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In Learn More the *National Geographic* magazine team shares some of its best sources and other information to expand your knowledge of our featured subjects. Special thanks to the Research Division.

### Indonesian Volcano Culture

By Emily Krieger, National Geographic Staff

Indonesia, a sprawling archipelago of 17,500 islands, is a nation adrift in the ocean. But the land has an equally strong—if not stronger—impact on Indonesia's population of 245 million. Sitting atop colliding plate boundaries, the country has been wracked by frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Indeed, nowhere else on Earth do so many people live so close to so many active volcanoes. The Centre for Volcanology and Geological Hazard Mitigation, the government agency that monitors volcanoes, estimates that since 1600, the archipelago has had 129 volcanoes become active; more than 30 of them are on the most populous island in the world, Java.

The volcanoes that tower over the landscape have a broad influence on Indonesian life. They provide a sense of place and direction to those who live in their shadows. And in more practical terms, farmers benefit from their soil-enriching ashfall.

Volcanoes are also worshipped by many as the sacred home of deities. The Balinese sleep with their heads toward nearby volcanoes. And when the residents of Flores, the Nage, die they're usually buried with their feet pointing in the direction of the ocean and their head toward Mount Ebulobo. When the gods seem restless, believers make offerings of vegetables, money, chickens, and even goats to appease them as well as to bring prosperity. Many Indonesians believe natural disasters are the result of personal behavior and can influence the success—or downfall—of political candidates and leaders. No matter what the cause, Indonesians lead a fragile existence. Some of the most dramatic reminders of how fragile it is include the 2004 tsunami that claimed 170,000 lives on the island of Sumatra and the mud volcano that has been erupting in East Java since May 2006 and so far has displaced 10,000 families.

**Source:**

- Smithsonian Institution: Global Volcanism Program  
[www.volcano.si.edu/index.cfm](http://www.volcano.si.edu/index.cfm)
- Volcanological Survey of Indonesia  
[www.vsi.esdm.go.id/volcanoes/index.htm](http://www.vsi.esdm.go.id/volcanoes/index.htm)
- U.S. Department of State: Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs  
[www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bqn/2748.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bqn/2748.htm)

**Indonesian Volcano Culture**

Volcanoes are both providers and destroyers in Indonesia and have played a part in the country's religions for millennia. The archipelago's proximity to mainland Asia and to major shipping routes ensured the arrival of world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity—but even as religious faiths changed, the reverence for

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volcanoes remained a constant. Indonesians often mix animist elements into other beliefs, so that it's not uncommon for a Muslim to pray five times a day to Allah but also to make offerings to a local volcano deity. Nevertheless, a growing tension exists between those who believe in animism and those who think it's foolish or sacrilegious. This tension is apparent in large and small matters: A rural migrant who moves to a large city might lose touch with the old ways, disappointing his family. A presidential candidate must balance the popularity of animist worship with conflicting personal or party beliefs.

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#### Understanding Indonesian Religion

Indonesia's ethnic, religious, and linguistic melting pot has produced a fittingly wide range of faiths and religious practices. Blending elements from different faiths is at least as common as adhering to the tenets of one religion. Though the vast majority of Indonesians are Muslim (roughly 85 percent), many combine Islam with animism, sometimes also mixing in Hindu or Buddhist ideas. And while most Balinese are Hindu, many Indonesians living in the eastern reaches of the archipelago blend Christianity brought by missionaries with ancient cultural practices centering on prehistoric megaliths. Stricter interpretations of Islam are seen in west Java, southern Sulawesi, and northern and western Sumatra, where the Islamic law known as Sharia has been introduced.

Details of beliefs and rituals can even vary depending on which part of a volcano one calls home: Villagers on the southern flank of Mount Merapi, in Java, worship a volcano deity named Kyai Sapu Jagat, while those who live on the northern flank refer to him as Mbah Petruk. But volcano deities are consistently seen as neutral rather than inherently good or bad. Many interpret an eruption on Merapi as a sign that the volcano deity has been disrespected by improper behavior or thought. Offerings are made to appease the spirit and bring prosperity, and sometimes to mimic sacrifices made in revered religious legends. Some people even say that a volcanic eruption is a way for a deity to expand his or her kingdom or to expel unwanted material—the volcano is, so to speak, merely blowing off steam.

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- *Jakarta Post*  
[www.thejakartapost.com/headlines.asp](http://www.thejakartapost.com/headlines.asp)
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- The Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia  
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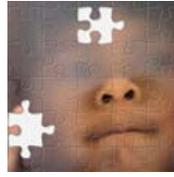
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