The distinctive, ancient black-and-white chequered cloth from Bali known as poleng typifies the island’s world view about the complementary nature of opposites such as good and evil, like and unlike. The tradition of poleng weaving goes back to the 14th century, and it remains a symbol of harmony and balance in Balinese culture.
Among the kaleidoscope of visuals that greets visitors to Bali, there’s a recurring motif that they’d have to lock themselves in a hotel room to miss. It girds tree trunks and mossy stone statues, is seen spread on restaurant tables, adorns worshippers at temple ceremonies and is deep-rooted in paintings by local artists: a monochrome chequerboard pattern known as poleng. And it’s more than mere decoration – poleng is one of the clearest expressions of the unique Balinese world view.

Balinese beliefs are a heady homegrown blend of animism, Hinduism, Buddhism and ancestor worship. At its heart lies a philosophy called Rwa Bhineda, which describes the world in terms of complementary opposites – large-small, young-old and good-evil. The island’s elaborate ceremonies are largely about maintaining the balance between good and bad. Evil spirits, for example, are not to be defeated, but be appeased with offerings.

“The Balinese think of poleng as magic,” says Susi Johnston, an authority on Indonesian arts who’s lived in Bali for two decades. “It acts as a barrier between objects, or persons, that have a strong mystical charge. So it’s associated with protection.” When you see a tree or an oddly shaped stone wrapped in poleng cloth, it’s because the Balinese believe a powerful spirit pervades it – a typically animistic conviction. “You’ll also see the pecalang [traditional village guards] wearing poleng because of its protective qualities,” Johnston explains.

The origins of poleng aren’t entirely clear, but it’s at least as old as the Hindu Majapahit Empire, the Javanese civilisation that ruled the Malay Archipelago from the end of the 13th century until the early 1500s. With the rise of Islam, the Majapahit royals fled to Bali with an entourage of artists, musicians and courtiers, thus sowing the seeds of an artistic blossoming that continues to this day. They brought with them a rich tradition of textile dyeing and weaving, but it’s possible that the poleng motif is even older – an animist artefact that was absorbed and assimilated.

Most of today’s poleng is machine-made in Java and Bali, while Johnston says there are a few workshops around the towns of Klungkung and Gianyar in central Bali that use quality Indian cottons and
Traditional village guards, known as peculang, wear poleng for its protective qualities.

负责保安的传统村落守护者会以poleng作制服，因为相信poleng具保护力量.
Threads of Life’s weaving cooperative in Seraya still produces poleng fabrics the traditional way, using hand-spun cotton, organic dyes and weaving by hand.

Threads of Life西拉耶的合作社仍保留傳統紡織方法——使用手紡棉紗和有機染料，以及用人手編織布料。
colour-fast dyes. But there’s only one place in the remote eastern reaches of the island where the ancient techniques endure.

“It can take a month to make one metre of poleng,” says Ni Wayan Weti, manager of the Threads of Life gallery, as she gestures at a length of cloth draped on a table. “Our cooperative in Seraya only uses hand-spun cotton and organic dyes.”

Tucked away in a little side street in Ubud, Threads of Life is a treasure trove of textiles from around the archipelago, and one of the last bastions of a dying art. Seraya, a small village in the arid uplands of east Bali, is the only place where poleng is still made the traditional way. Threads of Life supports 35 similar cooperatives throughout Indonesia, in a bid to preserve the country’s textile heritage. Meanwhile, traditional cloths are often siphoned off by enterprising locals to antique dealers and private collectors. But William Ingram, a Threads of Life co-founder and co-director, believes the real heritage is the fabric’s ritual significance and the skills to produce them.

“We set up the Seraya cooperative through our sister organisation, the Bebali Foundation, in 2002,” says the Englishman, who’s lived in Bali for 25 years. “We found these old women weavers up in Seraya who were making cheap polyester shrouds – but they were also hand spinning cotton.” Today, the cooperative has 50 members, including master dyers. “They grow their own indigo, which is over-dyed with a brown tannin to get the black – it will sometimes go through 10 washes to get the right shade.” Poleng of this quality is rare, so there’s no shortage of buyers.

Look closer at the poleng pattern and you realise it’s not actually just black and white – there are grey squares, too. “In fact there are four shades altogether because the greys, which are a blend of white and black threads, are slightly different depending on whether the warp or the weft thread is on top.”
Ingram points out with a wry chuckle. It's a subtle nuance that's been lost with the proliferation of cheap printed versions, yet you couldn't get a more elegant rendering of the principle it represents.

In Ingram’s interpretation, poleng is wrapped around guardian spirits at temples, trees and rocks as a reminder. “If we respect the inhabitants of the unseen realm, which basically means living ethically, we're embodying the white aspect of the poleng and our experience will be harmonious,” he says. “The converse is true when we embody the black squares. Of course, the reality is that most of us occupy the grey area.”

The use of poleng as a design theme has become increasingly sophisticated. Where once it was the province of budget Balinese homestays, these days you'll find it integrated in the interior design of five-star resorts such as the W Hotel in fashionable Seminyak, which features a poleng-inspired tile mosaic in one of its bars, while similar chequered panels conceal televisions in the guest rooms.

Poleng is big in fashion, too. Bali is a popular destination for designers and, viewed through their lens, poleng isn't a world away from two-tone tartan. John Hardy, a successful international jewellery brand founded in Bali, has a comprehensive collection of

Jewellery brand John Hardy (above) and Fair Trade textiles company Threads of Life (left) both champion poleng patterns in their work.

poleng-inspired pieces, from bracelets to pendants and rings.

Head to Mount Batur, one of Bali's active volcanoes, and you may be lucky enough to witness poleng in its most symbolic aspect through the Baris warrior dance. “Uniquely, in Batur the seniors of the community perform the dance wearing poleng,” Susi Johnston says. “It’s very beautiful to see and even a bit ominous in the misty mountain setting.”