



Weaving Spells

Hidden behind a forbidding stone wall that encloses the entire village lies the Bali Aga community of Tenganan. **Holli and Annemarie Hollitzer** fell under its spell on a recent visit

On an island where mystery is commonplace, the way of life of Tenganan villagers continues to intrigue not only foreign tourists but also other Balinese people.

The Tengananese Bali Aga or Bali Mula claim to be direct descendants of the original, indigenous Balinese, who inhabited the island long before the Hindu mass exodus from Java took place during the collapse of the Majapahit kingdom (1478–1520).

This migration saw entire courts and their artisans arrive to make their home in Bali in order to preserve their Hindu faith.

The Bali Aga religion has been traced back to an early form of pre-Majapahit Hinduism. This recognises the Hindu Trinity (Brahma, Wisnu, and Siwa) although, in the Tenganan version, the trinity is headed by Indra.

It is early morning as we step through the narrow main entrance into the compact, quiet and well-ordered village compound. In front of us stretch neat, geometric lines of houses, all identical in size and shape. There is hardly a person to be seen.

At most entrances there are billboards announcing that here lives a



geringsing weaver, a basket-maker, a lontar book scribe, and so on. All their signs welcome you to step inside.

Tenganan in south-east Bali, with its friendly inhabitants, is a popular destination for the tourist coaches.

Although the village proper is contained behind these ancient stone walls, a large territory with fertile agricultural fields also belongs to the villagers of Tenganan.

According to ancient legend it was given to them by the king of Bedahulu. He lost a much loved horse in battle. After searching for days the Tengananese party finally found the corpse of the king's horse. They were asked to name their reward.

In what seemed like a modest request they asked for the land where the horse had been found, or, more specifically, the area where the carcass could be smelled. A royal official with a keen

Only a few of the women of Tenganan continue to practise the ancient skill of double ikat weaving of *geringsing* cloth

sense of smell was sent to accompany the chief of Tenganan to measure off the land. They walked for days but could not escape the odour.

At last the exhausted official said that he felt they had covered enough land. The chief agreed and, when the official had left, he pulled from under his cloth a large piece of rotten horse flesh.

To this day, these large tracts of land provide for the needs of the villagers. The pale and refined Tengananese do not work the land themselves but hire others to till the fields, plant the rice and harvest their crops.

We follow the middle street, one of the three broad main streets that run parallel uphill towards the north, dividing the village into four long blocks of houses. The roads are built from rough river stones, with each incline leading to a long terrace. We pass cages with restless fighting-cocks, many with their feathers dyed yellow and pink, and then we reach the centre where the huge open pavilion of the *bale agung*, or council house, rises. It is the heart of Tenganan's ceremonies. Here village meetings are held and religious rituals are performed.

Nearby, the scribe I Made Pasek is just setting up his small table where he will work inscribing the adventures of the traditional heroes from the Ramayana legend on the narrow pages of a lontar book. The pages are made from thin strips, approximately 2cm x 24cm, cut from the lontar palm leaf. Using a sharp metal chisel, he painstakingly recreates the scenes from the famous epic. He then rubs his etchings with a black paste produced from ground kemiri nuts, wipes away the excess, and now every last detail of his fine line etchings stands out. When all artwork is finished, the leaves are bound between split bamboo covers into books.

On our left a sarong-clad man, his face shaded by a wide grass hat, leads his cow past us on his way to the green fields outside the northern gate. We follow him to the top terrace, where a group of buffalo roam free, stepping carefully to avoid their calling-cards. A pungent smoky smell draws our attention to an impressive display of baskets, bowls and table mats in all

shapes and sizes. These beautiful, tightly-woven products have just spent five days being cured over smoky coconut husk fires and are now ready to be sold. They are woven, not from the usual bamboo or rattan, but from a type of tough grass, *ata*, that grows in the hills around Tenganan.

I Nengah Kedep tells us that he was the first basket weaver in Tenganan when he started 45 years ago. As business grew he delegated some of his work and now there are 20 families of basket makers.

He shows us how the twisted strands of *ata* are soaked to make them pliable for weaving and then we watch a large basket take shape in his skilful hands.

"*Ata* is so strong that it will long outlast both bamboo and rattan," says I Nengah proudly.

On the ground outside his shop he has spread rows of newly-made baskets and place-mats to let them dry in the sun for one week before their final smoking.

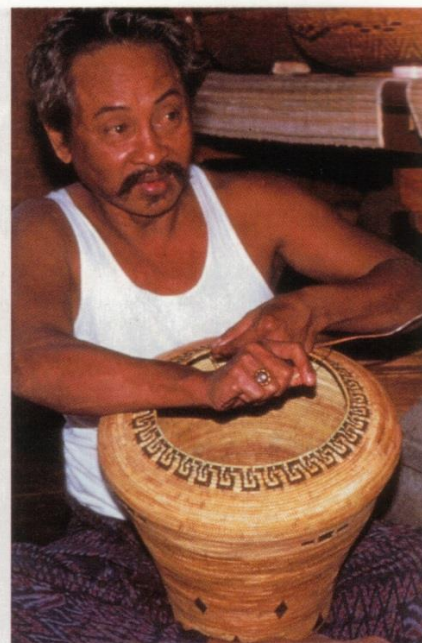
Although the fine baskets produced in Tenganan are much sought after, the craft with the greatest fame in this village is the unique *geringsing*, double *ikat* weaving, today performed by only a few of the women.

