

Mediumship and Magic in Bali

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Two mediumship sessions in Bali are described and compared to Western mediumship, noting similarities and differences. In order to understand better the differences, a summary of the Balinese magico-religious world view is given, emphasizing the medium as one variety of healer. The task of the healer is to help restore balance between the Upper World and the Lower World, and between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Indeed, the latter concepts of macrocosm and microcosm express a magical perspective in its purity, illustrating Levy-Bruhl's Law of Participation, as opposed to Western ontology and epistemology. Within this magical world view, mediumship can be seen in three ways. First, mediumship seems to be one remaining way in which the West expresses magic in its culture. Secondly, mediumship varies from culture to culture and needs to be understood within its cultural context. Finally, mediumship is a means of cognitive repatterning, and thus it aims more to produce meaning than to provide information.

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In a Presidential Address to the S.P.R., John Beloff (1976) argued that the paranormal has more affinity with magic than it does with either science or religion, and that unless we are willing to expand our range of interpretation of the phenomena, we may miss their essence. Although Beloff was referring to the virtually extinct magical tradition in the West, I believe his point can be expanded to incorporate magic found in contemporary non-Western traditions. In this paper I will offer some remarks on how we may be able to expand our interpretations of psi by examining how it is used in the magical culture of Bali.

Bali is a small island in the Indonesian archipelago, separated from eastern Java by a strait less than two miles wide. The waters, however, around Bali are treacherous (Covarrubias, 1972), which accounts for the relative isolation it has enjoyed until tourism began in earnest in the 1960's. Thus, the rich artistic and religious culture was allowed to flourish with relatively little outside influence, even during the Dutch occupation commencing at the turn of the century. The magical world view is deeply imbedded in the Balinese psyche, and there is virtually no aspect of life which is not touched by it. Reports of paranormal phenomena abound, ranging from ESP to magicians changing bodily form (leyaks), from paranormal healing to death by sorcery. In this pervasive magical world view, it may be instructive to examine instances of mediumship and place them within the wider cultural perspective, noting similarities and differences to traditional mediumship in the West.

Mediumship Sessions

During a research expedition in October-November, 1990, I witnessed (and video taped) two mediumistic sessions. As is usual in mediumship sessions in Bali, a group of us attended, all of whom were more interested in experiencing the phenomenon of mediumship than we were in receiving specific information. The group consisted of two Balinese, two Japanese and me. Mediumistic sessions in Bali are not private affairs, with sometimes up to ten or twelve people, usually family members, crowding around the raised platform on which the medium sits, but as is typical in Bali, the publicness extended farther than this, with groups of people waiting their turn able to hear what was being said.

I will quickly set the stage of the mediumistic session in Bali and describe the features of the two sessions, held about four days apart.

Appointments are not made, but rather whoever wants to visit the medium comes to the family compound in the morning, always dressed in traditional clothes (as one would wear to a temple ceremony). Because of this arrangement, waits are often quite long, although we did not have to wait in either case more than an hour and a half. Sessions usually last from one half hour to an hour and a half, so sometimes waiting periods can be quite long (Eiseman 1989, p 158). The mediums

are also dressed in traditional costumes and usually sit on a special speaking platform within the family temple that is found in every Balinese compound.

The first medium was a man (most seem to be women) living in a small town about five miles from Ubud, in the center of the island. He began the morning at 9.30 a.m. (Nov. 11, 1990) by chanting mantras (ngredana) to invite the power (wachyu, spirit, or word or vision) to come to him. A total of 16 people (three groups) were waiting when we arrived. Our turn came about 11 a.m.

The procedure was as follows: First, we presented our offering, giving it to the medium. The offering consisted of three parts: 1) Daksina (a coconut (symbolizing the sun), rice (the stars) and an egg (the moon)); 2) Canang Rao (a flower -- literally, an offering for talk); and 3) Rantasan (a piece of cloth for the ancestors, usually white or yellow). Sometimes the ancestors ask for cigarettes (but not this time), and a small amount of money is included.

Secondly, the medium chanted mantras inviting the spirits (especially Gana, the elephant-headed god, whose image appears on magic amulets, and the son of Siwa) to come. He also invoked the Balinese-Hindu trinity. Incense was burned, a bell was rung, and a flower was used in the prayer (the smell of the flower and the sound of the bell guides the mind to the upper world). Finally, a small fire of sandalwood was lit, and he purified his body by putting his hands in the smoke. Then the medium began talking.

