

Traditional healing on an island paradise

By Dr. MEL BORINS*
SEVEN YEARS HAD passed since that first time we were there. We went again, looking for the smiling faces, the innocent trusting people, the untouched natural beauty and the best sunsets in the world. The sunsets hadn't changed, but everything else, certainly had. For four days, my wife and I mourned the death of the Bali we once knew and idealized. We sadly said goodbye to our utopian dream, and our own youthful innocence, and began to enjoy this paradise island anew.

I met Dr. Wirawan, a quiet physician and teacher in the department of public health at the Udayana University faculty of medicine. He told me the country is divided into eight counties, and that each has one hospital. There is also one general hospital in Denpasar, and two military hospitals.

There are apparently only 200 doctors. It is compulsory for each to work in public clinics six days a week, from seven in the morning to two in the afternoon. For their work, they get paid the equivalent of \$100 a month. This is equivalent to the pay of a lawyer, veterinarian or government official. However, almost all the doctors have private clinics as well, in order to support themselves and their families.

In the government clinics, patients pay about 150 rupiah (or 30¢) per visit—including drugs. However, many people find the quality of care not to their liking and choose to go to a private office, where they get more attentive care. Apparently the average charge per private visit is 600 rupiah (or one dollar and 20 cents). Dr. Wirawan said the average time spent per visit is just a few minutes, and the maximum is about eight minutes.

Most Balinese people go to a Dokun, or traditional healer, because of convenience and cost factors. There are certain medical problems for which they seek a medical doctor's care.

But many medical doctors, in fact, find their own relatives seek the advice of a Dokun before consulting them.

Essentially, there are three main types of healers, or Balians. The first uses herbal remedies. These are often written down in ancient books called 'tonjar,' which have recipes for all medical problems,



Pekak Mangku

through families; from one healer to the person of the next generation who will take over.

The second type of healer specializes in problems of the musculoskeletal system. These healers perform massage, and use manipulation to deal with arthritis, sprains, pains and other musculoskeletal complaints.

Thirdly, there are the spiritual healers, who believe people get sick on a spiritual level and then their physical bodies are affected. A certain kind of spiritual healer is called a Tetakson, or someone who goes into a meditative state and receives messages about people and their cure.

The first healer I visited was a 73-year-old Balian named Pekak Mangku. He is a chubby, toothless, old-looking man, whose face and body are covered in black naevi and tinea versicolor. He wore only a black and white checkered sarong and sat on a bed covered in a woven straw mat. To one side was a small prayer altar and, beside the altar, incense was burning.

His first patient presented with a sore wrist. Apparently, four days before, the man had a fall on his outstretched arm, and since then his wrist had been sore whenever he moved it.

Few words were spoken. First the healer touched the wrist and, while exploring all parts of it, mas-



Balian spiritual healer

saged different points on the hand and forearm. These points, surprisingly enough, corresponded to the pressure points used in Chinese acupuncture.

After working on the wrist, he went up the forearm to the elbow, and finally massaged points throughout the upper arm.

After a few moments, there was painless motion where previously there was pain and restricted movement.

But the treatment did not stop there, and soon the man removed his shirt and the Balian massaged his neck and shoulders. Then he gently manipulated the man's neck and shoulder. The Balian believed the problem was not focused only in the wrist, but affected the man's neck, back, shoulders and upper arm as well.

Pekak Mangku has taken three years of formal training from various healers in Bali while he was being insufficient; that this boy's young. Afterward, he learned mainly through experience. He might have a permanent limp, confided in me that after 50 years of healing, he feels he still down a dirt road in search of a does not know enough and is continually learning.

After he massaged and manipulated the stiff neck of the Balinese medical doctor who brought me to him in the first place, the Balian overtook me to his one inpatient. In another part of this, healer's home spec to private problems, and even lay a 10-year-old boy who had had seen people in groups.

mur, and had been brought down with his left leg in a makeshift traction. His leg was tied to the end of the bed by a stretchy piece of long cloth. Around the thigh was a piece of cloth soaked in a kind of plaster, and bound around the cloth were numerous bamboo sticks, each about four inches in length, circumventing the thigh.

