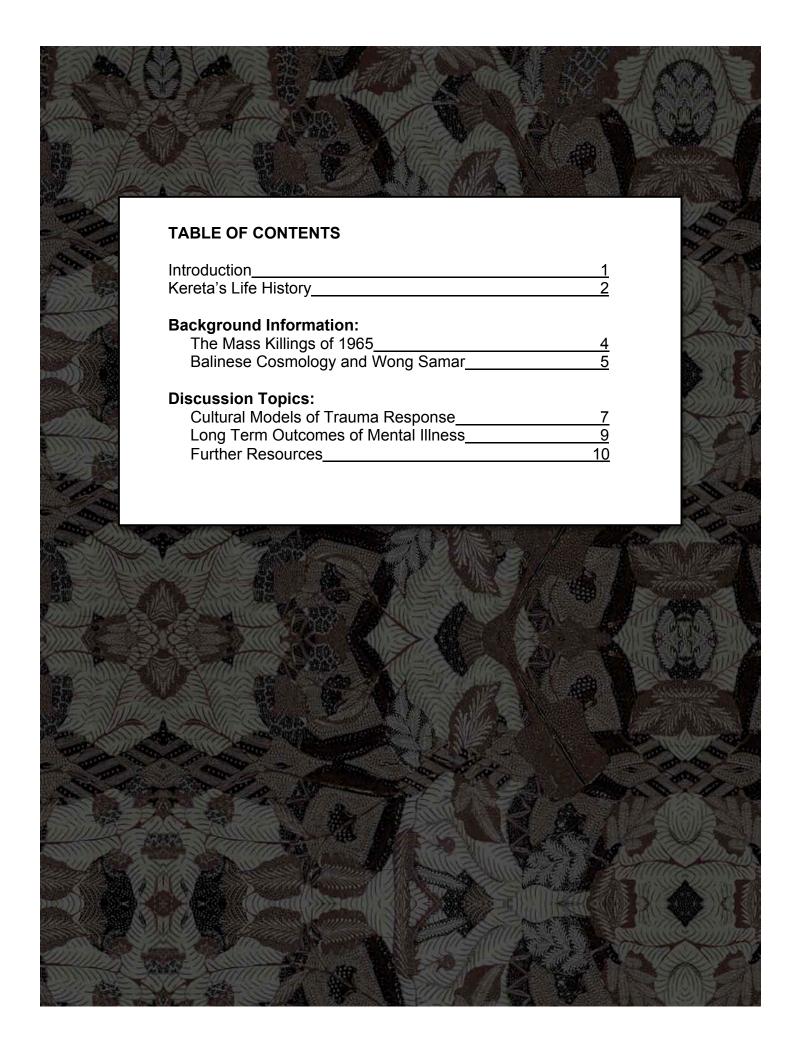


NYOMAN KERETA
Understanding Experiences Beyond the Norm





INTRODUCTION



Pak Kereta is a gentle middle-aged Balinese man with lines deeply etched into his suntanned face. He has been married for over twenty-five years to a woman who is a member of his clan. Together they have two adult sons.

When Kereta is feeling well he is active in neighborhood activities, such as playing in the local village gamelan orchestra. However, he is sometimes unable to participate due to disturbances by the spirits, which affect his physical and mental state. He speaks candidly and openly about his relationship with these spirit beings and the efforts he has made to care for them or alternately to make them leave. He says he has been living in two worlds, the world of his family and community and the world of the spirits, for the past 15 years.

Pak Kereta's experiences skirt the borders of cultural and spiritual norms, simultaneously manifesting and exceeding Balinese beliefs about the supernatural world and the possibilities for human interaction with it. Kereta's reported experiences seem credible or explicable to some, bizarre and extraordinary to others, enigmatic or doubtful to his wife, and the sign of major mental illness to his psychiatrist.

Meanwhile, the precipitating factors that might have initiated these experiences are multiple. Whether he is haunted by past loss and grief, visited and at times tormented by invisible beings, or in protest against years of political anxiety and social stress, Kereta draws strength and comfort from his family as he finds the best ways to manage his symptoms and contribute to the household.