This medium went in and out of trance and spoke in Kawi, the old Javanese language. Mediums in Bali often talk in Kawi, so it is usually necessary to bring someone, perhaps a local priest, to translate what is said. In this instance, a Japanese woman was presented by the group as the "target" "sitter" (S). I will give a sample of the conversation between her and the medium (M):

M. You come from a different country. [This was pretty easy to see.] You have come because you have a very difficult situation [This was not true.], and you should keep going.

S. What is wrong?

M. You have lost something.

S. No

M. Not anything material, but in the mind. You can't sleep well or think about plans. [She had not completed some work she had planned to do, but that was because she slept a lot in the hot weather.] The problem is that you take trips, but you never tell your ancestors where you are going and ask them to come and bless you.

[Periodically, K would go back to chanting mantras to reestablish contacts with the spirits.]

M. The Brachma and your ancestors want to help you but you forget them. If you remember them, you will get success. Anytime you go on a trip, tell the ancestors where you are going and ask their blessing, making an offering. In Bali, make an offering to god, Brachma; when in the United States, make the offering in your mind, since they don't know anything about offerings.

[M. then explained a complicated offering to be done where she was staying in Ubud].

S. Who are my ancestors who want to help me.

M. Grimadi. [S. did not recognize the name.]

The session ended with the medium chanting again and thanking the spirits for the information.

The second mediumship session took place four days later in Denpasar, the capital of Bali and on the southern coast. The medium, a woman, did not go into trance but spirits talked with her. When they did so, she made a sound like "Oh, oh, oh, oh." Her preparations were not as formal as the previous medium's, and rather than chanting mantras to the gods, she dipped palm leaves in arak and threw it, which usually is an indication that she has dealings in black magic. On this occasion a Japanese man was chosen as the target sitter; the medium spoke Balinese, and one of the group (himself a balian usada) who knew S fairly well answered for him, asking S for information he did not know. This man (who had chosen this medium) gave incorrect information at times, testing the medium to see if she would know this. She did not.

As opposed to the first medium (and mediums in Bali, in general), she asked the sitter a number of questions: what he did, where he stayed in Bali, what part of the compound he stayed in, if he had gotten sick, who is friend was, etc). A number of her statements about him obviously derived from the information she received in the answers, some of which intentionally contained false information.

After she heard he had been sick, she said "I know." She told him that he must make an offering to get well and be successful. The offering was Pisang Putjati, meaning "correct, always stay here"). He should put it on the table and pray in any way his religion allows him. A second offering on the table should be not for the gods but for his ancestors. Later, she suggested making another offering (of coconut, rice and egg) each time he came back to Bali in order to have success here as a painter. His problem was that he wants to be Balinese, but he does not speak the language. However, she told him that when his body is pure, he will be able to wear Balinese clothes and go to the temple since god is one.

By Western standards, even without extensive analysis, one can say that these sessions were non-evidential. At least in one case, there was much probing for information from the sitter and others in the group, and what factual information was offered by the mediums was incorrect. It is interesting to note, however, that the Balinese in the group considered the second session a complete failure, and said that one should never trust the word of one medium. They said that a kind of majority vote technique is practiced in Bali, and that is that in important questions one should consult four mediums, one from each of the four directions in Bali (representing the nine deities) about the same question/problem and evaluate what is said by them all. In ideal cases and dealing with the most important problems, there has to be agreement among all four mediums before the answer/suggestion is accepted.

However, my aim is not to evaluate the mediums for evidence; rather, it is to understand the phenomenon within the Balinese context, comparing it to traditional Western perspectives.

There are, of course, several similarities between the two traditions. First, information is offered in both. Secondly, spirits are the source of the information (although what is meant by spirit in the two traditions may not be the same). The medium is simply that, a medium from the transcendent to the physical. Thirdly, there is guessing, questioning the sitter, reading of body language, and taking other cues as part of the procedure to produce the information given.

Several differences strike one immediately, however. The first is the consistency of the solution to all problems--one needs to honor the gods and the ancestors by making offerings. The advice given, therefore, is culture specific. When I summarize aspects of Bali-Hinduism shortly, we will be able to see how well it fits in with their general world view. Secondly, the Balinese session is highly ritualized. This makes sense in a culture which is quite homogeneous and focused on daily ritual. Thirdly, although one finds spirits, sometimes ancestors, which come through in trance, there are other differences. For instance, there do not seem to be special guides who accompany a medium,¹ nor have I heard of extraterrestrials coming through in trance. The Balinese world abounds in spirits and gods which have concerns with the daily life of the living. Trance is a normal phenomenon in Balinese culture (Conner, et. al. 1986, p. 64), and often gods will possess individuals during a temple ceremony to complain that the ritual is not being done properly or to inform the people that he or she is pleased. Thus, possession by spirits is the norm in Bali, not an unusual occurrence or restricted to mediums (Belo, 1960). Finally, Western mediumship has

¹ Belo (1960, p. 246) found a belief in such a spirit control in only one district in Bali.

traditionally little to do with black magic, but black magic is widely practiced in Bali and there are as many offerings made to evil spirits as to good spirits in daily life.

