

Cases Of Trance Possession in Bali

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I first went to Bali twenty years ago, having seen a film on trance in Bali (*Sacred Trances in Bali and Java*, Hartley Productions). During that short visit, I saw a *Sang Huang Jaran* (the Fire Dance) in Bona village, and had extensive conversations with Anak Agung Gd Kaleran, a Balinese friend with whom I have been working ever since. Although our conversations led me to believe that the fire dance was not as paranormal as it appeared on the surface, nevertheless seeing this dance and hearing of numerous trance ceremonies occurring regularly on Bali convinced me that this small island to the east of Java was a fertile ground for studying the trance phenomenon.

At that time, this fire dance was the only one on Bali taking place regularly. Now such performances occur for tourists almost daily, with at least three groups performing them weekly (or biweekly) in Ubud alone. The growth of these performances for tourists indicates that one needs to be careful in Bali to insure that the trance one is witnessing is legitimate. The four that I am focusing on in this case study are put on as religious ceremonies in the appropriate temples for the Balinese (and the divinities); indeed, in three of them, I (and a few students who accompanied me to Bali) were the only Westerners present in the ceremonies.

Background

First, let me offer some background. Bali is a small island, approximately 90 miles long and 50 miles wide, lying 8 degrees below the equator, and about 18 degrees north of the Western part of Australia. A volcanic island, the land in the eastern end is rich and fine for agriculture, especially wet rice farming. A tourist destination now, with beautiful beaches, it is nevertheless one of the few island cultures in the world not oriented toward the ocean. In fact, its basic orientation is away from the ocean.

The reason for this strange phenomenon is cultural. While the rest of Indonesia is Muslim, Bali retained a form of Hinduism, which they call Bali Hinduism, or the Water Religion, with roots in classical Indian Hinduism, transmigrated through ancient Java, combined with indigenous animism and ancestor worship. Their cultural orientation concerns spiritual space, and the holiest spot on Bali is the highest volcanic mountain, Genung Agung (3000 meters). Based on an ouranian approach to religion, height points to divinity, or the generative forces, while the opposite orientation, away from Genung Agung and toward the ocean, points to the demonic, or the degenerative forces. Bali Hinduism aims to keep these two forces in balance, to propitiate and appease both forces, and not allow either force to triumph ultimately.

Trance possession in Bali depends on this worldview, with special religious ceremonies offering the divinities and the demons an opportunity to “appear” on earth in order to be propitiated or to give information.

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

Trance

A distinction has to be made between trance and trance possession. Trance is found in Bali in a number of circumstances (Belo, 1960), from mental illness, to mediumship, and even to gamalan (Balinese orchestra) playing. Suryani and Jensen give it a wide definition, calling it a dissociative state (Suryani & Jensen, 1993). While this definition seems too broad to me, this issue is not the focus of this Study. Rather, I want to focus on trance possession, the putative taking over of someone's body by a divine or demonic element. Bourguignon (1973) surveyed 488 world societies and found that 90 per cent of them had some institutional form of altered state; of these 52 per cent incorporated trance possession. In Bali, trance possession is an important part of religious life. At the end of many ceremonies (*odalan*), a priest often goes into trance and is possessed by the divinity being honored in the ceremony, and this divinity is able to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the ceremony.

Kuningan

Every 210 days of a Balinese calendar year, an event called *Galungan* occurs, an important spiritual time in Bali when the deified family ancestors came back to earth, and grand celebrations take place all over the island, both in family temples as well as regional and national temples (Eiseman, 1989, p. 183). During this time, many offerings are given to the ancestors, often 3-4 feet tall and carried atop the head in processions to the temple.

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

At the end of the 10-day *Galungan* period, the divinities ascend back to heaven. The following day is *Kuningan*, a day marked by a number of important and impressive trance possession ceremonies. After a 10-day period dominated by the presence of gods and deified ancestors and offerings made to them, beginning on *Kuningan* day and for the next period, there is a focus on propitiating the demonic elements (*kalas*), as a matter of keeping the balance. These ceremonies often take the form of trance possession. On *Kuningan* day and the following eight days, I participated in four such ceremonies, three of which I have witnessed at least once before. I will describe these events to give a flavor of the discreteness of trance possession behaviors in Bali.

