

BALI'S TRADITIONAL HEALERS, THE BALIANS

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The book and movie "Eat Pray Love" have turned the spotlight on baliens, (dukuns/shamans) the traditional healers who play an important part in Bali's culture by treating physical and mental illness, removing spells and channeling information from the ancestors. Travelers seem to have added a visit to the balian to their Bali 'must-do' lists, right along with snorkeling, a cremation ceremony and a trip to the spa. But a visit to a balian is a serious matter, not a tourist sideshow. The balian is an instrument of divine healing, and the client enters a covenant to receive this healing with respect, reverence and humility. Ask yourself why you want to visit a Balian -- out of curiosity? To learn a little about traditional healing arts? Because you are ill and genuinely need a healing?

A Balian is committed to service, and may never turn anyone away. Tourists who casually enter the Balian's compound expecting to be seen often delay the healer from working with the genuinely ill Balinese who have come to see him or her. Because of this, foreign visitors (including resident expats) should make an appointment with the Baliens who prefer this. Please dress appropriately with arms and legs covered, and don't point your feet at the healer (or any other Indonesian). Women should not be menstruating. Always take an offering with the fee tucked into it; never hand money directly to the Balian. The fee is usually Rp 100,000 for a consultation, and Rp 200,000 for treatment. If the treatment is extensive the fee may be higher; ask the Balian. Your hotel can make the appointment and supply the offering, and you might also want to take a translator as many Baliens do not speak English.

What can you expect when you consult a Balian? Your experience will be very public, with all the other clients watching avidly. The healer may make magic, create fire, use mudrahs, draw patterns on your body, spit wads of chewed herbs on your skin, apply scented oils, poke you with sharp sticks and/or give you a deep tissue massage or manipulation that will be very painful indeed. You will probably howl; most people do. But you will probably feel better.

Every village has at least four Baliens. There are about 8,000 practicing in Bali, which has about four times as many Baliens as doctors. They are at the forefront of community health, and Balinese will often visit the Balian before going to a conventional doctor for treatment. The relationship between the two disciplines is interesting. The head of the Balian Association is a medical doctor whose father and grandfather were Baliens, and the Hindu University in Denpasar has a faculty of traditional healing. Many Baliens will refer a client to a doctor, hospital or pharmacy and doctors may discreetly suggest a visit to a Balian if mainstream medical treatment is not effective.

Pak Made Surya, an authority on Balians, has been studying the subject in depth for 15 years. He is the only expert I'm aware of who offers healing arts study tours to those interested in the culture of traditional Balinese medicine and magic, and the opportunity to visit carefully selected, authentic Balians during one, two and six-day study tours. He has translated and worked with scholars and educational film and video crews including National Geographic. Besides leading Healing Arts study tours for 23 years, he has served as senior research assistant for several scholarly books relating to the Balinese view of the After Death and sits on the advisory board for Sacred Sites International. He is collaborating on a book provisionally titled *A Spiritual Kitchen, an Ancient Balinese Healing System*.

"There are plenty of bogus Balians out there," Surya warns. "Be guided by personal referrals." There are four kinds of Balians. The first kind is a Ketakson who acts as a channel between the client and God. Ketaksons evoke the spirit of a dead person, and pass on information to the family about what kinds of offerings are needed for cremations and other ceremonies. They can also channel living people to give guidance or locate missing objects. Most of the female Balians are Ketakson.

The Pica/Paica Balian is a medium who may not be a formal student of magic. This kind of Balian receives physical objects which appear and disappear spontaneously and are used during healing sessions. "I've seen a kris suddenly materialize during meditation, standing on its point and rotating by itself," Surya recalls. "The object may seem ordinary and may not be beautiful. These ritual objects appear and disappear of their own accord, and may manifest for up to five years." The Balian Usada is a person who either has the intention to become a Balian or may receive divine knowledge during a severe illness. These people decide to further their knowledge by studying the lontars (sacred texts) and with recognized healers. The lontars, thousands of ancient texts in Kawi script, contain information on ethics, anatomy, traditional herbs, meditation, yoga, tantra and other subjects. The Balians also study both white and black magic, which are very similar except for the intention of the practitioner. The fourth kind of Balian combines all of the above. Many may appear crazy or psychotic, or hear voices, while the wisdom in entering them.

