

# Heavenly descent: Balinese birth traditions and the politicization of women's health care

## Abstract

There is a distinction can be made between the culture surrounding birth in Bali that existed in the past and what it is today. This is to be expected; changes occur overtime especially in culture. Though I believe that Bali is experiencing its own sort of acculturation shock in the sense that the population never knew that it was going to go in the direction of what could be viewed as westernized medicine. People felt that their histories and traditions were deeply seeded and rooted, that it would always be a part of them. That their culture would always be right alongside them in every aspect of their life, from birth to death. With programs like the National Family-Planning program its becoming harder and harder to maintain those traditions and retain the history of ancient Bali.

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## Introduction

In ancient mythology, there were seven celestial sisters. The depiction and stories of these celestial sisters were adopted and changed throughout history. For the Balinese, the story goes as follows: Seven celestial sisters, the Nymphs of Pleiades, descended from the heavens on night to a lake found on a beautiful mountain top. The pool was sacred and the nymphs, using their sarongs, flew down to land gracefully and bath in the water. Not far from them, a prince by the name of Raja Pala was on a hunting trip. He became lost, wandered the woods, until he came upon the angels in the pool. He spied on them from the bushes, became infatuated with the star nymphs and kept his eye on one in particular. This sister was the youngest and most naïve, but all Raja could see was the sky reflected in her eyes. Raja Pala stole her sarong from the poolside and hid back in the bushes. When the sisters began to leave, the youngest could not find her sarong, sarong preventing her from flying back to the heavens with her family. She was left there, alone. Raja Pala emerged with the youngest sister's sarong and said to her, "bear me a child with eyes that remind me of the world you belong to and you will have your wings back." The youngest sister did so, a child was born with the eyes of the stars, strung between two worlds, born of a prince and a goddess of the sky. Raja Pala returned the sarong to the sister. Before ascending back to the heavens the sister said to Raja, "you may have this child for his brief life on earth, but after that, remember, he returns to me". This story is the beginning of the belief that children born in Balinese culture are descended from the heavens and are therefore angelic beings. Because the children are of the stars and sky, when they cry as night it is believed that they are crying for their home (the heavens). It is custom for the family of the child to take them outside and show the child the sky, day or night, as a reminder that they are not so far from home.

How does this translate into thousands of years of tradition? Something that we know, the indigenous people of Bali have a huge culture surrounding family and community. They believe that all things have the energy and this energy flows through each and every person, making everyone connected in some way. The village, their

temples, their art, their food, and the nature surrounding it are all important pieces of who they are and their history. Something that they believe fully is that health is interconnected. When someone is sick in the village they believe that that's sickness is spread throughout, that there is not just one person or one thing causing the sickness, it is that of the community. Power is an important concept to think about. Balinese people and healers specifically believe that power exists in all things but can be manifested in objects and people. The amount of power, like that of energy, is constant and cannot be changed. If power in one person is increased, then it has likely decreased in another. All power is homogenous, and when it is obtained, dominance of things is achieved and that is the nature of things. The indigenous people of Bali have many traditions surrounding pregnancy and labor, but the discussion in this paper is only going to be about the tradition and the ceremonies surrounding mothers-to-be and their postpartum life, and how this relates to Balinese beliefs.

Globally pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood are culturally significant and produces rich traditions, ceremonies or other similar things. This particular story within Balinese history, became a lifelong and eternal belief that children born of Balinese mothers are angelic. This belief turned into a tradition where infants could not touch the ground for at least one hundred and five days.<sup>1-3</sup> After this time, a ceremony was put on where everyone got together to celebrate the infant's transition from being heaven-bound to earth-bound. The indigenous Balinese people have been uprooted, plagued, punished, and relocated. The populations that carry on these incredibly old traditions are far and few between but are strong people. They hold most dearly the retaining of strong oral traditions. Passing information, stories and everything they know to their families and hopefully the families beyond them, is how these cultures stay alive and thrive. There is much that is held sacred and protected not to be shared with the public, but there are things these populations are happy to share because of the joy that it brings them in their lives.<sup>2</sup>

When women in Bali find out they are pregnant, they first visit what is called a "dukun". Traditionally, dukuns are traditional birth attendants and healers whom are usually male. Most of a women's

prenatal care and health are carried out by these dukuns. Its described that the dukuns help the mothers to be “talk to the baby, find out who they are and what they needed for their purpose in life”. The things the women are told to do after these visits with the dukun are mostly spiritual and in relation to who the healer and the mother believe that the baby is going to be in their future life. If the dukun relays to the mother that the child may be an artist or a performer, the mother may be “prescribed” to sing and dance, to engulf herself in art so that the spirit of her child feels a sense of belonging in this world.<sup>2</sup> The mother and father will even make offerings to the child and the spirits, hoping that they are blessed to have her stay here on earth with them.

The rituals occur in stages, those before birth, those during birth and those after. Rituals that begin before birth are meant for the baby's health, and the baby's strength for a long and productive life ahead of them. Husbands do not cut their hair while the mother is pregnant. Anger should be avoided and reading aloud from the holy books are expected. In the third trimester, prayers are offered not only for the baby, but for the “four siblings” which are in tradition are considered the placenta, the amniotic fluid, the blood and the vernix. Pray is incredibly important during this time, because the people believe that at any moment, the stars could take their child back to the heavens.

