BALI:
SEKALA
AND
NISKALA

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ESSAYS ON RELIGION,
RITUAL, AND ART

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with two chapters by
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this time. The soul has finally been sent on its way to God. Wealthy, high-caste families will hold more elaborate nyekals, sometimes called mamukur. And really colossal nyekals, called maligin, are organized on rare occasions for very important souls. These require months of preparation and involve hundreds or thousands of people and the expenditure of many thousands of dollars.

May the family now breathe a sigh of relief and be satisfied that it has done its duty for the deceased? Not at all! Those who helped with the ceremonies must be thanked by special gifts, offerings, and trips to their homes. Expeditions must be sent to various holy temples to thank God for the success of the ceremonies. And, most important of all, a whole new series of ceremonies must be conducted wherein the now purified spirit is installed in a special shrine in the family temple, as a bona fide betara yang, a deified ancestor awaiting rebirth. Then, and only then, can everyone who participated in all those months of work rest.

From time to time along the roads in Bali one will see a kind of small, crude tent erected from bamboo poles and covered with a net. This may actually be in the middle of a main thoroughfare or at a tereget — mysterious or magic — place near a principal intersection, blocked off with rocks. The police do not disturb these structures. At night a kerosene pressure lantern is kept burning inside or nearby, and one or several people spend the night there for three days in a row. This is called a magagabag, or mutetimbu. An accident, probably a traffic accident, has occurred here, and blood has been spilled. If a levak or other evil spirit has access to a person’s blood, great harm could result, so the place is kept under guard. The net acts as a barrier — its mesh has so many entrances that a levak is confused and can never find the proper one through which to reach the blood. Thus the victim of the accident is protected.

In a culture where no distinction is made between the secular and the religious or supernatural, the sekala and the niskala as the Balinese call them, the latter can enter into daily routines and beliefs in a fashion incomprehensible to one who thinks only of witches as quaint symbols of Halloween, or of magic as part of a Las Vegas stage show. Sekala means what you can sense — see, hear, smell, and touch. Niskala involves that which cannot be sensed directly, but which can only be felt within. Niskala plays a much more important role in Balinese culture than it does in the West. Niskala is a very personal matter, often difficult to articulate or, in some cases, hazardous to do so.

Most foreign visitors to Bali will hear nothing of “black magic,” and not only because their skepticism is well known to the Balinese. A Balinese will
usually not even mention such things to his or her fellows. One's niskala feelings are, if spoken, a weakness, because if a practitioner of "black magic" should be within earshot, he could use the knowledge to cause harm. People in Bali, like those in many other places, are reluctant to name something unpleasant, as though naming it — Knock wood! — would make it so. Even thinking about such things is risky.

Hindu-Balinese religious philosophy embraces the principle that for every good, positive, constructive force, there is a counterbalancing evil, negative, destructive force. The two sides are inseparable. They must necessarily coexist, but preferably in dynamic equilibrium, so that neither gets the upper hand. The principal efforts of Hindu-Balinese religion are devoted to maintaining a balance between positive and negative forces. Equilibrium and balance are the key goals.

Since both constructive and destructive forces are present in the world, an individual, should he desire, could presumably use one or the other to his own advantage. But as with all knowledge, mastery of these forces does not come easily. A great deal of study, hard work, self-sacrifice, even exposure to possible personal harm and danger is involved. The knowledge requires many years or decades of intense and dangerous study. The nature of these powers is written in the sacred palm leaf books, the lontars, in which all sacred Balinese writings are preserved. To command these niskala forces, whether to do good or foul, requires years of arduous study under the guidance of someone who is already a practitioner.

The words for black magic and for the person who practices it, the "witch" or "spook" if you want to call him or her that, are the same in Balinese: leyak. When speaking to a foreigner, the Balinese will use the phrase "white magic" — as close as they can come to describing the powers used to overcome, resist, and prevent black magic. The Balinese word is pengijeng awah, "to protect the body." Although we see these two forms of knowledge as opposites — black/white, bad/good — the Balinese consider knowledge of the ways of niskala something always to be respected, perhaps even feared. High priests, pedandans, if they are of the Brahmana caste, and lay priests, pemangkus, if they are of the Sudra caste, have devoted their lives to the study of the positive use of this power. Leyak have studied the lontars perhaps just as long, with opposite ends in mind — this study, of course, a secret one. Somewhere between these two is the balian, a shaman and doctor, who has mastered a bit of both extremes and who is both revered and feared, lest he drift toward the negative, although his work is normally to help people rather than harm them.