KERETA'S LIFE HISTORY

Pak Kereta was born in 1944 in a small rural village in central Bali. He has been a farmer his whole life and continues to live in the same extended family compound in which he was born. He remembers a fairly pleasant and uneventful childhood shaped by the rhythms of rice agriculture and the Balinese ritual calendar.

However in 1965, when Kereta was twenty-one, his village was caught in the wave of violence that swept the nation during a period of political upheaval. At this time, military and paramilitary forces purportedly belonging to the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI) entered his village looking for suspected members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Pak Kereta witnessed the roundup and massacre of several villagers in which both killers and victims were personal acquaintances. Although he himself was not targeted for violence he was extremely distressed by what he saw and felt sure that he was in mortal danger. Then, a short



while later, he witnessed his cousin take part in the brutal assassination of his own father just outside the family compound.

Soon after these horrifically traumatic events, Pak Kereta's long-standing problems with social withdrawal and fear began. He believes the constant terror he experienced in the wake of these killings weakened his life force. He began to have problems with feeling his heart beating rapidly and an "inner pressure" weighing down his body. For months after the massacre he had difficulty eating and became very thin and withdrawn. He was jumpy and easily startled, and had periods when he felt his mind go blank. He had difficulty falling asleep, and was frequently awoken by nightmares of being chased or people being butchered. In the years following the violence, Kereta became increasingly afraid of social gatherings and avoided public places and events. He withdrew from the common social activities of his *banjar* and stopped participating in community work projects.

Then in 1974 he ate some eels that he had caught in an irrigated rice field, not knowing that they had been sprayed earlier that day with a powerful insecticide called Endrin. He became very ill, with symptoms of vomiting and dizziness that lasted for months before he recovered.

After some reluctance due to his known vulnerable condition, Kereta's wife agreed to marry him in 1980. It was a difficult transition for the couple, although Kereta cared deeply for his wife. She ran away from him and returned to her family home, but after a number of months she returned and they were reunited. They first had a son, and then in 1984 they had a daughter.

Unfortunately, there were complications with the delivery and the baby girl died soon after being delivered. Kereta describes this as the most difficult time in his life. In his grief he cried continuously.

He also began seeing small, black figures, which he believed to be spirits known as the *wong samar*, or "the indistinct people," a commonly recognized form of spirit being. He first saw the *wong samar* while cutting the grass in the rice field, describing them as wandering over the grass and hiding in stagnant water. At first they made noises that he could not understand, but gradually the noises coalesced into words as they asked him, "Why don't you take care of yourself? Will you take care of us?" He felt the figures were competing with one another to enter his head and take possession of his body. He describes,

"I wanted to hide in a quiet place, but there were always creatures and sounds. There were voices coming from the grass. There was an image of a black creature. The rice fields were full of voices."

When occupied by these spirits, Pak Kereta would stay inside the family compound to avoid social contact. Other times, he would leave home for days, hiding in solitary places such as remote rice fields or the deeply cut canyons that crisscross the Balinese landscape. He finally refused to leave his room at all, at which point his family brought him to a *balian*, or traditional healer. According to the *balian* his illness was caused by witchcraft. Pak Kereta stayed at his compound for a month to receive treatment. His experiences with spirit beings gradually waned over time. When he did experience a relapse in symptoms, he would seek out different treatments, including traditional healing and pharmacological interventions prescribed by psychiatrists at the Wanjaya and Bangli mental hospitals in Bali. Certain social and political stressors continued to trouble in his daily life, including enduring contact with neighbors and family members who took part in the violence against his loved ones during the events of 1965. This residual fear would occasionally exacerbate his condition; for example, during the national election campaigns in 2002–2003, when Indonesia elected its first-ever democratically elected president, the spirits returned. This time they were asking Kereta to rejoin the Communist Party.

"They want to take my body and make me a communist."

In response to these lingering attacks he wore a camouflage jacket and military helmet, and slept outside in his family temple courtyard. He believed these actions prevented the spirits from entering his body and forcing him to return to the PKI.