Cases

Selat

Selat is a mountain town in the mountains in the region of Bangli. I had witnessed this special ceremony there eleven years earlier, and I was interested in seeing if it had changed. It occurs every two 210-day years on *Kuningan* day, so it is a rather difficult ceremony to see. Members of the village, as well as neighboring villagers, come and gather around a large area in the middle temple (each Balinese temple has an inner, middle and outer temple area). The fact that Balinese from the surrounding area also attend this event shows two things: that such special trance possession ceremonies like

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

this unusual one is not held in many villages, and that it is a spectacle—both entertaining and religious—for the Balinese.

A special group of local men were in charge of crowd control, making sure that there was enough room for the ceremony, and continually asking the crowd to squat down--to maintain a lower position than the participants, who were in fact demonic elements possessing the entranced men.

The ceremony began with a typical confrontation between the Barong, which looks much like a Chinese lion and symbolizes good, and Rangda, the witch who symbolizes evil. Time after time in Bali this confrontation occurs, and the point of the exercise is to dramatize and to instantiate the balance between good and evil, so neither side wins the confrontation. But, these are very holy characters in the Balinese worldview, whose costumes are worn by people with a great deal of spiritual power (*sakti*), and there is no doubt that these people are often entranced during the ceremonies.

During this confrontation, men in the audience spontaneously go into trance and are possessed by the demonic elements. As one person shouts or starts gesticulating, they are grabbed by 5-6 other men who restrain them and who manipulate their temple dress so that it will not come undone during the ceremony. Each time a person goes into trance, the gamalan, the Balinese percussion orchestra that is played at any important ceremony, reflects the action, speeding up and getting louder when a person shows spontaneous possess, and then slowly slows down again as the person is restrained and taken to the side. Although the gamalan is reactive at this time, it is an integral part of the ceremony and should be viewed as having a symbiotic relationship with the action in

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

the ceremony, sometimes reacting to it and sometimes causing it. For instance, there is no doubt that the haunting and repetitive sounds of the gamalan are a factor in inducing trance, as well as the special melody played in important ceremonies, so the gamalan is as much an instigator of the trance as simply a reflector of it. By the time the confrontation of the Barong and Rangda had ended and they had been led to the inner temple, 7 men had been possessed, including one of the two men enlivening the Barong.

The assertion of possession, as opposed to simply ascribing trance, is due to the circumstances rather than to behavior. The men had to be restrained, flailing about, and they gesticulated wildly, calming down and staring vacantly, but these behaviors can be attributed to some kinds of trance. However, the context dictates the interpretation of possession. First, the ceremony occurred in the *Pura Dalam*, the temple dedicated to the degenerative forces, and where this kind of possession occurs. Most importantly, the ceremony needs to be viewed as an elaborate ceremony of offering and appeasement. While the gods love beauty in offerings, the demonic elements above all love blood (cock fights often occur before these kinds of ceremonies, serving the same function).

The seven men were then released, and kris knives (traditional weapons and thought to have souls) were brought from the inner temple and one was grabbed rather roughly by each man. At this point, several of the men ran into the crowd with their knives flailing and peoples running and dispersing in their wake until the security men restrain the men and bring them back into the central area. I will return to this point later, but I want to focus on the trance possession activity. Baby chicks are brought out by several *pemangkus*, local temple priests from the lower class, and are held up in display.

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

The trancers have been walking around, some fast with an aggressive expression on their faces, and some slowly with a vacant stare. The chicks attract the attention of the men and the *pemangku* and an entranced man begin a version of the Balinese stylized dancing. Sometimes it is broken off by the entranced man, but often the dance movements progress into an interactive dance, and then the chick is grabbed by man, who then bites off its head and starts eating it. Sometimes the rest of the chick is thrown to the ground and sometimes it is consumed as well. This, of course, is the purpose of the trance possession ceremony, the consuming of the blood by the demonic elements that have possessed the men.

After about 30 minutes, some of the *pemangkus* brought out soda bottles with arak (also pleasing to the demons) and held them up. Some of the men began the dancing movements, which culminated in them grabbing the bottle, drank the arak and fell back, being caught by helpers, who then carried or walked the men and sat them down at the side of the circle. Other men continued grabbing the chicks and eating them, until finally all of them drank the arak; the men were paraded around the circle three times and then taken into the inner temple.