A leyak can transform himself, or rather, his spirit, into another form — a monkey, a bird, a ghostly light, a body without a head — the variety is endless. This can only be done at night. The physical body of the leyak remains behind in bed. The transformed shape can be seen, and is regularly reported as having been seen, by those Balinese who venture out near midnight. Needless to say few do. The apparition can fly through the air — it may only scare people and disappear. But it can also kill, introduce foreign objects into the body of an intended victim, poison food, cause sickness, cause crop failure, and so on — the list varies with time and place and includes just about all the misfortunes that regularly befall people, and a few that are highly irregular.

The transformed leyak cannot be killed with a knife, but various other methods can be used to destroy it or ward off its evil influence and force. If it is successfully killed, the human body of the specter, back in bed, will die without any apparent injury, sickness, or cause. And this itself may be taken as an indication that such a person was, in life, a leyak.
Being a leyak is exceedingly dangerous. The Balinese consider any tampering with the forces of niskala to be riddled with danger and pitfalls. This is true even for a pedanda, pemangku, or baliak. And to carry this practice to such extremes as to cause one’s spirit to leave the body in order to harm others is unimaginably dangerous, since the body lies helpless and unprotected at home.

Leyaks most often attack members of their own family group. Stories are even told of male leyaks attacking and killing their wives, or vice versa, concealing themselves as, for example, a coconut that falls unexpectedly from a nearby tree, thus awakening the mate, who goes outside to investigate and meets his or her fate. It is certainly possible for a leyak to attack those outside the family, but this requires advanced knowledge on the part of the leyak and is said to be extremely difficult. Motives for intra-family leyaks are the usual disputes that arise in any close-knit and closely packed family group—jealousy, revenge over a real or imagined insult, desire to gain the money or possessions of the victim, and so on.

One is most vulnerable to leyak attack when sick, injured, or otherwise has diminished power to resist. Babies are especially vulnerable before their niuluhlanin, their “three-month” birthday, 105 days after birth. A slice of onion is often placed on an infant’s fontanel to prevent entry by a leyak, since they find the smell highly objectionable. All manner of talismans, amulets, offerings, and magical objects surround the baby and protect him or her from attack. After the three-month anniversary the infant wears his dried umbilical cord in an amulet around his neck. Adults who are sick or injured prefer to remain at home, lest in going beyond the safety of the house compound they encounter a leyak who might take advantage of their weakened condition.

There are various degrees of control of these magical forces. To ward off a threat of black magic, one may simply go to a baliak and obtain an amulet, a magic prayer or mantra, a ring, or some other magical object that will do the job of guarding the body or preventing intrusion of evil influences. The varieties of these objects to protect the body are endless. Another is to go to a temple, preferably the Pura Dalem, the village temple near the cemetery dedicated to Siwa, or his wife Durga. There one must meditate all night long. If one is lucky—most are not—and has the proper powers of concentration, one’s mind and body will be given the power to resist evil. The precise nature of this acquisition is not always clear. Most people are too scared even to try this method. The reason is simply that this midnight meditation is also a step toward acquiring the power of leyak. Strong internal power or force—even if acquired to ward off evil—can be turned equally toward good or bad, depending upon the desires of the person possessing it.

Some locations in Bali are more infused with black magic than others. Certain villages, Sanur among them, are known to be angker—unusually strange or fearful—or tenget, containing great supernatural power. Crossroads and graveyards are the favorite dwelling places of leyaks at night. Even trees of unusual shape or size, large or odd-shaped rocks or other strange objects are regarded with special care because of their possible power. You will often see offerings placed in small shrines at these places. Being out at night anywhere is a fearful experience, leaving the traveler open to evil influences, especially during the hours around midnight.

Black magic should not be confused with the ordinary evil influences that abound in the world. The personification of these negative influences are the bhutas and kulas that live in and on the earth, especially at crossroads. They are often more bothersome rather than truly harmful—causing one to lose a valuable object, perhaps precipitating a family fight, or making the baby cry. But bhutas and kulas are not leyaks.