Kereta has come to terms with the fact that the spirit beings will be with him indefinitely. He seems to have gained a certain degree of peace with the shadows and illuminations that visit him, yet he also describes long periods where he does not see or hear any spirits at all. He is able to contribute to the family livelihood through farming and making offerings to sell in the market, and is treated fondly by his wife, sons, and brother.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: THE MASS-KILLINGS OF 1965

The events of 1965 remain some of the most significant, disturbing, and yet least discussed events in Indonesian history. Both a taboo subject within the country and little known globally, the events of 1965 continue to resonate on personal, social, and political levels for many Indonesian citizens.

On the night of September 30, 1965, six high-ranking Indonesian generals were murdered and their bodies disposed of in a well in the outskirts of Jakarta. While the reasons for, and perpetrators of, these deaths remains contested to this day, at the time the violence was framed as part of a *coup d'etat* attempted by communists and those affiliated with them. Up until the purported coup, the communist party or *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI) was an entirely legal



political organization. In fact, it was one of the largest parties in the nation and worked closely with then-President Sukarno; however, as President Sukarno's power was waning and global anti-communist sentiment was growing, party members became the scapegoats for a military bloodbath that swept across Bali and other areas of Indonesia. Between 80,000 and 100,000 Balinese, or approximately 5–8 percent of the population, were killed between December 1965 and March 1966. Estimates for the number of people killed nationwide are somewhere between 500,000 and 1 million. Thousands more were imprisoned and

subjected to torture, forced labor, and other harsh conditions, sometimes being held for many years. The primary victims of this violence were alleged PKI-members and those accused of being sympathetic to the communist cause. The perpetrators of violence included military and paramilitary forces, those neighbors and family members who voluntarily informed on or attacked other villagers, and those who were forced into violent acts through threats of death or further violence. In the film, Kereta describes his own personal experience of this horrific time.

The events of 1965 had reverberations for decades as former president Suharto led a campaign to officially frame them in a way that supported his "New Order" regime (1966–98) and to stigmatize, ostracize, and blacklist those who were perceived as supporting the communists. This included not only former PKI members, but also their extended families. A "clean environment" policy (*lingkungan bersih*) legally banned family members of the PKI from holding various jobs or civil office and limited their civil rights. Until Suharto's fall in 1998, any public discussion of the events of 1965 that was at variance with the official government version was forbidden, and those who engaged in it were jailed or "disappeared."

The current situation in Indonesia regarding the events and aftermath of 1965 remains deeply ambivalent. Since the end of the "New Order" regime, a number of grass-roots organizations have

formed with the mission to investigate the truth about the mass killings, disseminate accurate information, initiate dialogue about the past, and get closure and justice for victims' families. For example, the Yogyakarta-based *Yayasan Penelitian Korban Pembunuhan* 1965-1966 (The Research Foundation for the Victims of the 1965-66 Killings) is active in identifying victims and leveraging political recourse for their families. *Inside Indonesia*, an esteemed publication featuring scholarship and journalism on culture and politics, published an entire issue dedicated to the events of 1965 in early 2010 and many individuals are coming forward to speak about, and even publish, their memoirs of the time.

However, such efforts co-exist with continuing censorship and governmental control. For example, in 1997 those history textbooks that did not explicitly blame the communist party for the coup and upheaval of 1965 were burned by the government and accused by the Attorney General of carrying the "latent danger of communism," and despite growing interest in Indonesia books of the topic of '65 have been banned for "disturbing public order. Up until the present day, progressive calls for more transparency with regards to 1965 are still in tension with a social climate where many people remain distrustful of the communist party and are afraid of its associations.

BALINESE COSMOLOGY & WONG SAMAR

Some viewers may find Kereta's communications with the spirit world to be an entirely unfamiliar

realm of experience and behavior. However it is important to understand that while the frequency and intensity of Kereta's interaction with unseen beings certainly goes beyond that which is considered normal for most Balinese, many Balinese do experience some form of interaction with the spirit world over the course of their lives. Furthermore, the content of Kereta's visions is deeply grounded in a culturally specific and commonly shared cosmology.

