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Dasaran: A Medium for Grief in Bali

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DASARAN: A MEDIUM FOR GRIEF IN BALI

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SIT Study Abroad
Indonesia: Arts, Religion and Social Change
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Prayer room of *Jero Dasaran*

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Introduction

My Interest

Coming to Bali, I knew that I wanted to understand a sliver of the experiences that people have after a loved-one dies. Of course, there is no one way that people in Bali or anywhere process the loss of a loved-one, yet I am continually fascinated by how people understand and cope with the many feelings that occur after someone dies.

My interest in this topic started out of necessity my junior year of high school when I attended three funerals in ten days. The first was for an elderly friend, then one for my teammate's father, and the last and hardest was for the sudden death of a close family friend's six-month-old baby, Rhys. In the months following Rhys' death, I watched the boundless empathy and care that my own parents gave to our grieving friends as the couple practically moved into our house. I learned when to cry, when not to cry, and when just to hold my friends until their exhaustion finally gave them brief rest from the nightmare they were living. My parents' compassion and generosity throughout the experience moved me to immerse myself in emotional and academic understandings of death and dying. Although I did not know what aspect of grief to explore, I came to Bali with the intention of extending my understanding

beyond my Quaker, Jewish, Spiritual, Christian, Agnostic, Atheist and Western conceptions into different religious and social spheres. I wanted to understand how to talk about grief with people coming from an entirely different mindset and background. Furthermore, I wanted to understand how spiritual healers and community members support people after a loved-one dies.

Research

Experiences of death, dying, loss, and grief are universal yet culturally specific. Talking about loss after someone dies is tough even when that person and I share the same culture understanding and language. Working on this project, I did not have that luxury; I lacked knowledge of language, social norms, and religious beliefs. Therefore, in keeping with my admiration of caregivers, I chose to focus my attention on the specific work that *dasaran* do to help Balinese-Hindu families that have lost a loved-one. A *dasaran*, *dasaran-dasaran* in plural form, is a kind of traditional healer found all over Bali who works as a medium to channel spirits and gods. *Dasaran-dasaran* are also referred to in Bali as *balian kerasukan* or with the more general professional title *jero* used to recognize traditional healers. In Tabanan, where I focused my study, *balian kerasukan* are esteemed community members and spiritual leaders. Their role includes acting as a medium for recently deceased souls so that family members can have a last opportunity to communicate with their loved ones. Almost all Balinese Hindus visit a *dasaran* in the period between the death of a family member and his or her cremation. However, each family's experience with a *dasaran* is built around the particularities of the *dasaran*, the family, and the circumstances surrounding the death. Visits to *dasaran-dasaran* are a tiny fraction of the experience families have early on when they lose a loved-one, but the experience sheds light on the some of the many Balinese-Hindu religious views that shape experiences of loss.

To better understand some of the ways that people in Bali experience grief and loss, I will explore in this paper how *dasaran* work and how they help to alleviate some of the burdensome emotions that occur after someone dies. I will start this paper with 1) my general impressions of grief in Bali; followed by 2) details about the *dasaran* I met with and how they communicate with spirits; 3) then I will explore how the *dasaran* alleviate grief, including examples of individuals that visited *dasaran* after a loved one died, and 4) I will conclude with my interpretations. I hope to highlight the uniqueness and intricacies of *dasaran*'s service to Balinese-Hindus experiencing loss while also providing insights into how the needs met by *dasaran* are similar to the needs many people have when experiencing loss.

Methodology

Gathering information on this topic was not easy. Most of my data was gathered through conversations with *dasaran*, people who had visited *dasaran*, and other Balinese-Hindus, all living in Tabanan. I conducted these conversations in a combination of English and *Bahasa Indonesian* primarily with three *dasaran* and three people who went to *dasaran* after a close family member passed away. Each interview was independent; none of the family members I talked with were affiliated with the any of the *dasaran-dasaran*. For interviews done in *Bahasa Indonesian*, I had the help of other Balinese-Hindus, usually my advisor, Ajik Sudarta , or other teachers to translate either during or after the conversation. In these conversations and whenever possible, I tried to observe the emotions of people experiencing loss, but I want to heed Unni Wikan's warning from her book *Managing Turbulent Hearts: A Balinese Formula for Living* :

“...expression of sadness may often not be visible to the passing foreigner who is impressed with the ‘discordant’ cheerfulness of the mournful occasion. Balinese facial expressions and bodily posture mislead because the tell-tale signs of sadness (and of

anger for that matter) are carried through signifiers that are only visible if one has been trained to see them”¹

Since I have not been trained to recognize the signs, I will try not to impose emotions onto the observations that I do share.

Rather, I will focus my attention on the thoughts people expressed to me words. Of course this leads to issues of language and potential lack of openness. Since translation and language often posed a barrier to me, I try to reconcile this problem by actively including and evaluating the emphases of the people that helped me to translate. Ajik Sudarta ’s wisdom and insights into Balinese-Hinduism greatly enriched each conversation and my understanding of *dasaran* and loss in Bali. Although he cannot speak on behalf of all Balinese-Hindus experience, his perspective and translation must be acknowledged as a major part of how I understand *dasaran*’s service to Balinese-Hindu families in Tabanan after a loved one dies.

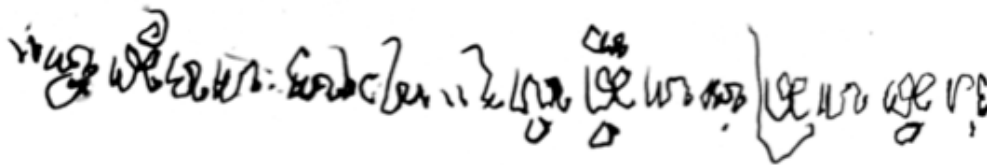
Additionally, I had three methods for addressing issues of openness. First, I tried to frame my questions to be simultaneously open-ended and focused in the hope of soliciting concrete but individualized answers. Secondly, mutual friends or my advisor always introduced me to the people I met with well in advance of our more formal interview and accompanied me when I did eventually interview. By meeting with friends and their friends, I tried my best to create what Unni Wikan calls the “prerequisite for warmth and intimacy” that can only be found among the “closest family members—along with intimate friends.”²

¹Unni Wikan, *Managing Turbulent Hearts: A Balinese Formula for Living*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 167-168.