Everyone in the women's community gathers for the birth of her baby. Infants are born in the home with the help of the dukun, the father, and a female relative of the mother or father. Elder women are expected to be there as emotional support for the mother. Villagers and children are welcome to watch. These rituals during the birth of the child are practiced so that once the child is born, he or she immediately feels a part of the village and the community. A Balinese community relies heavily on this sense of stability and a positive society. After the birth, several ceremonies or traditions take place. The ceremony that this paper chooses to focus on is the foot-to-ground ceremony. According to the literature, a child will not touch the ground for the first three months of their life. The child is cradled and held and introduced to the earth's gravity slowly and gently. When the child is one-hundred and five days old, there will be a ceremony where he or she is introduced to the earth and “planted”, in a sense, on the earth. During this one hundred and five-day period, the infant is held while falling asleep and waking up; at night they are wrapped in a cloth so as not to touch the ground and are often held by the mother. Young girls of the village take an active role in caring for the new life in the community and ensuring that the infant does not touch the ground before it is ready. Heavy bracelets and anklets are often put on the child to “weigh them down”.

Bali is a country that is rich in traditions and history but has one of the lowest fertility rates globally. Why is this? A study conducted in 1975 analyzed the government of Bali's implementation of a family planning program for its population. It was a national program that was part of its economic development programs. Its main focuses were concentrating in contraceptive campaigns in two regional provinces in Indonesia, including Java. The features that were unique and successful in Bali included the “system banjar” and the use of IUD as a method of contraception.<sup>4</sup> While the IUD is incredibly popular in Third World countries because of its ease-of-use, it often is accompanied by significant health problems (bleeding, pain, infection) because of lack of access to care. Village medical staff did not have the knowledge to care for women who have this implant and the system put in place to give these women these forms of contraception often just go in to the community and then leave once they're done. Though the frequency in use of IUDs in Bali is high as a result of

the government's totalitarian methods, their ability to disseminate information about contraception and the services and supplies that go along with this is inadequate. Studies have shown that knowledge about female anatomy, reproductive processes, and contraceptive choice falls short even among those medical and paramedical staff who have been “trained”.<sup>4</sup>

The term “banjar” can be explained as being similar to a local council. It is typically in a discreet geographic location governing a cohesive moral and the religious community that has a small population. The members of this council are normally made up of married men, and they meet once a month to discuss to make decisions and about their local community that they oversee. Under this family planning program, the banjars we're responsible for reaching eligible members of their community who would be accepting of contraception.<sup>4</sup> This included married couples of child-bearing age, and couples who have already had children. Single women who were child-bearing age were not eligible to participate in the family planning program and obtain contraception, even though they may be sexually active.<sup>5</sup> The heads of the councils were paid a small salary for heading the program and implementing the government policies. A registry was expected to be made of all eligible couples in the council's community so the government could keep track of the “contraceptive status” of the population and the effectiveness of the Family Planning Program.

The implementation of what could be called “traditional western women health care” has created a complex cultural and medical context of male domination and control of female sexuality and reproduction.<sup>3</sup> The ability for women in Bali to have a child has become closely related with economic and political programs because of the pressure that women feel from programs like the National Family Planning program implemented in 1975. Qualitative studies have shown an inverse relationship between fertility rates, and the care and valuation of children in the family. It is noted in Parkers article that there is some opposition to Bali's wholehearted adoption of family-planning. The women and even the families feel there is a potential loss of ethnic and cultural identity. Some groups are beginning to feel threatened by the continuing diminution of the Balinese population.<sup>4</sup> Not only are fertility rates declining, morbidity and mortality rates among pregnant women are also extremely high. When a woman becomes pregnant in Bali, she is three hundred times more likely to die than other women in the community.<sup>6</sup> There has been a spread of Western, medical birthing practices to try and reduce the high rates, but even with these implementations, the numbers are not changing. Also, the numbers for mortality and morbidity in the Western globe are not the best for pregnant women either. A birth clinic, the Yayasan Bumi Sehat Birth Clinic, pushes a humanized birth framework to try and reduce the mortality and morbidity rate among pregnant women. A “humanized framework” simply means emphasizing the separation of the technocratic, patriarchal, Western, medical model of birth, and implementing more of a women-centered, mind-body approach to labor and birth. It aims to allow the woman to make the decisions, to have choice over their bodies, and satisfaction in their birth experience.<sup>6,7</sup>

Overall, there is a distinction can be made between the culture surrounding birth in Bali that existed in the past and what it is today. This is to be expected; changes occur overtime especially in culture. Though I believe that Bali is experiencing its own sort of “culture shock” in the sense that the population never knew that it was going to go in the direction of what could be viewed as westernized medicine. People felt that there was such a deep root seeded in their histories

and traditions that it would always be a part of them. That their culture would always be right alongside them in every aspect of their life, from birth to death. With programs like the National Family-Planning program it's becoming harder and harder to maintain those traditions and retain the history of ancient Bali.

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### Conflicts of interest

The author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

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