The fundamental structure of the Balinese universe, which pervades and shapes many aspects of Balinese life including the phenomenology and perception of mental health or illness, acknowledges Sekala and Niskala. Sekala is the visible world and Niskala is the invisible world; they are commonly interpreted by scholars to indicate "natural" and "supernatural" domains. A similar central ordering principle of the Balinese worldview is the distinction



between *buana alit* (little world) and *buana agung* (great world), where the *buana agung* is seen as the macrocosm, or universe, and the *buana alit* as the microcosm, the universe as embodied within each individual Balinese person.

From a Balinese perspective these two areas are not clearly bounded but rather in constant and dynamic interaction with one another. Therefore rather than delineating two discrete worlds, these

categories may be most useful in distinguishing between the various aspects of power that pervade the world and the kinds of experiences that are possible in it.

One kind of experience that is widely agreed to be possible is interaction with the numerous spiritual beings such as ghosts, witches (*leyak*), demons (*buta kala*), and departed souls, which are believed to inhabit the rivers, graveyards, ravines, and banyan trees of the Balinese landscape. While these beings tend to inspire fear, there are also many powerful protective spirits: for example, the *barong* is a beloved and familiar figure responsible for the wellbeing of the village and frequently represented in dance and drama. The *kanda mpat* are the four sibling spirits every Balinese person is born with and are perceived to be very potent agents with the power to harm or aid, depending on how they are treated. Most Balinese believe in the existence of all these spirits, have active relationships with them, and provide them with sometimes-daily religious offerings. Furthermore, traditional healers and ritual specialists are frequently possessed by various spirits and utilize them to diagnose and treat illnesses and to redress familial and other social problems.

Therefore, in attempting to understand what is extraordinary about Pak Kereta's experience one must acknowledge the spiritual orientation of the Balinese and the importance of *Niskala* in the shape of everyday life; in other words, in the context of Balinese belief it is not Pak Kereta's visions per se that indicate an abnormal condition but rather the role they have played and the course they have taken in his life.

The wong samar, the spirits Kereta engages with on a regular basis, are a potent class of spirit beings that have linkages to Balinese history, mythology, and culture stretching back at least 700 years. During the migration and wars of the Majapahit era in the mid-1500's, a semi-mythical leader from Java named I. Macaling brought an army of spiritual beings called the wong samar to conquer Nusa Penida, an island off the coast of southern Bali. While they were ultimately defeated, it was believed that the wong samar lived on in the spirit world after the battle and that people could avoid illness and death by paying tribute to them with proper religious respect and supplication. While it may seem bizarre that Kereta mentions being married to a wong samar, indeed in Bali it is believed that people can take such spirits as wives. They are reputed to be affectionate and loyal spouses if treated with respect, although become vengeful if neglected. They are commonly though to have flattened upper lips, float an inch above the ground, and live in canyons or remote rice fields.

Wong samar remain ambivalent figures in folk belief today; some folktales describe wong samar as frightening creatures that live in the woods and try to snatch temple dancers, while other villages boast that their market is frequently visited by wong samar at night and say that if you encounter a wong samar they might give you a special gift. Various mystical or mysterious occurrences continue to be attributed to the wong samar up until the present day, such as a case in February of 2005 where wong samar were believed to be leaving portentous white marks on buildings and temples all across Bali. Certainly not every Balinese will see the wong samar for him or herself, yet clearly Kereta's beliefs about the wong samar and his propitious relationship with them have a deep cultural basis.

PTSD, NGEB & CULTURAL MODELS OF TRAUMA RESPONSE

When considering Kereta's life history and trying to understand both the phenomenology and etiology of his interaction with invisible beings, certainly we must take into account the traumas that he has suffered in his life: the assassination of his father and the witness of a violent massacre, the tragic loss of his baby daughter, and the sudden fear that he had accidentally poisoned himself. However we must also take into account the fact that various models of stress response may offer different insights into Kereta's suffering and his experience of the supernatural world.