The mystic powers attributed to this cloth have given rise to a lot of legends. There are Balinese who still believe that human beings were once sacrificed to produce the dyes for these rust-red *kamben geringsing*.

The word *geringsing* means flaming or iridescent. To contain the great powers in the *kamben*, the warp is left uncut and the cloth will now help ease pain, heal wounds and protect the wearer against illness and against evil vibrations.

Not only that, but it is also said to refresh your soul and restore your mental balance. The Indonesian word *ikat* means to tie, and, while single *ikat* weaving is relatively common, the only place where the intricate and highly-prized double *ikat* is produced is in the village of Tenganan.

In this process both the warp and weft are tied and dyed before these magic cloths are woven. The process is slow and laborious and requires the skeins of handspun cotton threads to be dyed with natural products and then tied and re-dyed in many different immersions, to produce the different colours and patterns required for

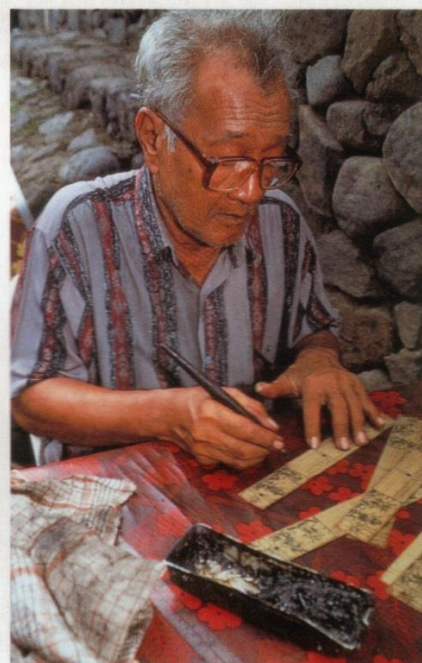


From above: Nyoman Diani demonstrates the skills of *geringsing* weaving; I Nengah Kedep, the first basket-maker in Tenganan, is still producing fine baskets and placemats; I Made Pasek sits at his small table inscribing calendars and Ramayana stories on thin strips of lontar leaves; the fighting cocks at Tenganan are often dyed pink and yellow

the traditional motifs of *wayang*, *lubeng*, *cempaka* and others.

Leaves, bark and kemiri nuts are used to make the indigo blue, black, yellow and deep rust colours that predominate in the *geringsing* cloths.

A young weaver, Nyoman Diani, points to the hanks of cotton hanging from the rafters of her house and tells us that to make the yellow colour alone takes 42 days. To then weave a perfect





Dressed in *geringsing* cloths and wearing golden head decorations the women of Tenganan perform the slow dance; the maidens of Tenganan take a ceremonial ride on the wooden bars on the old ferris wheel; Tenganan woman wearing ceremonial gold-leaf head dress



cloth, matching warp and weft, with no mistakes, requires enormous concentration, and only the very finest cloths are used in the many ceremonies at Tenganan. The imperfect ones are sold to the Balinese, for other ceremonies, and to tourists.

One indication of the great importance of *geringsing* is that the word appears in the ancient name of the village, Tenganan Pageringsingan. Our



timing is fortunate. We have arrived in the midst of a series of ceremonies and are just in time to watch the annual *mulan saat* celebration which will be followed by the *mulan daha* ritual.

The old wooden spinning chairs (simple ferris wheels) have already been erected. Here, in the dark tropical night, the maidens of Tenganan will ceremonially swing on the creaking old timber bars. But when we gaze

against the blue noon sky we find laughing young boys, dressed in immaculate sarongs, taking the old wheel for a test run.

We stay and watch the female members of the village council—*krama desa luh*, dressed up in fine, dark *geringsing* cloths—prepare for their evening procession and solo *abwang* dance. On their heads they attach hair-ornaments of betel-chew ingredients.

We are mystified as to what it all signifies and ask some of the local bystanders for the meaning of the ritual. But all they can tell us is that it has always been performed like this. Only a curious foreigner would ask why.

A few days later follows the even more important *muran desa* ceremony which is held once every three years.

The flat yard in front of the *bale agung* has been beautified with banana trees and leafy twigs and branches decorated with various citrus fruits and pale pink jambu hanging on strings. The whole area has been closed off to outsiders.

When darkness falls, a procession of men and women set off to the north, and then the maidens of the village, clad in *geringsing*, take a ceremonial walk around the old spinning chairs and finish with a ritual swing on the ancient contraption.

The women perform the slow and simple *abwang* dance while the men sit, with daggers drawn, in a row on the ground.

Tuak, the fermented palm juice produced by the men of the village, is ladled out of a bamboo container into small coconut cups.

We watch for hours, almost in a trance, intrigued by the many enigmatic happenings in front of us.

Again we are totally mystified about the meaning of these events. But, having learnt so little with our previous questions, this time we let our Western curiosity rest and yield to the Eastern mystery that is Tenganan. □

The Hollitzers are a photojournalist team based in Australia