I had witnessed this ceremony 11 years earlier and most of the ceremony was similar, except in two respects. The first was that one of the men grabbed the bottle of arak and drank it and then continued walking around and eating the chicks, rather than falling back and ending his participation. This seemed to be a surprise to everyone and the crowd engaged in nervous laughter when this happened. It was unexpected, which was both entertaining and worrisome, and this event supplies a foreshadowing to my

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

conclusion, that trance possession behaviors are context dependent; any usual behavior becomes worrisome.

While my major point displays the unchanging nature of the trance behaviors, the second difference points to how change gets incorporated into ceremonies. I brought eight students with me, all decked out in appropriate temple garb. Before the ceremony several people expressed worry that one of my students wore a temple outfit that was predominantly red and that the demons didn't like it. Nothing like this occurred my first time there, so I asked my Balinese friend if we should be concerned. He replied in the negative, but when the ceremony began and the possessed men grabbed the kris knives, one of them flung himself in the crowd near us and drove the student wearing the red backwards, protected by Balinese. The security men were even concerned about the red light on my video camera that came on when taping (although, interestingly, one of the possessed men saw it and performed a short dance in front of me and seemed far from being infuriated by the color). In the eleven years since I had first attended this ceremony, this new and important aspect of the ceremony had grown to general knowledge and worry, as a number of people mentioned it to us. I can well imagine that one of the trancers in previous ceremonies became agitated by some red color and explained this while in trance, and this new taboo was introduced, understood now by everyone except outsiders (as even my Balinese informant did not know of this taboo, in spite of being one of the most knowledgeable persons about Balinese religion on the island).

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

Celuk

The jewelry-making village of Celuk held a series of ceremonies each night called the Sang Yang Dedari. Jane Belo (1960) described this dance in her classic book on trance in Bali, pointing out that it was a famous ceremony in the Kintamani area, near Mount Batur, a volcanic mountain. One of the two previous performances I had seen occurred there, which was a classic one: two girls eight to twelve years had been elected to dance. According to tradition, these ceremonies occurred when a pestilence threatened the town, and this ceremony would offer them protection. Traditionally, the two girls would be selected and kept in the temple training in legong-type dance for a month (as opposed to the usual one to three years of training needed to master this dance). They would be put into trance using one or two puppets bobbing on a string in front of them, and then they would then dance in unison, with their eyes closed. For the Balinese, the only way to explain such a performance was that they were possessed by spirits who allowed them to dance even beyond the capabilities of legong dancers, performing feats not usually done, such as dancing on the shoulders of men. The dancers were always prepubescent; indeed, at one ceremony I witnessed near Ubud several years ago, only one girl performed as the other one had started menstruating during the month-long period of isolation before the ceremony.

The ceremony in Celuk was different in that it was in fact a series of nightly ceremonies for eight days; I went on one night and stayed only a couple of hours with my students; Bob Morris went on a later occasion and saw more of the ceremony (they last

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

long past midnight). I will describe what I saw. First, we did not see the girls go into trance (this is usually done in private in the inner temple), so I do not know the mechanism of induction. The ceremony began by the girls being carried in seats on the shoulders of four men and walking to the four corners of the village, where each direction was blessed. Then the girls were brought back to the village pavilion, where there was a small stage on which the girls danced and several priests sat. The musical background to the dance was provided by three sources. In the first, the women, who sat separately from the men, sang in unison a slow, rhythmic song, and the girls danced slowly in rhythm. This was followed by the men, who sang *cecak* (the sound of monkeys), a syncopated, speedy rhythm much like a vocal gamalan. In this instance, the girls danced in unison faster to keep pace with the rhythm. Finally, a small gamalan orchestra played. When the music stopped, either during a song or to go from one group to another, the girls stopped dancing.

The eyes appeared to be closed during the entire time, but I, of course, could not exclude the possibility of peeking through the eyes to see what the other girl was doing. The dancing was fairly precise in following each other, but the skill was not that of trained legong dancers. Belo (1960) describes the dance, quite accurately, as having a “relaxed, rather listless quality, quite different from the tense postures and acute movements of the approved legong styles. They were, and seemed to be dancing in their sleep” (p. 181). They did not in this ceremony get onto the shoulders of men and dance.

