

Cok Sawitri

The traditional role of women in Balinese society often sees the fairer gender taking second place to their male counterparts. There are however, many dynamic female characters whose contribution to their society speaks louder than words.

One of these is Cok Sawitri, a gifted lady whose curiosity, sensitivity and determination have helped consolidate her as one of Bali's leading intellectuals. The Balinese term Cok, is an abbreviation of Cokorda, pronounced 'chock'. Cokorda is the title granted to the highest members of the Balinese aristocracy.

"My responsibility to my culture and my religion comes from within, not from pressures from the community," Cok Sawitri confidently states. "I have strong opinions and am often perceived as being arrogant. Yet I believe that living in a democracy allows for equality and freedom of thought." A mature and responsible fusion between tradition and modernity are the foundations for Cok Sawitri's personal philosophy.

"I don't like that the Balinese are only seen as exotic. Westerners too often misunderstand the Balinese because they are often quiet in expressing their thoughts, or because they are not endowed with the logical and rational mind." "However," she adds. "The Balinese are intelligent and highly sensitive people. We have a different style and attitude, and code of ethics for public behaviour. Often we do not communicate through words, yet via humour, symbols, stories, art, dance and performance."

A committed, and harsh critic of foreigners who live in Bali, Cok Sawitri doesn't always agree with western researchers findings about Bali and ill informed writers who choose to maintain some of the exotic, tourism rhetoric. These writers, and perhaps I am guilty of this too, succumb too easily to popular 'modern myths' without the desire to investigate on deeper levels. Slowly over time the 'facts' become modified and the results are spurious far from the truth.

Born in 1968 in Karangasem, East Bali, in the village of Sidemen, one of the most picturesque locations in Bali, Cok Sawitri has been producing works of art since elementary school. Journalist, novelist, poet, environmentalist, activist, dancer and choreographer, teaching both traditional and modern Balinese dance, painter, with countless collaborative works through most genres of her creative expressions, she is active in various women and humanity organizations, as well as theatrical groups in Bali. Gender politics is also one of her committed interests.

"I love to learn and I always strive to retain a child like zest for this, while endeavouring to remain humble too." For four years Cok Sawitri studied local natural medicines, not to become a doctor though, yet purely because she wanted to know. "I believe everyone one of us is a teacher, we are each gifted with beauty and intelligence. What is important is the strength and creativity of a free and enquiring mind."

Cok Sawitri's face radiates with joy while she talks about the most influential character in her life; her mother. "My mother is a strong character. During my youth she had the courage to set me free and this inspired me to be brave. She truly allowed me to be me. Serve everyone well, be humble, yet have pride in what you do, my mother would say. She taught me through her own example."

"Gifted with a logical and rational mind that never succumbs to the mysterious and mythical worlds that Bali is renowned for, my mother's honest and worldly approach to life is wonderful, while her sense of humour is both endearing and a driving force in her life."

The famous Balinese dance the Calon Arang is the source of one of Cok Sawitri's most enduring passions. One that has led her on an unequalled, in depth research and analysis of its origins that culminated in 2007 with the book *The Widow of Jirah*, originally published in Bahasa Indonesia, and since 2014 has been available in an English translation. She had previously written 4 theatrical sequels based on the legend each with different interpretations. Her mission into the research began as a rite for self-purification in the Balinese/Javanese tradition known as ruwatan.

The Widow of Jirah, which streamlines and transforms the intricacy of the classical legend into beautiful poetic prose, rich in nature's wisdoms and hidden moral lessons completed the sequels and closes over 20 years of her work on the Calon Arang.

Three other novels written by Cok Sawitri have been nominated for Khatulistiwa Literary Award, for Indonesia's best fiction. In 2015 she will release her next novel, 'Sitayana', Sita's Journey. Sita is the central female character of the Hindu epic Ramayana and consort of the God Rama.

As a social activist Cok Sawitri's role is often on the frontline as witnessed during the 'Tolak Reklamasi' demonstration rallies against a mega development threatening the natural environment of South Bali. The planned project, in which nearly 800 hectares of sensitive estuary in Benoa bay will be transformed into tourism developments has polarized the island, dividing the Balinese into opposing sides in what has become perhaps the decade's most controversial issue.

While considered an expert on the Balinese culture she too is more than acquainted with the many facets of Balinese life. "Karangasem produces the finest quality arak, and while this excellent, yet potent liquor at times may be maligned because some choose to over indulge, its every process from the sourcing of ingredients, to its brewing and ritual drinking is considered sacred to the Balinese."

As well as being a role model for young Balinese women she is modest too. "I wish for no accolades, I hope that people appreciate my work. If you read my novels, poetry or short stories, the messages are there." People communicate in an array of creative and wonderful expressions, yet the most essential, according to Cok Sawitri, is via language of the heart. Asked if she had any words she wished to share with the younger generations of Balinese, her retort was stern, yet wise, "Influence others through your actions not words."



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