In order to make sense of these differences and to expand our understanding of how psi can be viewed in a magical culture, let us turn to the Balinese context of mediumship.

The Balinese Magico-religious World View

Mediums are not considered to be fortunetellers, per se, but they are classed as healers (Balian in Balinese; Dukun in Indonesian). Several people have tried to make a classificatory schema of Balians (Weck, 1986; van Eck, 1878; De Kat Angelino, 1919-21; van Bloemeen-Waanders, 1859; Eiseman, 1989), but their inconsistency points to the complexity of the use of this designation. In general, "Balian" refers to any traditional healer, but one can divide them in terms of their healing specialty, in terms of how they diagnose, in terms of how they receive the healing power, or in terms of the healing methods employed.

It may seem strange that a medium (Balian Taksu, taksu meaning spirit or power, or can be thought of as a kind of spirit) is classified as a healer, but one needs to understand the Balinese concept of illness. Illness is due to three causes: karma, black magic and imbalance.

Karma is generally outside of the control of the individual and the healer. At best one can merely lessen the karmic consequences. On the other hand, sorcery and imbalance are more under the control of humans and can be treated in essentially four ways: physically (such as broken bones), herbs, massage and pressure, and through magical means (mantras, amulets, and offerings). However, even herbs and massage must be accompanied by the appropriate mantras to release their power; so "medical" intervention must be combined with magic, as even the smallest aspect of Balinese life is impacted by religious beliefs (Weck, 1986, p. 2).

A medium can inform the sitter whether the cause of the problem is black magic (pungiwān) or imbalance. If it is the former, one will need to seek the help of a practitioner of white magic (penengan). Imbalance can be treated in several ways, but a major approach is through offerings. In general, help is sought from mediums when the illness is individual, as opposed to imbalance in the community (which can exemplify itself as a series of deaths, as plagues, natural disasters, etc.). Thus a medium heals in the sense that she or he aims at restoring balance in the individual (and, indirectly, in the universe) (Conner, et. al. 1986, pp. 97-8).

Balance is a central concept in the Balinese world view, so it will be worth our while to examine in what contexts it is used. In general, it is the pivotal idea of the special brand of Bali-Hinduism that is practiced in Bali. Bali-Hinduism results from four distinct sources: animism with ancestor worship, which was practiced by the original Balinese (Oka, n.d.); Hinduism, with special emphasis on Shivisim,

brought in several waves from Java from the 7th to the 13th centuries; the magic of Tantric Buddhism; and adat, which is local law or custom. This creates a special blend of an all-pervasive way of life which emphasizes orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy.

Two fundamental ideas in this system which relate to the ideal of balance (Ruwa Bineda) are: the three worlds, and macrocosm/microcosm. According to the Balinese cosmology, the visible world is really an illusion, a maya. It exists between the Upper World, the world of the gods, and the Lower World, populated by demons. Out of an agreement between the powers of growth and dissolution, the Middle world was created, but it is an illusion in the sense that the forces that shape it come from outside of it. Both its existence and the nature of its existence depends on the contrary forces of growth and dissolution remaining in balance. Thus, if the forces of the Lower World gain ascendancy, disaster and illness result. By the same token, however, the counter balance to the Upper World must exist, or the Middle World would be extinguished (Lansing, 1983, p. 52). The spirits of both worlds--the Dewas and gods of the Upper World, and the Kalas and Bhutas of the Lower World--must be appeased through offerings. Thus, Bali is rife with offerings, from the massive celebration of Eka Desa Rudra, which occurs once every 100 years, to the daily offerings on banana leaves left to every spirit in a compound (over 100 were left in the compound where I stayed). Thus, a constant concern is with the balance between the forces of the Upper World and the Lower World, making sure that the appropriate offerings are made at the right time. On the one hand, then, much illness and suffering are the result of imbalance, which can be rectified through appropriate offerings.

The second central idea--or set of ideas--places us more directly within a magical world view: macrocosm (Bhuana agung) and microcosm (Bhuana alit). The microcosm is within the self, while the macrocosm is the universe. The macrocosm and the microcosm mirror one another; even geographical features of the universe (which is thought to be only Bali) have analogies in the self (Lansing, 1974, p. 57). The important point is that the relationship between the two universes is so intimate that a change in one will produce an analogous change in another.