Black magic is the result of a conscious effort by an otherwise normal human being to gain control over supernatural, evil forces and use them to his or her personal advantage by causing harm to others. Bhutas and kulas are easily dealt with by placing offerings on the ground at the same time that other offerings are made to the higher, positive aspects of God’s spirit. Almost every Balinese ceremony involves placating the demons with a little rice wine or palm brandy spilled upon the ground and some small offerings in triangular containers, called sengahani. Sometimes, when these negative forces appear to be getting the upper hand in the equilibrium of forces, a major exorcism, called a caru, must be held, involving a great many offerings placed in a square enclosure on the ground. (See Chapter 20.)

Almost every Balinese has had some sort of personal night-time encounter with unexplainable noises, movements, lights, or ghostly shapes. These are generally attributable to leyaks, as are bad luck, sickness, crop failure, and other misfortunes. But few are able to give specific details about the identity of the person who, as a leyak, caused the problem or why he or she wanted to do so. Sometimes it is said that the leyak’s apperition, if confronted by an intended victim with resistant powers, will hide behind a leaf and change from the apperition to his normal form, and then engage the observer in usual conversation as if nothing had happened. In this case, the identity of the leyak is known. But, normally, this is not the case. The result is seen, but the cause and identity are unknown.

Unless one lives in Bali for quite a while, it is just about impossible for a Westerner to understand just how much the adjustment of the Balinese people to their universe is based upon mystical powers, magical forces, and strange and unexplainable energies. I do not mean simply that
the Balinese recognize the existence of these forces and attempt to cope with them. I mean that these phenomena occupy a central position in the Balinese concept of the world and that the Balinese are constantly aware of them, and that a major portion of their thinking and activities revolve around the existence of these forces and how they can best control and adjust to them.

The Balinese world is filled with *kesaktian*, a word, rarely used, that means “magical power.” A Balinese might use the adjectival form — *sakti*, “magical” — but the existence of the force is not even a subject of discussion. In Bali, objects that Westerners would consider to be inanimate and wholly devoid of any ability to exert active influences on other objects may be considered the foci of concentration of a mystical force. *Loyals* are only perhaps the most dramatic phenomena on an island charged with *kesaktian*. Even seemingly basic items, such as food and clothing, are surrounded by a vast amount of lore, ceremony, and religious procedure.

Elaborate etiquette is involved when presenting guests or elevated persons with food, and equally elaborate routines are involved in its acceptance or refusal. Offerings of food are made before each meal. Food is part of almost all offerings. Kitchens and stoves are special objects that, being involved with food, have power that must be treated properly. Culturally important food crops such as rice, coconuts, bananas, and bamboo are all especially charged with mystical power — and are ceremonially respected. Animals, too, possess mystical power. Before an animal is slaughtered as a religious sacrifice or for food, an offering is made for it and mantras are recited. On the day called Tumpek Andang, which comes every 210 days, offerings are prepared for cows and pigs. Wells and pumps are presented with daily offerings, as are streams, lakes, dams, and irrigation ditches.

Clothing, particularly that which has touched the sexual organs, is charged with dangerous power, and once must never place oneself in a position so that one is below such clothes. Certain kinds of clothing are appropriate for use when praying in a temple, and violation of the dress code is likely to result in undesirable and unforeseeable consequences. Menstrual blood is especially magically charged, to the extent that a menstruating woman is not allowed to enter a temple. Blood-stained clothing must be separated from other laundry and dried well away from any site of human activity. Jewelry, especially rings with stones set in them, have mystical power. Rare is the Balinese who does not have a ring, the stone of which has some sort of power. The same is true of amulets.

Religious paraphernalia is obviously charged with power. Holy water is an extremely important and magical substance. Masks that are used in the various religious ceremonies are great foci of power. Bangda and Barong masks are especially *angker* and must be treated with extreme care. Even the common *topeng* masks must be treated with respect. And many are the tales of the problems they have caused when not given offerings at appropriate times. Masks that are used in traditional performances must not be handled casually, even if they are not considered to be sacred. Musical instruments and dance costumes are regularly presented with offerings. Offerings are made to a *gong* before each performance.

Directions have magical powers. The *kaja-keled* axis governs everything in Bali. Colors and numbers are charged. Words and syllables are not just bearers of messages but embodiments of mystical power as well, not just in the form of mantras, but even by themselves. Books, especially *lontars*, have mystical power. Even sounds have power; not just musical sounds but certain single syllables, such as the mysterious and powerful syllables *ANG*, *UNG*, and *MANG*, which, combined produce OM. So do days of the week, months, and years.

Places, such as temples, cemeteries, markets, cremation grounds, mountains, lakes, and streams possess special kinds of mystic power, and only certain types of activities can be safely carried out in these areas. Automobiles and motorbikes have mystical power. A cautious driver will put a small offering in his car every day.