² Unni Wikan, *Managing Turbulent Hearts: A Balinese Formula for Living*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 60.

Thirdly, by framing the topic of grief around the work of *dasaran*, I hoped to set up an environment of collaboration between bereaved family members and myself. In choosing to focus on *dasaran*, part of my goal was to understand grief without poking and prodding blindly at people's experiences of loss. Coming into this project, I did not feel I had all the cross-cultural tools to ethically dive into intimate conversations about recent deaths with family members. Nor did I want anyone to feel additional pressure from me to perform his or her grief in a particular way. Focusing on *dasaran* allowed me second-hand experiences that guided me into more intimate discussions about loss. Even with all my attempts to balance these issues and understand *dasaran*, I recognize that I have only scratched the surface of a much greater topic.

Definitions and First Experiences of Grief



"We borrow our breath; we all will die"³
Balinese Saying written out by Jero Made Narja

Definitions

Death is a universal. However, the ways people understand it is distinctive for various traditions and individuals. In English, the word "grief" is derived from the Middle-English word

³ (Balian Kulit) Bapak Made Narja, personal communication, translated Bu Ary 24 March 2015.

grever meaning “to burden.”⁴ When someone experiences grief or extreme loss they become burdened by uncontrollable emotions and thoughts that are both internal and outwardly expressed. These emotions can vary depending on the circumstances and the person but are often typified by sadness, anger, confusion, despair, guilt, fear, and desire for hope. In America, it is widely thought that people must cry when expressing grief but silence, laughter, and even violence are common too.

In *Bahasa Indonesia*, the most applicable term is *persasaan duka*, translating roughly to feelings of sorrow, grief, misery⁵ or feelings of extreme loss usually after someone dies.⁶ People also use other terms such as *kesedihan* to express sadness and *perasaan kehilangan* to convey general feelings of loss.⁷ Translations for these emotions however are not exact, especially when taken out of cultural or ideological contexts. When I was first trying to make sense of these definitions, I also wanted to understand what performances of grief and loss are expected. Thoughts, rituals, practices, and beliefs complicate cross-cultural studies of grief. Therefore, while I will use the words grief, loss, sadness and *persasaan duka* interchangeably throughout this paper, these words are placeholders for the ambiguous feelings that must be clarified within each particular narrative.

First Impressions

In my earliest conversations, I got more insight into the performances of grief rather than the complexities of internal feelings. I met with Jero Made Narja, a ninety-three-year-old traditional dermatologist, who also acts as an elder in his small village. When people ask for his

⁴ “Grief” in New Oxford American Dictionary.

⁵ “Duka” in *Kamus Indonesian Inggris: An Indonesian-English Dictionary*, 3rd ed, by John Echols and Hassan Shadily, Jakarta: Cornell University press (1989): 150.

⁶ Riana, pc, 25 March 2015.

⁷ Yoga, Sandy, and Riana, pc, 23-26 March 2015.

wisdom after someone in the community dies, he advises, “we all will die when the time comes. Just let go. Do your daily activities and don’t let it bother you. Don’t spoil your sadness.”⁸ He outlined this philosophy with a Balinese saying, “breath from borrowing, we all will die.”⁹ His advice provided insight into how Balinese-Hindus are often expected to perform: a period of sadness, regular activities, and let go. In various conversations in the abstract, death was recognized as part of life, and the view was expressed that people ought not to dwell on their *persasaan duka*.

I also met with members of my own generation, two Udayana University students, Yoga and Sandy, who further stressed performance aspects of grief as we worked to translate key concepts. We began by swapping our respective experiences with mutual curiosity. At one point, we compared how long grief usually affects people. To their surprise, I explained that it can be from months to years depending on the person. While, according to Yoga, “people don’t grieve for more than a month”¹⁰

They explained the grieving period in terms of the *berkabung*, the time that people cannot enter any temples because someone they were related to in some way died. The length of *berkabung* is outline in each village’s particular traditional laws known as the *awig-awig*. Within each community, the length varies depending on a person’s relation with the deceased. The shortest period of time is after the death of member of the same *banjar*, hamlet, and the longest is after the death of a child or spouse.¹¹ According to Sandy, the prohibition exists because “God

⁸ Jero Made Narja, pc, translated by Bu Ary, 24 March.

⁹ Jero Made Narja, pc, translated by Bu Ary, 24 March.

¹⁰ Yoga, pc, 23 March 2015.

¹¹ Information on *berkabung* paraphrased from Sophie Sanders, SIT ISP *Kesedihan: Framing the Concept of Grief Within The Balinese Mindset*, Fall 2009.

thinks you are dirty,” but *berkabung* also sets a timeline for how long the “burden” of grief ought to last—at most only forty-two days.¹²

My early conversations left me a little confused. They provided information about performances of grief but nearly nothing about the emotions people feel when someone dies that I could relate to my previous experience. While I knew that people would not grieve in the same ways, I expected grief to carry a “burden” similar to that which I had observed in America. How could someone suddenly stop feeling the loss of his or her child after only two months? Four years later, I still see anger and heartbreak in Rhy’s mom. I thought experiences of loss must not be as simple as they were depicted to me in these two conversations or in the rules outlined by the *awig-awig*, but these were indicators of how scarcely Balinese- Hindu people discuss and outwardly display the individuality of grief.

At first I saw this as a major issue. I struggled throughout my study, especially when talking in the abstract, to get beyond the general. Nearly everyone I talked with would at some point say “we Balinese believe...” to contrast their experiences with their perception of “the West.” These simplifications were done out of kindness to help me make sense of the general ways people grieve in Bali. These generalizations helped me to focus my ideas because they enlightened the various important rituals and beliefs around the death of loved-ones—of course included visiting *dasaran*. I will further clarify the specific rituals and beliefs in the “Dasaran and Grief” section.

Introduction to *Dasaran*

¹² Sandy, pc, 23 March 2015.