Those coming from a Western psychiatric perspective might hypothesize that Kereta is in part suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. PTSD is an anxiety disorder that can occur after a traumatic or life-threatening event. Common symptoms of PTSD are re-experiencing events, also known as flashbacks; hyper-arousal, which can include feeling jittery or keyed up; and insomnia, depression, or numbness. In some cases symptoms of PTSD may not emerge for a long period following exposure to traumatic events.



PTSD has gained currency in popular and psychological discourses in recent years to the point that is has become a common global diagnosis, ever more frequently used to administer global "psychological first aid" interventions in such cases as ethnic conflict and natural disasters. However, it is important to acknowledge that PTSD is both a historically situated and culturally specific construction of trauma response that gained currency in America in the wake of the Vietnam War. Therefore it may not be the perfect fit to describe the trauma responses of those with different backgrounds.

Recent research suggests that although the neurobiological processes underlying an acute posttraumatic stress response have universal components, their temporal configuration and interaction is powerfully shaped by developmental, social, and cultural contexts. For example, the complexity of remembering and forgetting painful past events in the Indonesian context is affected by prevalent cultural ideas about emotional expression. Javanese and Balinese cultures value interpersonal harmony and therefore call for the management and regulation of strong or negative feelings. It is believed that ignoring these cultural norms for containment challenges the cosmological order and so risks exposing the community to natural disasters and other catastrophic retribution.

Kereta himself describes his illness as "ngeb." For the Balinese, ngeb is an illness caused by witnessing something horrific or bizarre. As a result of these frightening experiences, sufferers put

themselves in a self-imposed exile characterized by muteness and a lack of participation in the social world. Kereta believes his *ngeb* began with the witnessing of the massacre in 1965. Following the death of his infant daughter, this initial *ngeb* was compounded by visual and auditory hallucinations of the *wong samar* world.

One could consider Pak Kereta as delusional, and some psychiatrists may refer to *ngeb* as mental illness. However, *ngeb* is also quite resonant with the Balinese practice of *puik*, intentional silence and social avoidance, or a kind of social commentary indicating the person is *koh ngomong*, or "fed up of speaking." In the case of '65, this intentional silence was compounded by a national political culture that, until the fall of Suharto, made the public expression of distress or memory a dangerous act. Kereta's social avoidance and isolation, as signaled by *ngeb*, have their origins in witnessing a trauma that until recently had a schematized and politically monolithic construction in Indonesia's historical memory and a fear-inducing and stigmatizing enactment in daily village life. While it might seem obvious to outsiders that Kereta is a victim and survivor of a politically based massacre bordering on genocide, he is viewed by members of his community as being an instigator of the events of 1965, because he was a communist party sympathizer. Only in 2004 could his brother say that Kereta himself had been forgiven by villagers for causing the "disorder" of the events of 1965.



It is significant that Kereta has several friends and neighbors who also witnessed the violence of 1965, are similarly characterized as *ngeb*, and similarly avoid social gatherings. This model of trauma response can be interpreted as a fear of memorializing and hence disrupting or endangering the community, where in an effort to suppress this need to remember, the person with *ngeb* enters into an all-encompassing social withdrawal. However, *ngeb* can also be viewed as a means of active political protest; from this perspective, individuals with *ngeb* arising from 1965 become mute witnesses against the domination and control that the Suharto regime imposed on Indonesia following its ascendancy in 1965.

However one chooses to interpret it, Kereta's of *ngeb* case emphasizes the cultural specificity of trauma response and the potential for even disturbing symptoms of illness to act as a form of social and political resistance.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES OF MENTAL ILLNESS

As we see in the film, Pak Kereta has been given the diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia by his psychiatrist Ibu Luh Ketut Suryani. This diagnosis comes with some benefits in that it gives Kereta access to the medications that he and his wife both report have had a positive effect on his emotional state and his behavior. These medications may actually be more efficacious at relieving his symptoms than other forms of traditional healing, perhaps because they are able to address the neurobiology of his condition (for more on this topic, please see *Traditional Healing and Neuropsychological Disorders* in accompanying *Afflictions* guide).



