

OPINION

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED: THE MARGARET MEAD'S BALI EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

There were many lessons to be learned in our day to day observation. This article is an interesting personal opinion on the famous anthropologist's report on certain child-rearing practices that may lead to schizoid tendency among Balinese children. Author feels that some of the reports by Western researchers may be misleading and encourage local psychiatrists to take up challenge of understanding of our own people. *ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry, Vol .10(2): July- Dec 2009: XX XX*

Introduction

1967, that was the year I freshly graduated as a doctor from the University of Airlangga in Surabaya, Indonesia. I found myself appointed as the first Director of the State Mental Hospital in Bali. The next 19 years was spent in that hospital before I was moved to another mental hospital in another island. Those 19 years enriched me with many unique experiences and also found myself becoming interested in psychiatry and eventually got my degree in psychiatry from the University of Indonesia, in 1973.

Those 19 years formed an important part of my life, and I decided to write them up, and eventually got it published in 1993 [1]. Part of this book I would like to share, because it may contain some

lessons to be learned, especially by psychiatrist in this region.

New Frontiers

It had always been my intention to meet Margaret Mead or correspond with her. As she was the world's best known anthropologist, her work was frequently quoted by others. Unfortunately, I felt that some of her conclusions about life in Bali were incorrect. For example she spent time in the small mountain village of Bayung Gede (1949) [2], and proposed that the local child-rearing practices could produce schizoid tendencies among children. Here she was referring to the way that mothers force-fed their children by first chewing the food themselves, then forcing it into the baby's mouth. As a proof of her hypothesis, she cited her observation of

many babies clinging to their mothers' breasts when in the presence of strangers.

In their book on hypnosis and related states, Gill and Brenman (1959) [3] suggest that force-feeding may cause an "unconscious cannibalism" among the people of Bali, and may be the reason why the Balinese are so suggestible, going into hypnosis and trance quite easily. This point was taken even further by several writers who claimed that Balinese children enter into trance easily because they had "weak ego strength."

In his paper, "Schizophrenia and the Balinese," Howard (1971) [4] compares pictures of the Balinese dancers with photographs of schizophrenics, noting the similarities in their stances and claiming that force-feeding produces both schizophrenia and susceptibility to trance. Howard quotes Mead's work, but I doubted if he had ever been to Bali himself. Taking the contrary viewpoint, Bateson (1949) (Mead's former husband) argues that the stabilizing forces in Bali are so strong that schizophrenic sequences are rarely initiated.

I was eager to ask Mead if she realized that in a small Balinese village in the 1903s, the sight of a large Western woman with light hair and blue grey eyes would be fearful to small children. Not only would Mead's visage be out of the daily experience of the children, but her features happened to resemble those of the demons and witches that are part of Balinese folklore.

Eventually I was introduced to Dr Mead in a New York City restaurant by Dr Nathan S. Kline, an authority on

hypnosis. Mead was an excellent conversationalist but a poor listener. Whenever I disagreed with her, she raised her walking stick! Nevertheless she was well meaning.

Lessons to be Learned

From 1930's to 2010's, many things have changed and developed.

For one thing, there are many more psychiatrists all over the region. Maybe this will be time where local psychiatrists should do their own observations and writing them down. Our region is a fertile ground for mental health professionals to do research. We are able to share our experience to the rest of the world, instead of Margaret Mead making statement that could be wrong. We are at an advantage because we speak the local language and are more culturally aware. Another good area to be researched and shared were the culture bound syndromes in psychiatry like *amok*, *latah* and *koro*, etc. which were written by Western psychiatrists.

For this purpose the ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry is an excellent media to purport this idea.

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