



## Balinese' perspective in Myths and Diseases: How the society copes and survive the situation

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### ABSTRACT

Myths are common in Balinese society' belief system that rooted back to the local religion, *Wali* and Hinduism teaching. There are many stories in ancient texts; most of them cover the story of influential figures such as Gods, Deities, Demon, evil spirit and et cetera. Gods and Goddess represent good, righteousness and source that brings happiness and joy to human. In contrast, other entities like Demons and evil spirits become a symbol of maleficent that create chaos and disaster on earth. Through Balinese history, there were many disasters, plagues, and diseases that took heavy tolls. The Myth from ancient Balinese texts helps to provide consultation as well as the perspective of the ancient civilisation in dealing with

many unfortunate situations, including plagues and diseases. The mythical story leads to numerous ceremonies being celebrated on the island. The ritual act as an expression of gratitude, apologise, and a moment to self-reflect that humankind is not the only creature that inhabits the universe. The teaching emphasises that the local community is mandatory to take care of their environment, avoid exploiting nature, subsequently as an alarm to the individual to live in humble and responsible. Despite the locals are well adapted to modern technology and received higher education, apparently did not halt the rites. They believed the activities are identity as well as precious treasure from their honourable ancestor.

**Keyword:** Myths, Diseases, Balinese

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### BACKGROUND

Since the ancient period, human has been developing their communication skills to transfer a message from one individual to others, then for broader means. The ability allows Homo sapiens to cooperate on a larger scale and to achieve what a single human could not obtain. Broad-scale cooperation could be done due to complex communication that gave birth to fiction and Myth.<sup>1</sup> The rise of fiction and Myth on humankind enables more than a hundred individuals without prior acquaintanceship work in harmonic cooperation. It shapes what we addressed as culture nowadays. A belief system, according to Koentjaraningrat's cultural system concept<sup>2</sup> consists of dozens myths and fictions. The story acts as media of learning about the way of life, ideology, philosophy and moral value. A legacy of forefather to their future offspring. It may as well offers consultation about a various event in the past. Should in future the descendant faced grave danger, the ancient wisdom would be at their disposal to consult or to seek an answer.

### MYTHS AND DISEASES

Myths are common in Balinese society' belief system that rooted back to the local religion, *Wali*

and Hinduism teaching. There are many stories in ancient texts; most of them cover the story of influential figures such as Gods, Deities, Demon, evil spirit and et cetera. Gods and Goddess represent good, righteousness and source that brings happiness and joy to human. Whereas other entities like Demons and evil spirits become a symbol of maleficent that create chaos and disaster on earth.<sup>4</sup> Besides stories of good and evil, the text also discusses multiple important events in the past, history of rituals, catalogue of arts, medicines, even ancient wisdom that relatable to the current situation. The text is commonly written on *Borassus* leaf called *Lontar*. The community put great respect on the text and even considered it a sacred object. Therefore, it is understandable that in Balinese civilisation' mindset, an ancient text on *Lontar* became the only source of the answer in overcoming problems that were faced by the people.

Through Balinese history, there were many disasters, plagues, and diseases that took heavy tolls.<sup>5</sup> Some text would suggest the people conduct a ritual to ask powerful deities to put an end to the calamity. For instance, in the year 1246, as mentioned in stone tablet *Jiken Sastra*, the King and his people were requested to worship *Bhatara I Kusumadanta* to drive away from unstoppable diseases that lingered on their country over the

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**Figure 1.** Illustration of Evil spirit causing sickness<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 2.** Dalem Ped Temple, Nusa Penida.<sup>8</sup>

years. The figure of Bhatara I Kusumadanta was referred to Lord Ganesha.<sup>6</sup> The claim is strongly connected to the mythology of the lord Ganesha in the Book of *Panggalaran*, where He mentioned as *Gramdewa*, a protective deity of the Village or community. The Ganesha is also worshipped as a god of success and obstacles removal. Besides, In the Book of *Ganapati Tattwa* states that Sanghyang Ganesha can repel pests and plant diseases, while the Book of *Mahanirwana Tantra* mentions Lord Ganesha or *Bhatara Gana* as the master of the harvest and prosperity.<sup>7</sup>