Dasaran act as mediums for spirits and gods from the *niskala*, unseen world. According to *Balians: Traditional Healers of Bali* edited by Bradford Keeney with I Wayan Budi Asa Mekel,

“the highest level of Balian is the person who receives permission from a god to do his or her work. When the god shows you a vision or gives you a gift, you will be the most powerful type of balian.”¹³ People visit with these powerful healers to communicate for various reasons with the spirits and ancestors in the other world. This includes when someone is sick with a non-medical illness caused by the spirit world that cannot be diagnosed by doctors, when someone dies or when there is general turbulence within the family.¹⁴ Illness can be caused by physical germs and viruses, but also by the imbalances in the *niskala* world.¹⁵ A positive relationship between the family and their ancestors can help to assure harmony for the family in the *sekala* physical world.¹⁶ Therefore, when a family member dies, the bereaved do all that they can to support the spirit’s journey into the next life. The family goes to *dasaran* to understand all that they can around the circumstances of the death. Families can learn why the spirit died, if the spirit is in a good place or not, and if there is anything they can do to help.¹⁷ They are also given a last chance to talk with the deceased. This can all help the family to find meaning and hope in the midst of losing their loved one.

To understand the specific work of *dasaran*, I met with three generations of *dasaran* working in various parts of Tabanan: 1) Sinthia (17 years old), 2) Jero Batu Agung (43 years old), and Jero Pan Karma (86 years old). Each *dasaran* was chosen by their god to begin

¹³ Bradford Keeney and I Wayan Budi Asa Mekel, *Balians: Traditional Healers of Bali*, (Philadelphia: Ringing Rocks Press, 2004), 40.

¹⁴ Paraphrased from Jero Batu Agung, pc, 10 April 2015.

¹⁵ Paraphrased from Ajik Sudarta, pc, 10 April 2015.

¹⁶ Paraphrased from Ajik Sudarta, pc, 10 April 2015.

¹⁷ Paraphrased from Jero Batu Agung, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta 10 April 2015.

working as a medium for the *niskala* world. Their service is just one part of their life; however they are obligated to do their work by their gods. According to the husband of one *jero*'s, Bapak Dwajikawi Suara, "it is not smart to refuse—you might die."¹⁸ In complying with their gods' wishes, the *dasaran* have a small special shrine dedicated to their work where they are able to pray and communicate with the *niskala* world. The shrines, either in a small separate room or in a special part of the compound, consist of a place for the *dasaran* to pray and a table covered in yellow and black-and-white-checkered cloth, umbels, and various types of gold and flower offerings. When attending any *dasaran*, it is essential to bring offerings of *canang sari*, the Balinese daily flower offering, along with cookies or bread, and a monetary gift based on what the visitor can afford.

Jero Sinthia

The youngest and newest *dasaran* I talked to was Jero Sinthia. She is seventeen and in her third year of high school. Instead of meeting with Jero Sinthia in her home, which I later saw when I dropped off my offerings, we met at her school in the teachers' lounge to discuss her experiences.

Two years ago, while in school, she first realized that she had special "sensitivity" to the *niskala* world. She began by seeing other beings at school starting with a beautiful woman with a yellow sash around her shoulders and neck. However, the first time "her physical body was borrowed by the spirit" was last year when there was a ceremony at her house. Sinthia explained, "during the ceremony something was lacking." The spirit thus borrowed her physical body to explain what was missing in the ceremony and demand the corrections. She was not able to

¹⁸ Paraphrased from Bapak Dwajikawi Suara SE , pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta 10 April 2015.

remember what the spirits said to her, but when she came out of the trance, her family explained what had transpired.¹⁹

When Sinthia goes into trance, she feels a strong energy and a heavy weight around her before she goes “blank.” When a family comes looking to communicate with the deceased, Sinthia prepares herself by asking permission of and praying to her gods and *niskala* guardians so that the spirits will be able to use her body as a vessel to communicate with the family. Meanwhile, Sinthia’s older sister (twenty-two years old) helps to “open the gate” between the *niskala* and *sekala* world by preparing offerings, while the family invites the *roh*, soul of the spirit, to come talk with them.²⁰ The spirit enters Sinthia as a light that comes down through the crown of her head. Once the spirit enters Sinthia’s body, she explains:

“I don’t remember, but it is like there is another Sinthia sitting next to me that talks to the people that come. I sit in one place at the beginning, and then when the spirit comes down, I move over and can see the other Sinthia with the spirit, but she can’t remember what she says.”²¹

The bereaved family trusts that the spirit of the deceased has entered Sinthia because she behaves and talks with similar mannerisms. Families will go out of their way to visit a *jero* that did not know the deceased to prevent the *dasaran* from pretending to be the spirit.²² When Sinthia comes out of a trance she looks to the family to see if the experience talking with the *niskala* world changed their demeanor or helped in some way because she cannot remember the process herself.²³

Jero Batu Agung

¹⁹ Paraphrased from Jero Sinthia, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta, 20 April 2015.

²⁰ Paraphrased from Jero Sinthia, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta 20 April 2015.

²¹ Paraphrased from Jero Sinthia, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta 20 April 2015.

²² Fred B Eiseman, “The Balian: Shaman and Healer,” *Bali: Sekala & Niskala; Volume 1:Essays on Religion B. Eiseman*, (Indonesia: Periplus Editions, 1990), 141.

²³ Paraphrased from Jero Sinthia, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta, 20 April 2015.

The next *dasaran*, Jero Batu Agung, a forty-three-year-old female, shared similar experiences with Sinthia but nuanced them with the wisdom of experience. I met with this *jero* and her husband, Bapak Dwajikawi Suara in their small house. Ajik Sudarta and I first purified ourselves with holy water before giving our offerings to Bapak Dwajikawi Suara to give to Jero Batu Agung to give to her gods. While we began talking with Bapak, his wife chanted and prayed in high Balinese in the next room. She needed to inform the spirits of our arrival and ask permission to share her knowledge with us. When she finished praying, she came into the room wearing white traditional clothing with a black-and-white-checked sash. Entering into her home and the prayer place for the interview brought life and resonance to her experiences as a *dasaran* that could not be conveyed in the busy teachers' lounge of Jero Sinthia's school.

