting. If the wind dropped and the kite dipped, the tempo of the music rose as the musicians encouraged it to fly higher. The deep slow regular beat of the large gongs as each kite prepared for takeoff and was launched plus crescendoes from the small brass drums were an omnipresent feature of the festival.

To these sounds were added the cheers of the crowds, who enthusiastically followed the progress of every entry. People would also sing for a wind. Sometimes one of the judges would break into song over the loudspeakers to pray for a wind.



Photo: J. Stevenson

Carrying a graceful, bowed pecukan kite on to the flying field.

The wind being lighter than usual for this festival, held last year, many of the larger kites, which are extremely heavy, did not get into the air for more than a minute or two. Taken to the site by truck, the kites are hand-carried by up to twenty men onto the field. The *bebeans* are launched by up to ten men, with another ten or more hauling on the ropes.

It rained a little on the first day—the cotton fabric absorbed the moisture, further increasing the weight of the kites.

A team would run to catch their huge and heavy kite, maybe twenty feet across, if it looked as if it was about to crash; amazingly, they would usually succeed and hold it upright without it touching the ground.

Each of the large *pecukans* had two hummers, called *guwangan*. Although not aerodynamically needed for the kite to fly, they are an integral part of the Balinese kite. They make a melodious hum as the wind passes over them. They are bow-shaped, and made of rattan or

bamboo. The upper *guwangan* is called the man, the lower the woman. When a kite flies out of sight, either in clouds or after dark, its sound will still be audible. Sometimes if a kite has flown for many hours and night falls, rather than pull it in, the fliers will simply tether it and let it fly through the night. Its sound will be the first thing the fliers hear in the morning.

While foreign kites were not included in the official festival program, they were flown intermittently by visitors at the side of the field. “International festival” was therefore something of a misnomer.

However, all the foreign guests had a wonderful time at the event, organized by the very hospitable Nyoman Adnyana of Denpasar and his group, and learned a great deal about the very different traditions of kite-making and kite-flying in Bali. The Balinese way of doing things communally was a major impression of the visit. Balinese kiteflying, which in the West is an individual experience, is a fine example of the communality. ♦

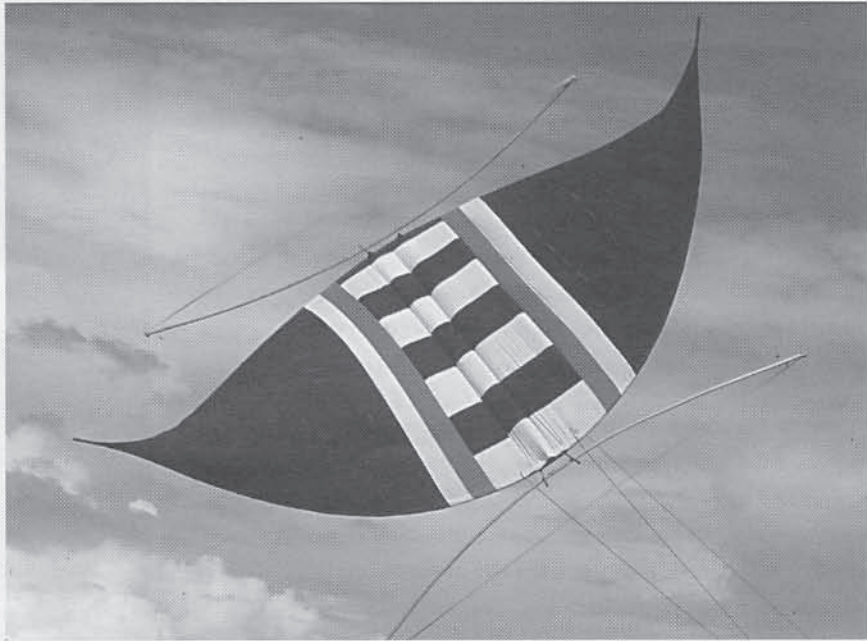


Photo: J. Stevenson

The pecukan in flight. Notice the two large humming devices.