The Balinese combine this dialectical relation with the idea of the three worlds, understanding a whole series of aspects of the universe in this three-tiered way. As the universe (Bali) is divided into three parts--the sea, which is impure and represents the Lower World of demons; Land, which represents the Middle World of Humans; and Mountains, which represents the Upper World of Gods--so aspects of the world are so divided. Humans have legs, and body and a head. The house is conceived as having a leg, a body and a head (Budihardjo, 1990, p. 37). Similarly, the family compound is conceived in this way, as is the tripartite arrangement of the village temple. Even the village is laid out in this way.

The smaller reflects the larger and vice versa. Indeed, Clifford Geertz (1980) has argued that the legitimacy of the traditional ruler in Bali derived from his ability to construct a capital/community which reflected life in the heavens, that the Negara was a microcosm of the supernatural order. Thus, the mere fact of creating a palace or community of a certain type shaped the world around it, while the community itself became (or was) the state and not simply a metaphor for it.

I do not have time to discuss the idea of magic in any depth, but I would like to point out some characteristics of the "Law of Participation," as Levy-Bruhl (1926) called this way of thinking. As opposed to Aristotelian logic which asserts the Law of Identity and says that a thing is what it is and nothing else, the Law of Participation asserts that things are both themselves and other things at the same time. All things in the universe, both living and non-living, are connected with each other so that no clear distinction can be made between one object and another, or between oneself and anything else. As opposed to the Aristotelian Law of Contradiction, which says that a proposition and its opposite cannot both be true, the Law of Participation asserts that no such clear distinction exists, that there is no real opposition between the one and the many or the macrocosm and the microcosm (and statements about them), for instance.

Thus, the epistemology and ontology of magic differ radically from the Western way of thinking. As opposed to Western essentialism, which asserts that a thing has an essential property and statements about it become true if they reflect this property (hence, the opposite would be false), no such essentialism is found in Balinese thought. One way to look at this distinction in epistemology is to contrast Western monotheism with Balinese polytheism. Just as traditional Western religion has asserted the existence of one ultimate being and one ultimate truth reflecting that being, Balinese polytheism asserts a plethora of gods and spirits, filling all three Worlds, and even seemingly contradictory forces must exist. Just as there would be no Upper World without the Lower World, so there could be no good without evil, and the presence of both are necessary to sustain life (the Middle World). Thus, apparently contradictory truths abound

The closest Western philosophy to this position is found in Hegel (who was influenced by Heraclitus) who proposed that contradiction was at the heart of existence, defining "contradiction" as the "co-presence of mutually incompatible forces." From this idea he developed the idea of the dialectic (theses, antithesis and synthesis), which characterizes both ontology and epistemology. Thus, life and logic are a balance between contrary forces. As the Hegelian antithesis is already incipiently present in the thesis, all things are related in the magical world view. The Laws of Identity and Contradiction do not apply.

The traditional distinction between fact and fiction is inappropriate in Bali, where there is no concept equivalent to the Western idea of fiction (Vickers, 1989), no juxtaposition of Wahrheit and Dichtung. For instance, by telling or performing a story from "history," the qualities of the past can become the qualities of the present by "co-incidence," not meaning that they occur by accident but that they have been made to "co-incide" or co-reside. The connection to Jung's concept of synchronicity should be obvious in this regard. Events normally separated in time or place, or distinguished by size (macrocosm and microcosm), co-incide such that the qualities of one are made present in the other. Hence, any one thing becomes not simply a symbol (in Western terms) or metaphor for other things, but takes on the qualities of a host of things. Objects, symbols, concepts are overdetermined. One never looks for "The Truth" but one can recognize a host of truths, even contradictory ones.

The Cultural Aspects of Mediumship

What can this excursion into the magico-religious view of the Balinese tell us about mediumship? What perspective on this phenomenon does it give us? In the spirit of looking for truths and not for The Truth, I will not lay claim to discovering "the correct interpretation," but perhaps I can offer an antithesis, a truth lying hidden (from our Western perspective) in the phenomenon.