Jero Batu Agung has only been working as a *dasaran* for the past three years, but she started communicating with the *niskala* world in her second year of primary school when her gods chose her. When she was a child, she was able to “go to the moon and to far off lands” with the help of the *niskala* beings, but the experiences were frightening to her. In high school and university, she would often faint when *niskala* beings would try to enter her. She wanted to work and have a family before she became a *dasaran*. Although many *dasaran* come from a lineage of ancestors acting as mediums, she became the first in her family.²⁴

Now that she has three children and works in a government office in Tabanan, she has begun her work as a *dasaran* and abides by all the rules outlined by her guiding gods. She makes time by taking patients in the evening after she comes home from work. She works every day like a doctor on-call. This includes working on *pasah*, a day often understood as inauspicious to

²⁴ Information about lineage paraphrased from Ajik Sudarta, pc, 10 April 2015.

visit *baliangs* because communication with the *niskala* world is difficult.²⁵ The only time Jero cannot work is when she is menstruating because this is seen as spiritually unclean.²⁶ She must always follow the rules that the gods outline for her or she will get sick and not be able to work at all. She cannot go to the market or venture much farther than work and home nor can she eat four legged-animals. However, Jero made it clear that she does not have trouble obeying the rules; “No, no, no the rules are not hard.” She enjoys her work; it brings her happiness, and her gods protects her from illness and harm.²⁷

When families come to her looking for help, they are greeted in the same way we were, first by her husband and then by her after she finishes praying to and asking permission of her gods. When Jero Batu Agung goes into trance it is different for each god or spirit, but she has three general types of experience when communicating with deceased family members: 1) direct communication, 2) indirect communication, and 3) no communication.

First, there are spirits that come wanting to talk directly to their families. Before the families even arrive and she is preparing herself, she knows what spirit is waiting for visitors. If the family comes from a village nearby, it is much easier for the spirit to travel to her body because, according to a widespread Balinese-Hindu belief, souls linger where they died until their cremation.²⁸ She can then feel the spirit enter inside her and borrow her body directly to talk with their family. When this happens, her head and eyes get big and she feels lighter. She feels like she can see everything even including the details of her neighbor’s house, but she cannot remember what she says or does because the spirit has control over her.²⁹

²⁵ Jero Sinthia and Ajik Sudarta, pc, 20 April 2015

²⁶ Paraphrased from Jero Batu Agung, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta 10 April 2015.

²⁷ Paraphrased from Jero Batu Agung, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta 10 April 2015.

²⁸ Ajik Sudarta, pc, 8 April 2015 and Ajik Gusti Putu Iriandana pc, 13 April 2015.

²⁹ Paraphrased from Jero Batu Agung, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta 10 April 2015.

Secondly, if the spirit does not wish to communicate directly with the family, the *roh* can sit next to *jero* and communicate with their families through the *niskala* grapevine. Jero Batu Agung will describe the physical and personality traits of the spirit to the family; the family is then able to tell who the spirit is based on the description she gives them. The fictional example she gave me was of a handsome man with a mustache.³⁰ Once the family and *jero* established who the spirit is, the spirit communicates with his or her gods who communicate with the *dasaran*'s gods so that the *dasaran* can convey the important information to the family through an otherworldly game of telephone.

The third experience occurs when families cannot communicate with the spirit all. This happens when families forget to make the necessary offerings within their family shrines before visiting the *dasaran*. This must be done to inform the soul that the family wants to communicate. The families must return on a later date after making the appropriate offerings. The offerings also enable the *dasaran* to work more easily as a medium because the gifts appease the *niskala* world. If the family does not go to their family temple, it may hinder the ability of the spirit to enter the physical body of the *dasaran*. The *jero* might be in *kepetengan*, in darkness, unable to communicate with the *niskala* world.

After Jero Batu Agung finished explaining her role as a *dasaran*, we were told we needed to thank the ancestors, God, and *niskala* world for letting us discuss her sacred work. We entered her small prayer room that she had been chanting in earlier. Most of the space was taken up by a large multi-leveled platform covered in offerings, yellow and white tassels, and umbrellas. Next to the platform there was a small seat covered in black-and-white checkered cloth for Jero to sit on. We sat on the floor with flowers and incense for prayer as she rocked back and forth in her

³⁰ Paraphrased from Jero Batu Agung, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta 22 April 2015.

seat and addressed all her gods and spirits by name. She asked for forgiveness and thanked them for allowing her to answer my questions. Any time she wants information, she must pray to her guiding spirits for answers and permission to share the answers. Although the first time we visited Jero Batu Agung, we did not pray properly when we first arrived, the gods still shared information because we came with pure souls and good intentions.³¹

Jero Pan Karma

The most experienced *balian kerasukan* I met with was Jero Pan Karma (eighty-six-year-old male), and his gods also granted me permission because they recognized that I had good intentions. In all his experience, Jero Pan Karma was quite different than the two women *jeros*. He began working as a *balian* in 1952 at the age of twenty-three. During his sixty-three years of service, he has become renowned for his abilities across Bali. When I met with him in the end of March, 1,795 people had visited him since the previous April. Only recently, in 1998, did he give up his jobs working as a farmer and laborer to heal people full time. Even though Jero Pan Karma is only available for visitors from 11 am to 12 pm, he still usually welcomes five to fifteen patients into his small dark compound.³² He described his practices very differently than the other two *dasaran* I met with, but in doing so he also highlighted many key components of how we will understand grief and *dasaran* in the coming section.³³

He began studying under Shiva Buddha in his family shrine and learned to listen deeply to the signs and treatments needed by those coming to see him. His first patient was a man sick with bad spirits from the *niskala* world. The man could not perform any activities or move,

³¹ Paraphrased from Jero Batu Agung, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta 10 April 2015.

³² Paraphrased from Jero Pan Karma, pc, translated by Riana, 30 March 2015.