The Balinese are not paranoid about the dangers of the world. But they are acutely conscious of them at all times — on their guard. These forces are around all the time, and one cannot say when and where they might penetrate a weak spot and cause problems. The result is that offerings are made to just about everything imaginable.

**Most Westerners Take Quite for Granted** Aristotle’s three basic principles of logic: Identity, a term will mean the same thing in all occurrences; Contradiction, a sentence and its negative cannot both be true; and “The excluded middle,” either something is true, or its opposite is true. In many circumstances, these three laws simply do not apply to Balinese lines of reasoning. This is not always the case. In immediate circumstances and for rule of thumb judgments there is little difference between Balinese logic and Western logic. But for the Balinese, Aristotelian logic does not provide a test of truth for all observed phenomena. The Balinese conceive that all things in the universe, living or not, have some connection with each other. There is no clear distinction made between oneself and some other self or between oneself and some other object. There is no clear distinction made between what we would call living things and nonliving things. There is no clear distinction made between what will happen, what has happened, and what is happening right now.

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, a French anthropologist working in the first decade of the 20th century, called this way of thinking, the “Law of Participation.”
In *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, translated as *How Natives Think*, a rather strained attempt to make the original title sound less racist, Lévy-Bruhl writes:

...in the collective representations of primitive mentality, objects, beings, phenomena can be, though in a way incomprehensible to us, both themselves and something other than themselves. In a fashion which is no less incomprehensible, they give forth and they receive mystic powers, virtues, qualities, influences, which make themselves felt outside, without ceasing to remain where they are. In other words, the opposition between the one and the many, the same and another, and so forth, does not impose upon this mentality the necessity of affirming one of the terms if the other be denied or vice versa.

If one is willing to forgive his self-serving use of the word “primitive” here, this seems to be a description of the Balinese concept of the cosmos.

It is not inconsistent with Balinese logic to conclude that event B could cause event A even though event B occurred at a later time than A. It is not inconsistent to attribute a cause and effect relationship between an object and event even though a Western observer would observe that there is no conceivable connection between the two. A certain kind of ring can cure a sickness. The offering made for a gong can help a baby to learn to speak. Climbing a tree on a certain day will result in an accident. This logical process is not unknown in the West — although it is often denigrated by a culture rooted in legalistic and scientific reason.

Under certain conditions in Bali, a person can be both dead and not dead. A man in Jimbaran was recently killed in an accident. Several days later, on an auspicious day, the men of the village collected to wash the body and carry it to the cemetery for burial. After the corpse washing, it is customary to place on the body various objects that, by association, will make the person’s body fit for his next incarnation: steel on his teeth to make them strong; mirrors on the eyes to make them bright; an intaran leaf on each eyebrow to make them attractive, and so on. This is called the *banten pakerisan*. When this had been completed, one of the men turned to me and said that now the person was dead. He had been alive till then.

**SICKNESS IN BALI** is almost universally viewed as the result of a state of disharmony between the individual and his surroundings. In this sense, illness is no different from various other kinds of misfortunes: an accident, crop failure; the death of a family member; losing a job. Whenever one of these misfortunes occurs, a Balinese will assume that he, the sufferer, has done something inappropriate: violated a religious law or custom, perhaps by mistakenly stepping over a sacred object; allowed his hubris to exceed that allowed by his position, perhaps by calling someone by too low a name; been disrespectful of a deity, perhaps by not making the appropriate offerings on an important anniversary.

In short, when fallen ill, a Balinese will assume that he or she has been *pramada*, “insubordinate,” and seeks less a cure than a kind of atonement. There is another possibility as well, that the misfortune has been deliberately caused by an enemy who found a soft spot when the sufferer’s defenses were down and too weak to repel the *leyak*, “black magic,” of the enemy. The enemy has open to him a very wide range of possible ways to cause harm, from the very obvious to the fiendishly clever.

When stricken by these misfortunes and ills, the Balinese see a special kind of doctor. A *balian* is often defined as “traditional healer” or “witch doctor.” Balians very often do practice healing. But they do a great many other things as well. A better term would be “shaman,” or the Indonesian equivalent, *dahun*. The point is that *balians* are not all healers, but spiritualism plays an important role in the functions of all of them.

It need not be a misfortune that leads a person to a *balian*. One common reason for a consultation is to determine the identity of the spirit that