However, labeling Pak Kereta's visions as a symptom of schizophrenia may have some drawbacks as well. As discussed in the case of PTSD and trauma response above, a neurobiological view of mental illness may elide the cultural and historical specificity of idioms of distress and their expression. Furthermore, globalizing models of mental illness may assume or project a Western construction of the self and a view of mental disturbance that, while well intentioned, may not in fact translate into a better prognosis for those afflicted or their families. Through both sweeping changes in strategies of mental health care as well as targeted campaigns by mental health organizations it has become accepted in the United States to view and treat mental illnesses, such as depression or bipolar disorder, as "brain diseases" over which the ill person has no more control than they might over an infection or other organic illness. The rationale behind this conceptual shift is that by revealing the biological underpinning of psychic suffering, blame and therefore stigma can be relieved from those experiencing it, which in turn might translate into less social isolation and marginalization. The surge in funding focused on this biological model has created a network of resources for the mentally ill in the US and Europe, especially with regards to pharmaceutical treatment, and has influenced international health standards over the past 20 years. Converse to expectations, however, as the push to medicalize mental illness has gained force public attitudes towards those with schizophrenia in the United States have actually shown increased levels of fear and marginalization.

In comparative studies, particularly in cross-cultural studies of schizophrenia, the opposite appears to be true: those in developing countries which do not take a strictly biological approach to mental illness appear to fare better over time than those living in industrialized nations. A 30-year longitudinal study conducted by the World Health Organization starting in the 1970's showed similar results, with patients living outside the United States and Europe having dramatically lower relapse rates. We might take Pak Kereta's excellent long-term outcome as emblematic of this trend. Despite his ongoing struggles with his invisible beings, his role within the family remains

secure, as he is surrounded by loving and caring kin who are mindful of his symptoms, accepting of his idiosyncrasies, and providing of crucial structure and stability. This situation is much better than that which we might presume he would have in America, where many people with schizophrenia unfortunately end up homeless and isolated.

This better prognosis may be due to the understanding of the self in relationship to affliction. In the American view, while stigma may seek to be decreased through a blameless view of "disease," this disease becomes associated with the person's identity in a culture where models of the self emphasize individual agency and the ability to overcome personal problems through effort and force of will. Many traditional cultures regard the self in different terms — as inseparable from the kinship group and ancestral network and openly affected by other spiritual beings. Indeed in many parts of the world, such as Bali, spiritual possession or visitation explanations remain quite common in the case of schizophrenic symptoms, which may in fact be quite beneficial for those suffering. By locating the source of the trouble outside the individual, affliction could be seen as something that was happening to the person rather than the core of their identity. Additionally, there are a number of proscribed social interventions and ministrations that mandate the support of the family and kinship group, which might be most effective in helping to control the long-term course of the illness.

The protective effects of this approach appear to be fairly stable; research done by influential psychiatrist and schizophrenia researcher Emil Kraeplin as far back as the early nineteen hundreds suggested that symptoms of schizophrenia were less severe in Indonesians and their overall prognosis overall much better. Of course, not every family will be able to provide the same amount of support and the vagaries of individual experience will play a part in determining the long-term prognosis of anyone with abnormal or unusual mentation. However, Kereta's fairly successful outcome, which is the result of a combination of long-term family support and psychiatric intervention, the work of anthropologists, psychologists, and mental health care providers must continue to search for integrative models that allow for access to the widest possible swathe of efficacious intervention while remaining attentive to those social and familial models which provide the most enduring and viable long-term support for those who live with mental illness.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Inside Indonesia 99: The Killings of 1965-66. http://www.insideindonesia.org/index.php/current-edition-mainmenu-178/1278-99-current-edition

40 Years of Silence: An Indonesian Tragedy. Documentary film sharing four personal experiences of the violence. Available via Documentary Educational Resources, www.der.org. www.40YearsofSilence.com

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ELEMENTAL PRODUCTIONS

SHADOWS & ILLUMINATIONS: NYOMAN KERETA Understanding Experiences Beyond the Norm FILM GUIDE

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