³³ I attribute part of the differences to the fact that I had Ajik Sudarta translating and assisting interviews with Jero Sinthia and Jero Batu Agung, but Riana translated and assisted with my interview with Jero Pan Karama.

therefore Jero Pan Karma and his guiding spirits recommended the special offering, *ceru*, to appease the bad spirits injuring the man. Word of Jero Pan Karma's healing powers continued to spread via word of mouth.³⁴

To help his many patients, Jero Pan Karma meditates and recites two mantras: *ganda tan mantra* and *rasa tan mantra*, in order to connect with the *niskala* world. As he massages clients' head and shoulders, he asks his clients to imagine the "shadow" or soul of the deceased. Jero then feels the coming of the shadows into his body and begins to act like the spirit of the recently deceased being.³⁵ Unlike the other *dasaran*, he uses massage, and meditation. He also builds longer-term relationships with patients that continue to suffer.

For example, when people do not feel alleviation from the burdens of grief, he will have his patients stay three days to insure that they are cured. One patient came because her husband committed suicide. The wife felt lost after her husband's death and stayed three days to learn what to do from her husband's *roh* that communicated through Jero Pan Karma. She learned of her husband's debt and was then able to pay it off with an elaborate offering specifically for the spirit's payment, *caru*. Once the debt was paid, her husband's soul could settle and she could finally feel relief.³⁶

Dasaran and Grief

Similar to the woman whose husband committed suicide, *dasaran* work enlightens families to the desires of lost loved-ones, provides reassurance that the love one is good, and provides guidance for the family if the soul is not in a good place. Since the *dasaran* literally embodies the essence of the recently lost loved-one, lingering questions can be answered and

³⁴ Paraphrased from Jero Pan Karma, pc, translated by Riana, 30 March 2015.

³⁵ Paraphrased from Jero Pan Karma, pc, translated by Riana, 30 March 2015.

³⁶ Paraphrased from Jero Pan Karma, pc, translated by Riana, 30 March 2015.

unfinished business can be resolved. Jero Sinthia clarified in her interview that families want advice and information because they are “sad and curious.”³⁷ Families want to find meaning in their loss. One of the family members I spoke to who recently visited a *dasaran* after his brother died, Ajik Gusti Putu Iriandana (Ajik Putu), a fifty- three-year-old man, explained:

“According to the belief and the tradition of Hinduism, the family needs to call the spirit of the dead to communicate. The family wanted to know why he died and is there anything that he wants to ask the family. Also, they wanted to know about the process of the cremation. Is there anything missing, is anything wrong?”³⁸

All the *dasaran-dasaran* and bereaving family members I spoke with shared five major ways that communication with the spirits was helpful. Families can learn 1) if the soul has a good place in heaven, 2) why the spirit died 3) what rituals might be needed, 4) any wishes the *roh* has for the cremation, and 5) any other messages from the *niskala* world. The family thereby learns if the spirit of their loved one is content or what they can do to help and to appease the spirit so that the deceased does not upset the family from the *niskala* world. To understand what the spirits say through the *dasaran* and how it helps, I will explore the general categories that the *dasaran-dasaran* cited as helpful to families experiencing loss.

Place in Heaven

Families first want to know if the spirit is content and in a good place in heaven. Knowing that the spirit is in a good place that is close to the gods allows a family to breathe easier. When I asked Jero Batu Agung, “in your opinion, why is it important for Balinese-Hindus to come talk to a *dasaran* when someone dies?” Her immediate response was, “The family wants to know whether the spirits will be in a good place.”³⁹ Her husband, Bapak Dwajikawi Suara, added, “when the soul of the dead can stay in heaven, of course the family becomes happy. The

³⁷ Jero Sinthia, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta, 20 April 2015.

³⁸ Ajik Gusti Putu Iriandana, pc, translated by Sinta and Ajik Sudarta, 13 April 2015.

³⁹ Paraphrased from Jero Batu Agung, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta, 22 April 2015.

family will not be sad anymore when they hear that the soul of the family is in a good place because some souls stay in a bad place.”⁴⁰ As Jero Sinthia put it, “the spirit says, ‘there is nothing to worry about.’ That’s why the family feels better because the family knows that the spirit is in a good place and is being taken care of by the Gods.”⁴¹ When families realize that the soul is in a good place, they are able to feel immediate relief and take solace whenever they think about their loved one.

During one of my first interviews, before I even knew I would focus on *dasaran*, Bu Diah, a fifty-four-year-old female, emphasized how comforted she is by the fact that her husband has a good spot in heaven. Bu Diah’s husband died of leukemia three months before I stayed with her briefly. Bu Diah is still struggling with the loss of her husband three months later. She explained that it is hard to live alone in her house. She often feels her husband’s presence on the steps where he used to sit. When she talks directly to him, saying things like, “please protect our daughter,” she misses him all the more. Rather, she tries to focus on the fact that her husband is with the gods in a good place in heaven—a fact she would not have known without meeting with a *jero*. Bu Diah said, “when I pray to the gods, I will feel so peaceful. It seems that he is sitting close with the gods just like we are sitting close together.”⁴² As Bu Ary translated, she held back her tears to say, “that’s a really good thing actually.”⁴³

Cause of Death

How the person dies is important when determining whether the soul is in a good place; thus, family must reflect on how and why the person died when visiting the *dasaran*. There are many questions that arise around how someone might have died: was the soul destined to die

⁴⁰Paraphrased from Bapak Dwajikawi Suara, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta, 22 April 2015.

⁴¹Jero Sinthia, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta, 20 April 2015.

⁴²Paraphrased from Bu Diah, pc, translated by Bu Ary, 26 March 2015

⁴³Wayan Ariati, pc, 26 March 2015

young? Was it an accident? Was black magic involved? Or was it just time for the soul to reunite with the ancestors in the *niskala* world?⁴⁴ During my conversation with Jero Sinthia, Ajik

Sudarta clarified:

“In Bali, dying is divided into 3 kinds: 1) sickness, which is normal, or 2) because of an accident like falling from a tree. The phrase *salah pati* is used when someone dies like this in the ‘wrong way.’ Lastly, 3) *Ulah pati* means someone committed suicide.”⁴⁵

Different causes, such as black magic and a destiny to die young, can lead to all of these types of deaths. Jero Batu Agung noted that “when the family comes, the spirit explains what happened,” if the person died because it was his or her time to die this “helps the family to be calm and feel better.”⁴⁶