"The Healing Arts Study Tours are learning journeys which offer the visitor an in-depth excursion into the culture of Bali through the eyes of the Balinese, for those who wish to observe, appreciate, and experience traditional healing methods," Surya explains. "Among other subjects, we explore the history of traditional medicine (Usada), the different systems and practices of the Balians and the mystical basis of the Bali Hindu belief system. The essence of Balinese medicine is the understanding of the magic of the Left versus the Right. We look at different healing modalities, love potions, black magic and their relationship to illness." Quite a number of Balians will not see foreigners at all, because they feel it's too difficult to communicate the subtlety and nuance of their work across the language and cultural barriers, even with a translator.

For those who are neither students of Balinese culture nor ill but would like to experience a balian, the following will accept visits from foreigners without an appointment. Once you are in the neighbourhood, the locals will direct you.

1. Jero Dasaran. (aka Jero Roti) Banjar Tengah, Kerambitan, Tabanan (Channeler)
2. I Gusti Ngurah Rai, Puri Aseman, Kerambitan, Tabanan (Reads people and gives advice)
3. Jero Purnayasa, Banjar Sayan Baleran, Mengwi, Badung (Unexplained illnesses)
4. Pak Wayan Tirtha, Banjar Tegal, Tegalalang, Gianyar (Balian Usada)
5. Jero Tapakan, Abangan, Tegalalang north of the cemetery, on the east side of the road (Channeler)
6. Jero Mangku Dasaran, Banjar Teges, downtown Gianyar east of the jail (Channeler)
7. Pak Bejug (Pak Dug), Banjar Kedewatan, Ubud, Gianyar (Muscle and bone ailments)
8. Jero Mangku Nyoman Sudri, Banjar Abian Tubuh, Kesiman, Denpasar (Channeler)
9. Jero Mangku Bajra, Banjar Batan Poh, Sanur, Denpasar (Purification)
10. Nyoman Sumiarta (Nyoman Ata) Jalan Kepundung Gang XI, Denpasar (Mystical illnesses, spells)
11. Pak Ketut Suwitra of Munduk can be booked through Puri Lumbung Hotel in Munduk (Massages, gastrointestinal-related problems)

The following Balian require appointments:

1. Jero Mangu Gede Puspa, Desa Nongan near Besakih (Cancer, removing spells, mystical illnesses) tel: 081237033676
2. Pak Made Partha, Banjar Bantan Buah 30 minutes from Ubud (Sports injuries, sprains, bones, back problems) 081338430224
3. Ibu Jero Nesa, Jalan Batur Sari, Bet Ngandang, Sanur (Channeler, purification, mystical illnesses, possession and for those who hear voices) 0361287234
4. Cokorda Bagus Astawa, Banjar Mukti, Singapadu, Gianyar 081338533037 weekends only (Reading people, mystical illnesses)
5. Pak Sirkus Banjar Tegal-Gundal, Kuta Utara Tel 0361739538 (Bones, muscles)
6. Pak Ketut Gading of Peliatan, Ubud Tel 0361970770 (Broken bones, muscular problems; does house calls)
7. Pak Man (Nyoman) of Tampaksiring, who relocated to Ubud Tel 081338935369 (An energy healer/taksu who uses massage with medicated oil)

Cokorda Rai, now 80, has retired I have myself been treated by several Balian, and visited others in company with Surya. I've watched Balian cure stress and depression-related issues, chronic back and knee problems, headaches and many other maladies. There is certainly magic at work here, in company with learning, intuition and the profound ambient energies of this remarkable island. If you choose to experience it, please do so with the respect it deserves.