I believe there is a natural affinity between mediumship and magic. Indeed, trance mediumship can be conceived as the modern Western world's expression of magical thinking. What is trance mediumship if not the temporary union of two entities, the one becoming the other in trance, similar to the ceremonies among e.g. the Australian Aborigines in which they become their totem animals? As they think they get the knowledge and skills of these totem animals by ritually identifying with and becoming them--their dances are not simply mimicking--so the medium achieves the knowledge and skills of the person she becomes. The Law of Participation seems to hold, and although the analytic mind may attempt to separate one personality from another and try to discern whether information comes from one source or another, the phenomenology of the experience points more to union, to magical participation. As the medium is viewed in the West as a medium between this world and another, the Balinese expand this notion to say that all of the Middle World serves as a medium between the other two worlds, both as a contact between and as an expression of these worlds. The visible (sekala) is merely an expression of the invisible (niskala). Thus, there is an intimate connection between mediumship and magic, and a deeper exploration is warranted.

In this connection, I want to make only two further points in this paper. The first is that mediumship is not a natural phenomenon which transcends cultural contexts. Both the ritualization and purpose of mediumship is heavily culture

dependent. In the West, an information oriented culture, the function is primarily to produce facts, to inform the sitter of continued spiritual life, of what will happen to the sitter in the future, of how to conduct daily affairs, etc. In keeping with the information function, whatever ritual is present tends to be down played or seems to be presented almost for effect.

On the other hand, mediums in Bali are healers, and their primary focus is aimed at curing illness as it is locally understood as imbalance.² Imbalance in the macrocosm, with the spirits being displeased, is reflected by imbalance in the microcosm, with individual illness or bad luck. Conversely, imbalance in the individual--for instance, not honoring the four brothers/sisters (Kanda Empat) within the body--is reflected in imbalance in the macrocosm. The usual solution, the making of the appropriate offerings, can be viewed as a simultaneous cleansing of both the microcosm and the macrocosm, of appeasing the spirits and bringing one's attitudes into appropriate alignment. The spirits within and without become balanced.

The second implication is that we may not want to ask the question that psychical research began with, i.e. is it literally the case that a spirit--a deceased person--is speaking through the medium. If one dismisses the ontology and epistemology of essentialism, one may no longer find quite as interesting the kind of question which asks whether Don Juan really flies.

Parapsychologists have often viewed crystal balls, tarot cards, ouija boards and the like as mechanisms for releasing unconscious psi information. Similarly, Tyrrell (1970) has argued that apparitions are projected images--telepathically induced hallucinations--created by our unconscious, and should not be thought of as literally present. However, this approach still views the world in the traditional Western way, asking what apparitions really are, or whether pictures really exist in the crystal ball. The pictures or apparitions are literally there or they are not. I am suggesting a more radical perspective, one in which the traditional Platonic disjunction between appearance and reality is not primary.

One area of research in cognitive psychology has been the performance of inductive thinking through pattern recognition (Hunt, 1982, pp. 157-163). We naturally think of patterns of existing; it is easy, for instance, to say which word does not belong in the group of "kangaroos, koalas, grass, cockatoos." Yet, patterns are not natural phenomena. People and even cultures form different patterns out of the same group of objects, and all of these patterns are real, as real, for instance as a planetary orbit.

² Traditionally, there are cases of pure clairvoyance in which children see a scene in a drop of oil put on their fingernail in order to find a lost object (Belo 1960, pp. 228-238), but this practice seems to have greatly diminished over the last several decades.

Epistemologically, the creation of new patterns, the achievement of new perspectives, is a mechanism for further understanding. Magical thinking is pattern-making thinking par excellence (or gone mad, depending on your view). It is the creative urge to think in patterns, in relations. Studies of creative people highlight this kind of thinking, showing that they not only create/think in one different pattern, but one essential feature of creativity is the generation of all sorts of patterns, even if they don't fit into a neat bundle. These are different ways in which the universe can be cognized, opening up new perspectives and new understandings.

One function of mediumship, I am suggesting, is pattern creation. It breaks down (or can break down) rigid distinctions between the past and the future, between mental and physical, between truth and fiction, between present and absent, and between the self and the not-self. Its function may not so much be to offer information as to provide a mechanism for finding new meaning.

Conclusion

I have suggested that an examination of mediumship in Bali offers us two new ways of viewing mediumship. On one level, it seems to be a culture specific phenomenon, meeting the needs of people in that culture. Hence, while Westerners are information oriented and look for evidential information, Balinese worry about themselves being out of balance, having failed to make the right kind of offerings or doing it in an inappropriate way. Thus, Balinese mediums are more concerned to heal this sickness than they are to offer information about the future.

On another level, the magico-religious ontology and epistemology offers us another way to conceptualize the function of mediumship. It can be viewed as a mechanism of repatterning our cognitive universe and thus creating new meaning for our lives. In my view, neither of these interpretations of mediumship denigrate it or lessen its importance. They simply expand the way we may think about mediumship and perhaps offer us new approaches to examine the phenomenon.

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