For example, my teacher, Pak Yudi, a forty-four year-old male, learned from visiting two *balian kerasukan* that his wife was *milik*, meaning destined to die young. His wife died unexpectedly in a motorbike accident in 2009, leaving Yudi to feel “worried about his future and the future of his children.” Although he was skeptical of *dasaran*, it was important to his wife’s family that he go with them to communicate with his wife. The first *dasaran* they visited did not impress him, but when he went to the second *dasaran*, he exclaimed, “it was absolutely over my head.” The *dasaran*’s mannerisms and voice were exactly the same as his wife’s. The spirit of Pak Yudi’s wife told the family that she was destined to die young, “it was to be and Pak Yudi should marry again.” She would pick a good wife, and “She did!” exclaimed Pak Yudi laughing. Pak Yudi struggled for the three years after his wife’s death, but “after seeing the *balian* for the second time less sad since I saw my wife through medium and because it was meant to be for her

⁴⁴ Jero Batu Agung, Bapak Dwajikawi Suara, and Ajik Sudarta, pc, 10 & 22 April 2015

⁴⁵ Ajik Sudarta, pc, 20 April 2015.

⁴⁶ Paraphrased from Jero Batu Agung, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta, 22 April 2015

to die young.”⁴⁷ If something else had caused his wife’s death other than the destiny to be *milik*, different rituals would have been necessary for the spirit to find a good place in heaven.⁴⁸ Through the *dasaran*, the soul and the gods of *niskala* can communicate exactly why the spirit died when it did and what can be done to help if there is a problem.

Necessary Rituals

The specific rituals and offerings are essential to the spirits’ success in the spiritual *niskala* world and thus to the peace of the family in the physical *sekala world*. This works in two ways. First when the spirit is happy it will not disrupt the lives of the family.⁴⁹ Jero Pan Karma explained that the “swords of sadness” will stab the family members if something is lacking in the rituals. The *niskala* beings make it so that the feelings of “missing something” are put on the family who will then carry the burden by missing the relative.⁵⁰ Secondly, rituals empower the bereaved to do something to help their lost loved-one. Ajik Putu, the man who lost his brother, illuminated these issues:

“What is it he wants? If we don’t know there will be problems. We Hindus want to have confidence that the soul won’t come back in a bad way to our family. He may come back to our dreams. That’s scary. What is it that he wants so that he can feel happy in heaven?”⁵¹

Through the *dasaran*, families can find out what is missing from their ceremonies or what spiritual debt and unfinished business the *roh has* left in the *sekala* world. They can then physically do something to change any problems by making the appropriate offerings.

Jero Sinthia remembers the time a family came to her because a young man died in a motorbike accident. The family wanted to know whether it was the time for the spirit to die

⁴⁷ Pak Yudi, personal communication, 24 March 2015.

⁴⁸ Jero Sinthia, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta, 20 April 20

⁴⁹ Paraphrased from Jero Pan Karma, pc, translated by Riana, 30 March 2015.

⁵⁰ Paraphrased from Jero Pan Karma, pc, translated by Riana, 30 March 2015.

⁵¹ Ajik Gusti Putu Iriandana, pc, translated by Sinta and Ajik Sudarta, 13 April 2015.

because he or she was *milik* or if something else caused the death. The family had been experiencing a lot of anxiety and disharmony, therefore they figured something more was wrong. The spirit had come to multiple family members in their dreams. Thus, the family wondered if something was wrong with the ritual they had performed during the cremation. When they spoke with the *roh* through Jero Sinthia, the family learned that they had neglected to make an important offering where the accident took place. The young man's soul stayed at the scene of the accident and was not able to find his final resting place in the family temple.⁵²

The *Ngaben*

One of the major rituals that must be performed correctly is the cremation, the *ngaben*. *Ngaben* derives from the word *abu* meaning “ashes” and is essential to release the soul from the five elements: air, earth, fire, water, and space.⁵³ Once the soul is released, it is able to join the ancestors in the family shrine to protect the family and continue the cycle of reincarnated. The cremation must take place on an auspicious day chosen by a priest. However, if the family can afford the expenses and elaborate offerings needed for a *ngaben* within the seven days following the death, the family can move forward with the *ngaben* without a priest to pick a day.⁵⁴ It is much less expensive, however, if the family is able to bury the dead first, and then do a mass cremation ceremony when other family members pass away.⁵⁵ According to Fred B Eiseman's essay, “Cremation in Bali: Fiery Passage to the After Life,” even when the *ngaben* is several

⁵² Paraphrased Jero Sinthia, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta, 20 April 2015.

⁵³ Paraphrased from Fred B Eiseman, “Cremation in Bali: Fiery Passage to the After Life,” *Bali: Sekala & Niskala; Volume 1: Essays on Religion B. Eiseman*, (Indonesia: Periplus Editions, 1990), 161.

⁵⁴ Information on *ngaben* paraphrased from Ajik Sudarta, 20 April 2015.

⁵⁵ Information on *ngaben* paraphrased from Ajik Sudarta, 20 April 2015.

years off, the spirit will stay close to the body until the cremation and “may bother the family in various ways as it seeks total release towards God and heaven.”⁵⁶

Therefore, it is very important that the family members provide the best *ngaben* they can to help their loved one transition into the next world. Families try to prevent missing anything by visiting the *dasaran* in the days directly following the death to discuss the *ngaben*.⁵⁷ While visiting the *dasaran*, the spirit can clarify if he or she is willing to wait for a mass cremation or if the day of the cremation works for them.⁵⁸ The spirit can also share if there is something in particular that they want to bring to the next world that should be burned with their body.⁵⁹ Everyone I talked with stressed the importance of obtain permission and advice from the *roh* before the cremation since it determines how the spirit will enter the afterlife and how well the spirit will treat the family once becoming an ancestor in the family shrine.

I was able to attend Ajik I Gusti Nyoman’s *ngaben* and speak with the deceased’s older brother Ajik Putu and his niece, my friend, Sinta, about the cremation and their earlier visit to the *dasaran*. Ajik I Gusti Nyoman passed away on 10 April, the family visited the *dasaran* the next day, and three days after that, the family held the *ngaben*. I came for the ritual cleaning of the body and stayed the next day for the cremation ceremony. As they shared the experience with me, Ajik Putu made it clear, “if you go to another village, their *ngaben* is slightly different

⁵⁶ Paraphrased from Fred B Eiseman, “Cremation in Bali: Fiery Passage to the After Life,” *Bali: Sekala & Niskala; Volume 1: Essays on Religion B. Eiseman*, (Indonesia: Periplus Editions, 1990), 161.