Mangku's plan was to keep the boy like this for about a month, and then he would be able to walk. The boy's parents chose this approach rather than the local hospital.

I questioned

This was the first time since I had witnessed traditional healing that I questioned whether this was the best treatment available. Both I

and the Balinese medical doctor years of formal training from various healers in Bali while he was being insufficient; that this boy's young. Afterward, he learned mainly through experience. He might have a permanent limp, confided in me that after 50 years of healing, he feels he still down a dirt road in search of a does not know enough and is continually learning.

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pound. He certainly was a busy guy! Apparently, this Balian sees over 100 people a day. He blesses babies, consults with respect to private problems, and even sees people in groups.

In his form of group therapy, he takes people with like problems and collects them together. He sits

behind an altar lined with flowers, a single naked light bulb hanging over his head, and preaches.

My medical doctor/translator explained this man's customers fall into three categories. One group includes those that are sick because another person has cast a curse upon them. Another gets sick because someone is poisoning their food. And the third group's members are ill because someone is hiding metal objects in their rooms and draining their strength.

The Balian clears curses, tells people to go back and search their rooms for nails, knives, and other metal objects, and warns people about the food they are eating. People apparently come from all over Bali to see him.

How did this spiritual healer get started? It seems he was walking down the road in a northern part of Bali about four years ago, when suddenly a "vision" came to him. In this vision, he was told to go to Sakawati and there he would help people. He was told which house to visit, and he stayed there three days in prayer. Soon people began to come asking for help, and the rest is history.

I told this Balian I wanted to learn more about spiritual healing, and he invited me to spend three nights with him at his home and he would teach me what I needed to know. I explained it would be difficult to leave my wife and three-year-old son, and besides I couldn't speak Balinese. He thought about my predicament, and finally said that if I went and slept in my hotel room for the next three nights, spiritual healing would be taught to me, in English, in my dreams.

Alas, three nights passed, and nothing came to me in my sleep but a few mosquitoes. When I awoke, I was no more an expert on spiritual healing than anyone else.

I spoke to Dr. Denny Thong, a psychiatrist and director of the psychiatric hospital in Bali. He described the Balinese people as peaceful, contented and non-aggressive. There is very little direct hostility expressed, and most people suppress their emotions.

The only open aggressiveness is shown on the roads. In traffic, everyone competes ruthlessly for space and power. It is a frightening

aggressive feelings in dance, plays and art forms. The people use trance as a type of catharsis.

Dramatic

Dr. Thong sees the role of the Balians as healers for the people. He feels they form a stabilizing influence on the community, acting almost like the community's psychiatrist. He says many spiritual healers use trance, magic and speaking in voices as a way to convince people as to which path to follow. Speaking from a trance absolves them of responsibility for what they advise. Hence they can be permitted to make judgments and suggestions they might not ordinarily make. Also, because they go into trance or use magic, their advice is so dramatically given that people tend to heed it.

Dr. Thong believes the Balians still have a great power over the people, and that a lot can be learned from them.

He is working toward establishing more co-operation between medical doctors and Balians. He would like to educate Balians about modern hygienic and preventive medical practices. He would like medical doctors to study what these healers are doing, so that the tools of their work can be used by medical doctors to advance the common good.

Dr. Thong especially sees the trance state as a powerful healing tool, and believes we must study and understand how we might use it in modern medicine.

A Balian speaks the common language of the people, and structures treatment in ways the common person understands. All too often on my travels, I feel the medical professor is not being clearly heard or understood because our language and ways of communicating are alienating us from the average person.

Many Balians have an innate sense or have developed an intuitive talent to enable them to almost instinctively read into a person's nature and problem. Perhaps we as doctors have suppressed this part of our brain, and in medical school have become so scientifically oriented we have lost this intuitive sense.

The Balinese traditional healer certainly has a lot to teach us about