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

Again, while it was easy to see that they were in trance, the reason to call it possession was due to their interpretation of the context, that this was the occasion for spirits to possess girls in this ceremony.

Kesiman

Eight days after *Kuningan* in the village of Kesiman, a suburb of the capital city of Denpasar, an important ceremony takes place in a district temple, so the ceremony is important in the religious life of several villages. Members from these villages take part in the trance possession activities. The ceremony has been described by Suryani and Jensen (1993, pp. 951-98), and I have witnessed it a half dozen times. Since the ceremony is dramatic and takes place in the city, it is a very crowded event, with Balinese and tourists coming from outside of the Kesiman to witness it.

For the second time, I was able to go into the inner temple in May and witness the participants going into trance. The inner court was crowded with “teams” of three or four people, as well as Barongs and Rangdas, from various villages, as well as onlookers. The ones most likely to go into trance sat close to the shrines where the priests were making offerings and blessing the participants, who were praying. Incense filled the air, and the ubiquitous gamalan played the haunting, rhythmic, holy melodies. No drugs or other specific methods of induction are ever used in this ceremony, or any other that I have been able to discover on Bali (except the use of the vibrating puppets hung on strings to induce the adolescents in the Sang Yang Dedari in the Kintamani district). Rather, a

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

combination of a holy place, the presence of the Barongs and Rangdas, the use of holy water in prayer, the rhythms of the gamalan, incense, and expectation combine to produce the induction. While I could see the faces of some individuals beginning to relax and the eyes become a bit unfocused, nevertheless the start of the group induction was quick. One person shouted in trance and jumped up, and suddenly others began shouting and writhing. The rhythm of the gamalan got appropriately quicker and louder.

I mentioned “teams” of three or four individuals above. Certain individuals are recognized as more likely to go into trance, and several others are their keepers. When they went into trance, the others grabbed them so that they won’t hurt others and they can be controlled. The teams began going out of the gateway of the inner temple into the middle courtyard, where there is a walkway around a cockfight pit (cockfights had been going on for some time, which are a combination of sport, social interaction, and offerings to the demons (see Geertz, 1973). All of the entranced teams, the Barongs and Rangdas, and gamelans, circumnavigated the cockfight pit three times before returning to the inner temple. During this time, most of the entranced individuals periodically stopped and called for a kris knife to be given them; they took the knife and “stabbed” themselves (the power of the Barong purportedly keeping them safe during this activity), usually on the cheek, but sometimes on the neck, the head, or even eye socket. After 10-15 seconds of this, the keepers grabbed the trancer, the knife was taken away from them, and a priest sprinkled them with holy water, which calmed them down, and they proceeded walking with the procession. Some trancers simply walked around in a daze. Two women made stylized dance moves as they walked in the procession.

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

After three circumnavigations around the inner courtyard, the procession went back into the inner temple, and a second part of the trance possession ceremony began, this one honoring the local ancestors. A group of men dressed in traditional local clothes embodied the ancestors; these men appeared to be in fairly deep trance. They sat in the temple pavilion and are approached by villagers, who bow to the ancestors, say a few words to them and then began stabbing themselves with kris knives, the same action engaged in by the trancers in the middle courtyard and found in several other trance ceremonies, most notably the *colang arang* ceremony with the Barong and Rangda, symbolizing the eternal balance between good and evil. The men were grabbed by designated temple security men and kept from injuring anyone else (the only injuries I have seen in the ceremonies in Kesiman have been to the keepers, who get hit by the flailing trancers, but I have seen no injuries to the trancers, themselves). When the last person was finished, everyone gathered for prayers and blessings with holy water.

Metro

In the small mountain village of Metro, not far from the Mother Temple at Basakih, I saw a ceremony that I had never seen before. The local tradition says that it started a number of years ago when the temple priest was a boy and went into a garden with other kids and a small Barong and became entranced. When this happened several times, a priest went into trance, was possessed, and was told that a temple should be built

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

at that spot, and ceremonies should be performed. The boy later became the priest of that small temple. The ceremony consists of dancing and then handling fire.