⁵⁷ Paraphrased from Jero Batu Agung and Bapak Dwajikawi Suara, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta, 10 April 2015

⁵⁸ Paraphrased from Ajik Sudarta, 20 April 2015

⁵⁹ Paraphrased from Jero Sinthia, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta, 20 April 2015

depending on the tradition. The practice of Hinduism is very flexible, but the aim of cremation is the same—to lift the spirit to nirvana.”⁶⁰

For this *ngaben*, all of the family gathered at the deceased’s compound, wearing white cloth headbands; they gave me one too. The day before, the body was wrapped in a long white cloth during the ritual cleaning; for the *ngaben*, family members held on to the cloth to accompany the deceased to the graveyard as young men carried the body in a coffin-like bamboo structure. Once at the cemetery, a priest cleaned the face of the deceased again with holy water strained through a white cloth. Each pot that contained the water was then shattered at the foot of the dead. The bamboo structure was also destroyed and burned because of its spiritual impurity.

As a priest continued to prepare the body, the family tucked the white cloth headbands we wore earlier in with the body. His widow and brothers folded about seven different outfits in with him too so that he could dress nicely in the afterlife. There was a special white and gold silk sarong and brown dress shirt on top of all the clothes. Ajik Putu shared earlier that at the *dasaran*’s, “[his brother] had something to ask of the family. He asked for one sarong and new cloths for the cremation.”⁶¹ These cloths fulfilled Ajik I Gusti Nyoman’s final wish communicated through the *dasaran*.

When the body was ready, the priest started the fire. Two large devices were used after the priest to douse the offerings and body in kerosene and to further ignite the flame. Once the plume of smoke was large enough that everyone needed to back away, people walked over to the many food vendors’ motorbikes and started chatting away and eating food. Each vendor had a rainbow umbrella jetting over their motorbike to protect their food. It made the atmosphere of fired foods, Balinese Jell-O-like drinks, and laughter all the more similar to a carnival. Once we

⁶⁰Ajik Gusti Putu Iriandana, pc, translated by Sintia and Ajik Sudarta, 13 April 2015.

⁶¹Ajik Gusti Putu Iriandana, pc, translated by Sintia and Ajik Sudarta, 13 April 2015.

had had some snacks, Sinta and I walked back to her house to change and wash out the spiritual impurity in our hair.

After the family had some downtime, we left to bring the ashes to the beach and the soul to temples. I rode with Sinta, Ajik Putu and Ajik I Gusti Nyoman's widow. In the car, the two adults in the front kept changing the songs on each other. When Sinta's aunt finally picked her favorite gamelan song she started dancing in her seat and moving her hands with the rhythm of the symbols. When we arrived at the beach everyone grabbed more snacks before praying. People looked exhausted, but I was struck by how similar the rituals were to a festival. Another family at the beach for a cremation was even dressed in matching shirts printed for the occasion.

Before the ceremony was over, we traveled to the temples *Pura Siva*, *Pura Dalem*, *Pura Desa*, *Pura Puseh*, eventually to the deceased's family shrine. For each stop, the priest rang a bell to communicate with the niskala world as the family lit incense and prayed with the flowers in their *canang sari*. All the while, Ajik I Gusti Nyoman's son carried the symbolic soul tenderly around with us in a small round basket made from coconut leaves and flowers. The last prayer in the family shrine joined the soul with the family's ancestors. Later, Ajik Sudarta clarified the philosophy:

“The spirit of the dead is worshiped as an ancestor when the soul is placed in the family shrine. Balinese believe that the spirit remains in the family shrine, which is why they feel better when they have finished the cremation ceremony. The spirit then can come down into this world from the other world for festivals. When the family makes offerings in the family temple, they are also making offerings to the family member that just had a cremation.”⁶²

To Ajik Putu and Sinta, the cremation, was an opportunity to help their loved-one into the next world: “When the family don't go to see the *dasaran*, we feel that the process is not

⁶² Ajik Sudarta, pc, 15 April 2015.

complete.”⁶³ Ajik I Gusti Nyoman will be able to watch over the family from their shine, content with the efforts the family made to help him journey from the *sekala* world to the *niskala* world.

Messages From *Niskala*

Whether the deceased soul clarifies what it wants from the *ngaben* or some other rituals, the very act of communicating provides support for the bereaved family members. According to Jero Batu Agung, the spirits usually makes a point of requesting that their families be harmonious: “Don’t be angry. No hatred.”⁶⁴ Not all families are able to reach their loved-one; sometimes the soul does not want to talk and the *dasaran* remains in darkness. Thus when a family can talk to their loved-one, like Ajik Putu did with his brother, their family felt relief that Ajik I Gusti Nyoman wanted to come down to talk, answered remaining questions, and address all other concerns.⁶⁵ Jero Sinthia explained to me her general experience working with bereaved families:

“The family of course when they come are sad and curious, but after a chance to communicate with the spirit from the *niskala* world. I can see, when I return to the physical world that the family looks better compared to when they first arrived at my house. In this world, *sekala*, they become happier based on what you can see clearly.”⁶⁶

The connection between the families and their loved ones is not severed after death, but rather can continue through the work of the *dasaran*. The happiness of the family and the deceased is still very much intertwined with the happiness of the spirit. As Jero Batu Agung made clear, “When the sprit sees the family sad, the spirit becomes sad. When the family is happy, it makes the spirit happy.”⁶⁷ Therefore, the spirit and the family must still work together after the loved-one’s death to make each other happy. The family has a responsibility to please

⁶³ Ajik Putu, pc, translated by Sinta, 13 April 2015 .

⁶⁴ Jero Batu Agung, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta 10 April 2015.

⁶⁵ Paraphrased from Ajik Putu, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta and Sinta, 13 April 2015

⁶⁶ Jero Sinthia, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta, 20 April 2015.