Some myths, however, claimed that some plagues and diseases could be caused by a powerful human-being after obtained an extraordinary ability. The power enabled the figure to create large-scale chaos and bring famine as the figure's will. The Myth of *Ratu Gede Macaling*, a King of Demons, goblins and evil spirits is a well-known legend that spread in the eastern coast of Bali. The figure is believed to be a mere human. However, after his relentless meditation, Lord Shiva granted him a mythical power, and a boon to lead the demon armies, and to cause plagues, pestilences & disaster on the Island of Bali. According to the Myth, it is said that he currently resides in his invisible fortress at Dalem Ped Temple, Nusa Penida. What makes him even more feared among the mortal being is the fact that every year, on the sixth month of Saka Calendar system, he owns a privilege to sail with his subordinate to claim souls on the island of Bali.<sup>9</sup>

Another well-known story both in Bali and Eastern Java is the story of Calonarang. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the old widow led her followers to spread terror and wreak havoc in the Kediri Kingdom. Calonarang and her followers were prominent in witchcraft and black magic; thus, they caused great terror and nightmare on the Kingdom. Her motive was a disappointment to society since no family dares to take her beautiful daughter Ratna Mangali as a daughter in law, despite her kindness and pure heart.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, there was a story in Bali entitled Ki Balian Batur, who enraged after his daughter was slandered by a madman at the market. The madman was spreading hoax, telling Balian Batur's daughter was selling food with human flesh as dishes. His dismay worsened after the society, without conducting further investigation, harshly rode his daughter while the official did not prevail the justice. In 1700 saka, Ki Balian Batur ordered his students to make a *gerubug* (plague) in Cau Village, that made Mengwi kingdom should bury their hatchet with Klungkung Empire to overcome the catastrophe.<sup>11</sup>

## PLAGUES AND DISEASES IN HISTORY OF BALI

The society identified Plagues and diseases under several umbrella terms. According to the ancient texts, plagues and diseases were known as *Mrana*, *Gering Agung*, *Gerubug*, *Cakbyag*, *Sakit gede*, *Bah Bedeg* and *Sasab*. *Mrana* is a type of infection that may catch plant, animal and human. *Gering agung* is a contagious disease that often occurs in some period of times. Sometimes, *gering agung* also refers to a condition when rain does not fall for an extended period. *Cakbyag*, *sakit gede* and *bah*





**Figure 3.** As a symbol of apology, farmers would hold another ritual *Ngaben Tikus* as their way to apologise and pray for the little soul to reach a higher position in the afterlife.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 4.** Typical offerings in *Sasih Kanem*<sup>18</sup>

bedeg are classified under Gerubug term. It was a condition when livestock and society experienced sudden-mass death without any prior symptom. And last is Sasab, a type of deadly contagious fever.<sup>12</sup>

The ancient Balinese civilisation believed that any disease, plague and catastrophe were caused by an influential figure, or related to the cosmic plan. Therefore, their approach to abolishing the problem was by praying to God and ask for an apology. The other resolution was waiting for a mighty figure such as King, priest or sage to help them in facing the disaster. The simple community approach was

based on the fact that in the past, they were unaware of any scientific knowledge. Thus, before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scientific research to identify or learn the source of disease were not at their disposal. Albeit there was no scientific study in medicine, yet we may find various indigenous herbal medication text that provides information for a particular disease and its remedy. However, the text was shrouded in Myth as well. For instance, an ancient Balinese herbal medication script to overcome cakbyag, *Usadha Taru Pramana*, even claimed to be passed from Goddess Durga. The knowledge had been transferred to Mpu Kuturan, after he performed deep meditation, asking for God's help.<sup>13</sup> The text mentioned approximately 202 types of plants could be utilised whenever someone caught by the disease. The ancient texts of medicine are well preserved and keep being learned even by medical practitioner nowadays. Besides *Usadha Taru Pramana*, there are several popular scripts to be studied by 'Balian' or Balinese shaman to improve their insight about typical local disease and pestilence such as *Usadha Buda Kecapi*, *Usadha Cukil Daki* and *Usadha Bebai*.

