



WITNESSING THE MADWIJATI CEREMONY

A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY AS SANGEH REGION INITIATES ITS FIRST SULINGGIH COUPLE...

I was sitting at a pretty table decorated with a white table cloth and yellow ruffles. There were a number of tables surrounding me with identical ornaments and plastic chairs covered with matching ruffle. The scene reminded me of the décor from a typical 1980's wedding reception, a memory from many years ago in a different world, when I lived in Melbourne. Yet, I needed a break from the noise of the entertainment. I snapped back to reality.

Attending a ritual in a Balinese compound that was close to my home, I found myself entwined in an extraordinary circumstance that was happening only meters away. I gulped down a cup of strong black Bali coffee and forced myself to emerge from the trance I felt I was in. I started to laugh out loud at the absurdity of my life. The enormity of the event I was involved in was even stranger than my time in *La La Land* in Hollywood, just a few weeks before.

I thought nothing could beat an invite to the Emmy award-winning premier of the *Handmaid's Tale* in Los Angeles, yet I felt as though my life has taken me into another dimension of reality. But what did it all mean? This complicated process began over 12 months before when I found out that one of my husband's cousins and his wife were to be initiated as Sangeh's first Sulinggi couple, the High Priest and High Priestess, at the ceremony known as *Madwijati*.





Witnessing this sacred ceremony is truly an extraordinary experience.

THE HAND

My husband Made had been called on to be his cousin's right hand man, just like Tyrion Lannister was to Daenerys in the Game of Thrones. I was also asked to be intimately involved in this complicated process, one where we would be deluged into the unseen *Niskala* world of magic, the extraordinary reality of death and rebirth, to be taking place before our eyes. One thing I knew for sure was that secret Balinese Hindu practices are taken seriously.

The love, commitment and care, bestowed upon our cousins by their Gurus and family members, made me feel as though I was living in an ethereal new world. We bore witness to our cousins surrendering to the unknown, as their souls left their bodies. A smiling young *Permangku* (a Balinese priest), who was chewing tobacco in his black



dress, excitedly explained to me that we were lucky to be participating. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity to be invited to such an event – even most Balinese would never have the opportunity to attend the *Madwijati* ceremony. He also explained that in this ceremony there would be many types of magic transpiring at once.

There was an overwhelming intensity as five *sulinggih*, assisted by their wives (also known with the same title), rang the Balinese bells known as *Genta* (Vajra Bell or Bajra in Sanskrit). The invisible power swirled around us, creating a vortex of mystical radiation and

synchronising power, as the Holy men and women called the Gods, radiating extreme dynamism. Made had explained the importance of warding off dark energy.

THE ASHRAM

We had taken a road trip the week prior to *Madwijati*, together with our cousins and Gurus, to visit Pura Besakih and various other temples, as a part of the complicated process leading up to the special day. I was completely surprised when our convoy dropped into an Ashram. It seemed unfathomable to me why we would be visiting an



Ashram full of Westerners, seeking enlightenment while participating in a shaking meditation ritual. Our Holy entourage was escorted into a dining hall, where we sat around a long wooden table. I marvelled at what might happen next.

The arrival of Ratu Bagus was indeed spectacular. He surveyed his guests with scrutiny. I wholeheartedly believe that Ratu Bagus was reading our minds. The reason for our visit was to invite Ratu Bagus to attend *Madwijati* – his presence was required to ward off black magic. I met with Ratu Bagus on the evening of *Madwijati*, surprisingly we arrived at the same time.

THE RITUAL

There were certain times in the evening I felt myself drifting into another dimension, a trance-like state taking over my senses. Observing our cousins surrender to death was beyond comprehension.

I watched them collapse as their souls left their bodies. I watched as my husband and others carefully carried our unconscious loved ones, gently laid them on their beds and covered them with white sheets.

Their souls were guardedly wrapped in a pot called *daksina* (a representation of their body and soul), which was placed on a small table close to their deathbeds. They were emblematically dead. Unconscious, their souls had left

their bodies. I witnessed our cousins surrendering to the unknown. It was intense, especially because there have been stories of some who have not awakened. My husband did not leave their sides. The ritual seemed to go on for hours and it kept the crowd awake, yet I needed a break.

I snapped back to reality after finishing another cup of strong coffee. I was alone. The laughter had stopped. I walked back to the deathbeds. Our cousins had arisen and were saturated in Holy Water. The next process was similar to the three-month baby blessing known as *Nelu Bulanin*. The Gurus were meticulous in dressing, grooming and writing secret Sanskrit text (*Ngrajah*) on our newly ordained *Sulinggih* couple. It was 1.30 a.m. when *Sri Mpu* climbed the podium assisted by his wife.

They were both dressed in exquisite finery. The ringing of the Vajra Bell resumed as our High Priest and High Priestess summoned the mystical spirits that had served them explicitly throughout their ordeal. Indeed, it was an extraordinary ceremony to be a part of. ■

By Sharon Karyasa



Meet the first *Sulinggih* couple of Sangeh region.

PHOTOS BY SHARON KARYASA