⁶⁷ Jero Batu Agung, pc, translated by Ajik Sudarta 10 April 2015.

the spirit by providing appropriate rituals and a good *ngaben*. In turn, the family can start healing when they are able to communicate with the spirit, know why the spirit died, and hear that the *roh* has a good place in heaven.

Interpretation and Conclusion

Dasaran's unique services for bereaved family members are only compatible with Balinese-Hindu beliefs in *niskala*, *sekala*, and ancestor worship. Without the belief in the other world and the practice of ancestor worship, the *dasaran's* message would not be taken as the truth of the *roh*. This complex belief system allows families to communicate with the bereaved, get reassurance that the deceased's soul is alright, and power to fix any problems through offerings. *Dasaran's* service is unique to Balinese-Hindu families experience of loss, but the needs of the family members are similar to those of people I have encountered within my own Quaker, Jewish, Spiritual, Christian, Agnostic, Atheist and Western background.

This became clear to me when I realized the universal desire to maintain hope in the despite the challenges of grief. Within the complex emotions and performance of loss, there is a general desire by everyone to maintain hope. Although grief does not necessarily exist within the timeline of *berkabung* and people do not immediately stop feeling pangs of sadness after speaking with the *dasaran* or releasing their loved-one's soul through the *ngaben*, the *dasaran's* role as a spiritual caregiver provides hope and meaning to families experiencing loss. There is meaning behind why and when the person died and why sadness for the family and *roh* might continue. There is hope that the family can still communicate with their loved-one, hope that the person is in a good place in heaven, hope that the grief will stop within forty-two days and hope that the family can make their own sadness or the sadness of the spirit better through offerings.

When experiencing loss, whether Balinese Hindu or American Atheist, don't we all crave hope and meaning?

While in the midst of writing my ISP, I got word that a senior at my small college committed *ulah pati* —the first suicide in nearly thirty years. Pete was a bright involved senior, played rugby, and edited the school paper; everyone was shocked. Gmail and Facebook was flooded with messages from the president, deans, religious leaders, and friends trying to find meaning and hope during a dark time. Talking with friends back home, everyone asked “what happened?” My close friend and Pete’s teammate, Dan asked, “what was the last thing I said to him?” Questions and concerns after death are universal, but people seek to answer these questions in different ways. Since Peter’s death, people have been trying to get answers and meaning by talking with friends and reaching out to the community. When Dan posted a memorial status, he concluded with “we lost a brother this week, and I know we all hope that he's in a better place right now.”⁶⁸ We do not have a *dasaran* to tell us why Pete died or if he is in a better place, but many of wish we had a way for our questions to be answered.

For Balinese-Hindus families that visit *dasaran-dasaran*, like Jero Sinthia, Jero Batu Agung, and Jero Pan Karma, the experience of visiting a *dasaran* is unique and resonates with them in different ways. In the individuality of the experience, whatever the spirit says, should, in theory, help alleviate the family’s grief, or at least provide insight into how the burdens might be lifted. If one *dasaran* is unable to help, the family can keep visiting *dasaran-dasaran* until they find the answers they need to help them through the experience. Bu Diah emphasized the relief she feels when she remembers that her husband is in a good place.⁶⁹ Pak Yudi, despite his initial skepticism, learned of his wife’s destiny and gained hope for his future and the future of his

⁶⁸ Dan, pc, 28 April.

⁶⁹ Paraphrased from Bu Diah, pc, translated by Bu Ary, 26 March 2015

children.⁷⁰ Ajik Putu was able to hold an incredibly beautiful and elaborate cremation for his deceased brother using what he learned from the *jero* he visited.⁷¹ Their sadness did not vanish magically after their visit to the *dasaran*, but their experience at the *dasaran* is a major step in the Balinese-Hindu grieving process. We all need some process to find our hope and to create our meaning.

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Recommendations for Further Study

There are unique challenges to studying both grief and *dasaran* in Bali. Both topics are very private and, thus, hard to access especially in the brevity of the ISP. I recommend for either topic, getting to know your contacts well by focusing on multiple interviews with a few people. I found that there are limited opportunities to talk candidly with people about their experience of grief and *dasaran*. And since going to a *dasaran* is a private and vulnerable experience, it is even more challenging to have opportunities to observe.

Nonetheless, there is endless interesting material to explore. For anyone interested in studying grief, I recommend examining the way that offerings are used as a coping mechanism.

One example is the *caru* offering used to pay off the debt of the deceased so that family members can stop feeling sick from grief. I also observed, on multiple occasions, what appeared to be family members overcoming moments of sadness by giving offerings to the ancestors in the family shrine. On the other side of things, for those interested specifically in *dasaran*, I recommend exploring why families go to *dasaran* after a baby is born. I allude to the topic in my ISP, but I think the process is equally important and distinct. I suspect either avenue would provide insight into how some Balinese-Hindus understand ancestors.

However, the best recommendation that I can give to anyone concerned about conducting an ISP on this topic is to find a good advisor(s). I found that the interpretation and insights of Balinese people around me were invaluable to understand the confusing web of beliefs and practices.

Glossary

The words are marked with an (I) for *Bahasa Indonesian* and (B) for *Bahasa Bali*

Awig-awig (B): the rules that are outlines in the Subak of each village.

Banjar (I): hamlet.

Balian (I): traditional healer.

Balian Kerasukan (I): a spirit medium that is able to communicate with unseen world (see *Dasaran*).

Berkabung (I): the period that a person is prohibited from entering temple after someone in their community or family dies.

Canang Sari (B): typical Balinese offering

Dasaran (B): a spirit medium that is able to communicate with the unseen world (see *Balian Kerasukan*).

Jero (B): professional title for baliens.

Mikik: destined to die young

Ngaben (B): cremation ceremony.

Niskala (I): the unseen, immaterial world of gods, spirits, and magic.

Persasaan Duka (I): feelings of grief and extreme loss.

Perasaan Kehilangan (I): general feelings of loss.

Kepetengan (B): literally in “darkness,” referring to when a *dasaran* is unable to communicate with
the *niskla* world.

Kesedihan (I): sadness.

Roh (B): soul.

Salah Pati (B): dying in the wrong way.

Sekala (I): the seen, physical world.

Ulah pati (B): death by suicide