The ceremony began with boys entering the middle temple, performing a dance that appeared to be very old in form, which was followed by a group of girls dancing. In this part of the ceremony, no one was in trance. The old Barong, used by the boys originally, was brought in, as well as Rangda, and offerings were offered to them. Several men then piled coconut husks in the middle of the middle temple grounds about 3 feet high and lit them, the flames leaping up four or five feet above the husks. The boys and girls then commenced dancing again. When the fire had simmered, I heard a shriek from the side and the priest came racing out to the fire and ran through it, which dispersed the simmering and burning husks around on the ground. Then two other men and three women became entranced. One of the women skipped around the outside of the scattered embers, while the rest of them walked in and out of them. Sometimes one of the men would pick up an ember and put it in his mouth. Another picked up simmering husks and hit his chest or head with them, the embers showering over him. The priest would lope through the embers with a strange gait, sliding one foot along the ground (unlike other examples of fire walking I have seen in Bali and elsewhere where the participants picked up their feet from the hot substance quickly).

An odd event occurred during the trance, where one of the women went to the gamalan and tried to drag one of the male players into the central area (the gamalan was in a small pavilion). I had never seen anything like that in my twenty years of research in Bali. Even my Balinese friend found this behavior strange. The cause of it became

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

evident later. As the trancers were brought out of trance by holy water, one of the women, who had been particularly wild in her movements first seemed to come out of trance and walked out of the inner temple, and then she fell again in trance, yelling. She was restrained, and the divine figure possessing her began speaking, saying that two girls had been absent from the girls dancing ensemble and that this was not a correct way to carry on the ceremony; the entranced woman had been trying to get the man to join the group to begin to get the correct number for the dancing.

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be reached about trance possession events in Bali from these four examples. One, they occur with relative frequency in Bali and are an important part of their religious life. Second, trances are not brought about by drugs or generally by any special techniques, but the ritual surroundings of music, incense, holy space, and expectation are enough to induce trance possession. Third, although there are a few examples of possession being used in a potentially parapsychological way, trying to gain paranormal information, such a use of trance possession is not typical in Bali. Even possession mediumship is not usually used to give parapsychological information but to let the ancestors inform people the causes of problems and what offerings they can make to mitigate these difficulties (Edge, 1993). Fourth, because of the second point, there is no clear separation between trance behavior and trance possession behavior. The reasons that the Balinese attribute possession to certain episodes of trance are due to context and

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

interpretation—these are the ceremonies where possession takes place, and also information can be given to the people about the success of the ceremony. Finally, trance behaviors are context specific. Each of these ceremonies elicited specific behaviors (e.g., fire walking, or self-stabbing, etc.), and a behavior in one of the ceremonies would have been out of place in another one. The behaviors are not wild and unexpected, but appropriate to the ceremony and to *adat* (local custom). Even where there are minor variations (a woman at Kesiman who walks with stylized dance movements) will repeat this behavior in ceremony after ceremony (see Edge 1996).

What this teaches us is that trance possession is a common phenomenon throughout the world and its behaviors are socially constructed. It may be a peculiarity of Western scientific culture that we expect possessed individuals to give us pieces of knowledge that we can verify in scientific fashion. Our own social construction sets up expectations (and results) that conform to our cultural desires. Traditional spiritualist mediumship can thus be interpreted as an interesting transition from a more traditional culture, when trance possession is used almost exclusively in a religious context for religious purposes, to a scientific culture, in which verifiable bits of knowledge are expected. This view conforms well to the fact that examples of spiritual mediumship blossomed at the same time in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, exactly at a time when science became a culture phenomenon, rather than an isolated discipline for specialists.

Edge, Cases of Trance Possession in Bali

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Abstract

Four cases of trance possession that were witnessed by me in Bali during May, 2002, are described. Trance and trance possession are ubiquitous in Bali, so it is an excellent place

to study such phenomenon. Trance possessions occur within ceremonial contexts, and behaviors within different ceremonies are constructed and appropriately different. I describe these four ceremonies and draw five conclusions about trance possession in Bali, and then I conclude with a short comparison of the function of trance possession in Bali and the West.