

## Magic -- an integral part of life in Bali

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Hiang Dewi, a pretty young wife of a Balinese rice farmer, died generations ago but this watcher of rice fields is very much alive for those who can see ghosts and believe in magic.

And it would seem nearly everyone here can see, or at least believes in ghosts such as Hiang, the spirit world and spells hovering over life as we know it.

Hiang is, apparently, one of the benefits of being in contact with Indonesia's unseen or mystic world. Believers say with a kind ghost like Hiang overseeing your house you will find your home to be more secure and friendly.

This is where magic -- *ilmu gaiba* in ancient Balinese -- comes in. Practitioners and priests say Balinese magic has been handed down from one generation to another for thousands of years, reaching its peak during the Majapahit era.

Magic is still practiced today throughout Java, but is particularly revered in Bali where more than 90 percent of the population accept magic as a part of daily life.

So strong is the belief in magic that there is a television program that regularly discusses magic, hosted by magazine editor and respected magician, I Gusti Agung Ngurah Harta.

But more extraordinarily, regular competitions are held for beginners in the magic arts, a bit like Harry Potter's Quidditch airborne game, dangerous for players and observers alike.

An expert on Bali's black magic, who requested anonymity said it was safe to watch this annual competition that will be again held in October, but 25-year-old Kadek from Ubud disagrees. She said witnessing this competition can be deadly.

"It is dangerous. If they see you watching, you can die. Last time this competition was held, the farmers who saw it went to their rice fields the following day and became ill. It's too dangerous," Kadek said, adding that spirit wars also occur, like the one between the Balinese villages of Medahan and Blahbutuh in 1996.

"There was a big spirit war between the villages. Every night it was really hot here and friends said they saw people dressed in white flying through the sky, just like on television. The war ended when a powerful black magician died. It was a terrible time and people were arguing with each other and deeply disturbed," said Kadek.

People have reason to fear the power of magic according to Kadek, because it is real and can hurt people.

"Yes, I am scared of magic. Yes, I know it's real. From the time I was small my mother warned me to be careful of what I ate because people nearby might put magic in my food," said Kadek.

The idea of magic introduced into food is common with potent magic introduced in food rather than by the magic spells of the European variety of the art.

Called *citik*, or poison, the black magic expert said this type of magic can be dropped into coffee or mixed in foods.

"We have some black magic *citik* that can be given to someone now, but it won't take effect for a year, so no one will ever know how their illness or death came about. Revenge like this is outside the laws of humans and can only be stopped by very strong magicians. Once you start with black magic there is no going back," said the expert.

Ngurah Harta said he does not recognize the concept of black or white magic. How the skill is applied is based solely on the character of the practitioner, he asserts.

His television program *Peblihgagan dan Sinetron Memedi* that discusses magic, mysticism and Balinese healing is, he said, aimed at helping people understand that magic is not as dangerous or extreme as many people fear.

"In Hinduism black is the symbol of protection, safety and fertility and white is the color of dedication; a symbol of holiness, so black or white (in magic *sic*) does not exist. It depends on the character of the person who performs the magic," said Harta.

Seekers of magical intervention in their lives come daily to Harta's morning clinic. He said people ask for help in their love lives, to ease family tensions or to divert threats of physical harm. Many also request charms or mantras to improve their businesses, while others, believing they are under a spell, seek Harta's skills to break the spell.

"Magic is predominantly used to cure people from various afflictions. I can tell magic is at work by the appearance of a patient. I can read their eyes, their face, their attitude. There is a vast difference in the appearance of someone who is physically ill versus someone who is suffering from magic," said Harta.

Harta's talents and Bali's place in the magical and mystical world are recognized not only in Indonesia, but also overseas.

International students come to his Denpasar home to gain insights into other planes of existence, including a group of Bulgarians who said they believe Harta is a living God.

"He is a living God. Everything we learn happens instantly and we improve our spiritual development quickly," said Valery, speaking on behalf of Harta's Bulgarian students.

The esoteric secrets at the heart of magic and healing are currently being translated into a book, authored by Harta, who said he has already documented 1000 different stomach ailments that can be cured with Balinese healing and magic techniques.

Holy man Jero Mangku Dalem from Tengkulak Tengah, said while he does not practice magic, he is well aware of its power, having studied the *Artawa Wedha* magical knowledge, written in Balinese script on sacred lontar or palm leaf books, for many years. He said this knowledge originated in the ancient East Java kingdom of Kediri.

"My lontar are more than 100 years old. They have been handed down in my family

from generation to generation and I have studied them for most of my life, and while I don't practice magic, I do make charms and ceremonies that help people who are affected by magic," Dalem said.

Talented magicians are able to transform themselves into animals at will to enter people's homes or villages without being noticed, according to Dalem, whose charms and amulets ward off black magic.

He adds that if people are strong in themselves, they are less susceptible to the negative elements of magic. "When a soul is strong and clean it is not affected by ghosts or magic, but if your soul is not firmly attached to your body, ghosts or magic can enter you," said Dalem.

Growing up in a household steeped in magic was difficult for Singaraja-born Putu, who says the magic introduced into the family by his grandfather caused years of suffering for the family, and left him with a sixth sense and the ability to see ghosts like Hiang Dewi.

"My grandfather was not born into a tradition of magic. He learned it late in life and it took him five years just to learn how to read the lontar, and then he died, telling my father to carry on the work," said Putu.

However Putu's father had no desire to become a *Balian* -- the Balinese title for a magic practitioner -- and for years afterwards, the family suffered recurring illness and financial problems.

"In the end my father gave in and became a *Balian*. As his son this is not something I want to do with my life, but I may have to. My older brother is now studying with my father, so he can take on the work when my father dies, but if he does not want to continue, the responsibility will fall on me," Putu said.

For the skeptics who believe magic is found only on the pages of Harry Potter novels, Grimms fairy tales and within the walls of Camelot, Ngurah Harta tells us, "You can't see God but you still believe. Belief in magic is no different," he said.