

BALI

BACKGROUND

Bali is a small island off the east coast of Java, and part of Indonesia. When it was first "studied" in depth by Margaret Mead and Gregory Batson in the 1930's, they noted that of all the cultures ever examined, it was the most different from our own.

As a psychologist interested in stress management and self-control practices, I was given a fellowship to explore Balinese means for managing stress through their use of dance and trance practices. During my two months study, I was able to observe several of the trance and dance practices and ceremonies such as tooth filing, burial, and the Barong (battle of good and evil). In addition, I am indebted to my host in the jungle outside Ubud, Wayan, and to Dr. Denny Tong, the Dean of the Medical School in Bali for their help. There were also interviews with several artists (woodcarvers) and "white magic" priests. (For may sake, as well as their own, no one was willing to take me to see the practioners of black magic!).

STORY LINE

I was being led by two young women to a Tooth Filing Ceremony deep in the Balinese Jungle. We came to a high, narrow, shoddy bridge made of bamboo which I felt terrified of crossing. It was fear, not "gentlemanly courtesy" which caused me to "allow" my "guides" to cross first.

Later, as we returned from the ceremony, I asked that we go a different way so as not to have to cross that bridge again. When I returned to Ubud, I told my host, Wayan, of my experience. His response to my fear was "When it is your time (to die), the bridge, falls. It can't be helped, what can you do?"

All people, no matter where they live, face certain common human concerns. These include preparing for "our time" to die; trying to develop a sense of belonging and security; learning to cope with the inevitable stress that comes with living in society; trying to understand and address the problem of evil in

the world; and wondering about the nature of the universe--where we came from, what is our meaning and purpose here on earth.

This story highlights some of the ways in which the Balinese have addressed these important human questions by examining trance and other Balinese practices. These include the tooth filing ceremony, the Barong dance (the battle of good and evil), and the warrior dance in which the young men are initiated into adulthood. Given the poise and moderation of the Balinese, these ceremonies are quite an exception. As Dr. Denny Tong, the Dean of the Medical School in Bali noted, "For Balinese adults, other than in the trance dances, the freest emotional expression is among the insane."

This article will also discuss the religious context in which the Balinese trance practices occur, a religion based on a combination of Hinduism combined with island animism. This framework allows the Balinese to both be very accepting of the world (as evidenced by the comment of Wayan about the bridge), and, at the same time, to be very creative and instrumental, as evidenced by their terraced rice fields on the hillsides, and their beautiful and fluid sculptures.

The Balinese answers to these human questions are unique and interesting in their own right; and, at the same time, examining their answers can help encourage us to reflect on and see more clearly our own ways of addressing these important questions.

TOWARD A SEARCH FOR FOR PHENOMENOLOGICAL TRUTH

Just as there is the potential difficulty of biases and

~~Just~~ Mead

Bali

blindness in trying to understand the assumptions of one's own culture, there is also the potential problem of projecting one's own views and framework onto another culture. One way to reduce that risk is to employ a phenomenological approach, in which an effort is made to understand how individuals (and the culture itself) view certain issues and events. Geertz, in his anthropological field investigations of Bali, noted that he attempted a "scientific phenomenology of culture" (1966, p. 8), a careful ethnological description within a highly sophisticated theoretical framework. Mead, in an introduction to Belo's work on Trance in Bali, noted that the scientific method "seemed at first to be a way of dissecting and denaturing the beauty of the whole" (1960., p. v), but went on to stress its importance in field studies, citing her and Bateson's (1942/1962) earlier work.

This paper attempts to do both: to present a phenomenological view of spiritual and cultural beliefs and behaviors (including trance); and to analyze and understand the purpose and utility of these acts and beliefs in providing an individual with orientation and a sense of control.

Mead

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