## HOW SOCIETY COPE WITH THE EVENT

The old Balinese society was unaware of conducting scientific research to identify the cause of a disease. However, they have an exceptional attitude in treating their surrounding, including to understand any of their misfortune. Take, for example, an old teaching that suggests one should avoid overly complaining or insulting any lousy condition they experience. Or else, it would multiply and consume one's body and mind. The teaching has been actively practised by the farmer, especially when they were facing rat pest in their farms. Not only suggest one should stay in their positive mindset, but the farmer event prays and humbly asked the pest to leave their rice field willingly. Should the rats do not seem to disappear after multiple requests and prays, then they will start to hunt it. Eventually, as a symbol of apology, farmers would hold another ritual *Ngaben Tikus* as their way to apologise and pray for the little soul to reach a higher position in the afterlife.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, in Dukuh Penaban Village, Karangasem, the local has a sacred dance that is still performed until today as a solution to stop the deadly disease in the past. The dance is called *Poleng Canglongleng* dance. The dance can only be staged on certain days, such as every full moon on fourth, seventh and tenth month in Balinese calendar, *umanis* and *pahing Kuningan*. The dance would be staged in Puseh Dukuh Penaban Temple. The history of the dance was dated back in 1721 Caka, where unstoppable disasters took place. Then, there

was a whisper to perform a sacred dance. It was said that once the protector deities of the Village were allowed to perform, the misfortune would be gone forever. The community hastily held an offering ceremony, included to perform a sacred dance by a group of a dancer with black-white checkerboard motives (Poleng) costume. Soon after the dance started to perform, miraculously, the plague and disaster instantly vanished. Since that time, the dance becomes a routine schedule that should not be missed.<sup>15</sup> Others local tradition such as Omed-omedan in Banjar Kaja Sesetan,<sup>16</sup> or Makotekan in Munggu were born after a similar situation in the past. Up to these days, locals believe, should they absent to conduct the rituals, misfortune and sorrow are surely approaching to their Village.<sup>17</sup>

The further ceremony is every Sasih Kanem; The Balinese community hold offerings as a mean to repel and reduce the month's negative atmosphere. The ritual is strongly connected to the Myth of Ratu Gede Mecaling, that regularly docks and visits the island of Bali to collect souls. According to scientific explanation, The sixth month or sasih kanem in Balinese calendar commonly falls between Novembers – December, where monsoon begins to blow from Australia continent to Indonesia archipelago.<sup>19</sup> The monsoon takes significant change on the island's weather; where heavy rain starts to fall, while some area left dry and humid. Pest such as locus, flies, and mosquitoes begin to breed that eventually leads to diseases.<sup>20</sup> Today, this scientific reason is widely known by the people in Bali. However, although most Balinese understand the scientific reasons behind the phenomenon, yet they do not dare to completely abandon the Sasih Kanem ritual, which has been long practised before their parents were even born. They believed, to respect the ceremony is equal to respect their ancestor's legacy, as well as to respect their identity.

If we take a closer look, there are countless rituals and ceremony held by Balinese throughout the island. Some of the routines are celebrated every millennium, century, decade, five years, annually, twice a year, every fifteen days and many more depends on the area.<sup>21</sup> Not to mention that those events are being carried on by individual, family, neighbourhood, Village, regency to district levels, but only for the Hindus. Indeed, the ceremonies are uncountable. The activities well merged to the society and give colours to what we see as daily life on the island of gods or the piece of paradise. The ceremony does not present because of tourism; it is sustainable as a heritage from the old wisdom.

## CONCLUSION

The Myth from ancient Balinese texts helps to provide consultation as well as the perspective of the ancient civilisation in dealing with many unfortunate situations, including plagues and diseases. The mythical story leads to numerous ceremonies being celebrated on the island. The ritual act as an expression of gratitude, apologise, and a moment to self-reflect that humankind is not the only creature that inhabits the universe. The teaching emphasises that the local community is mandatory to take care of their environment, avoid exploiting nature, subsequently as an alarm to the individual to live in humble and responsible. Despite the locals are well adapted to modern technology and received higher education, apparently did not halt the rites. They believed the activities are identity as well as precious treasure from their honourable ancestor.

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