

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BEB-17

Recipes for Health

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Jalan Seno IV/5
Tebet Barat
Jakarta Selatan
Indonesia
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Dear Peter,

The pen, goes the adage, is mightier than the sword. A hackneyed maxim? Perhaps. But on Nias, this aphorism takes on new meaning.

Here is an Indonesian island where the sword appears to have long been supreme: until recently, headhunting was an immensely popular sport and warfare the preeminent method for solving disputes. But look again. The pen is far from powerless. Weapons kill. But on Nias, writing cures.

Writing is important for the Niah. Mystic words, diagrams and symbols are considered some of the most efficacious forms of Niah medication. Pencilled on paper and then either dissolved in water and drunk or, alternatively, burned, mixed with coconut oil and rubbed onto the skin, writing can cure a variety of ailments. One type of diagram can cure headache, another reduce a fever. Still others can eradicate pregnancy difficulties or provide an antidote for certain types of poison. Writing can even exorcise demons. No sword can do that much.

Niah written cures are part of a traditional medical system that is part experience, part faith, part naturopathy and part abracadabra, a system that, more often than not, is preferred to the imported and expensive remedies of the West. Such written cures are not unique. They have much in common with the indigenous healing complexes of other Southeast Asian peoples. Elsewhere in Indonesia, in Malaysia, in Thailand and in Indo-China, writing is also used to heal and to protect. On occasion it is also used to hurt.

Threads of Sufi Islam, Hindu and Chinese beliefs run through many of these traditional preventive and curative regimens. They share in common an understanding that words, written or spoken in a specific manner, can be things of power. In Hindu belief, for example, the word om, the sound of the universe, is considered a source of sakti, of power. Incantations and spells incorporating the sound are found in the ancient Atharva-Veda, one of the collections of sacred Hindu writings. Today such magically charged writing is incorporated into Hindu amulets and talismans. Mystic diagrams like the Sri Yantra are also used to tap cosmic forces for everyday use.

Sufi beliefs are slightly different. All Muslims believe that the writing of the Koran, the Islamic holy book, is the actual Word of God, copied down verbatim as it issued from the mouth of the Prophet Muhammad. Sufis, however insist that every sentence of the Koran, indeed every word and letter, has an ordinary and a sacred, esoteric meaning. The latter, understood, can be used as a source of power. A particular Koranic phrase inscribed on an amulet or talisman can protect the wearer from harm, sickness, even bullets or knife wounds. A few letters

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muttered under the breath can bring a foe to his knees.*

The Chinese also believe in word power. Abstract and multi-leveled, Chinese ideography is easily directed into protective and curative channels. Seers and mediums use Chinese calligraphy as a conduit for communication with the netherworld. Certain characters or numerical configurations are considered "lucky" and are thus sought. Others, conversely, are "unlucky" and are avoided. Auspicious colors (red, gold, yellow) and their inauspicious counterparts (black, blue, white) add yet another level of meaning to such calligraphic beliefs. Color, configuration and content are all taken into consideration in Chinese amulets, talismans and other protective devices (such beliefs are discussed in greater detail in BEB-1, BEB-3, BEB-13 and BEB-14).

These theosophical beliefs, washing across Southeast Asia in the wake of Indian, Arab and Chinese exploratory, missionary and colonial activity were adopted and synthesized with indigenous belief systems. The resulting melange was part local, part Hindu, part Muslim and part Chinese, a little more of one here, a little less of another there, depending on the place. The resulting written cures and protective devices were equally eclectic.

On Nias, 125 kilometers (78 miles) off the west Sumatran coastline, yet another ingredient was added to the medicinal brew: Christianity. The forceful gift of Portuguese, German and Dutch missionaries and colonialists, Christianity was embraced by all but a handful of the Niah. The few that didn't, embraced Islam. The traditional medical system embraced both. The resulting formulas and diagrams contained fragments of Koranic verse, astrological symbols, numbers, geometric figures, Greek letters, crescents, crosses, as well as forms with no apparent analogues in conventional script. Though today their application is understood, the reasons for such eclectic juxtapositions are now long forgotten, esoteric and arcane even to the dukun, the main practitioners of traditional Niah medicine.

One such dukun is Milyar Wau, better known as Ama Yanti ("father of Yanti," his eldest daughter and first-born child). A slight, spry, broad-faced man in his mid-thirties, Ama Yanti lives with his wife, Ina Yanti ("mother of Yanti"), in Lagundri, a small Muslim fishing village in South Nias. They make their living running a three-bedroom, thatch-and-bamboo losmen, a hostel catering to the foreign surfers and other tourists that often visit the beach (tourism on Nias is discussed in BEB-16). Ama Yanti also teaches Islamic religion classes at the local government primary school. Their losmen is simply and sparsely furnished: a few rough-hewn benches and tables, some pressure lamps, wall calendars from neighboring Telukdalam (to patch holes and provide an bit of decoration), kapok mattresses and sleeping platforms for the guests, and a worn lemari (cabinet) where crockery, cutlery and Ama Yanti's magic books are stored.

Magic books? That's right. Ama Yanti possesses two thin, dog-eared volumes, each the size of a typical paperback novel, bound with batik-patterned cardboard

*Such beliefs have spawned a thriving protective decal and sign business throughout Muslim Southeast Asia. Pressure-sensitive charms and amulets, though not yet standard accessories, are considered important additions to the car, home and other vulnerable property. Thai Buddhists, Balinese Hindus and Filipino Christians have their own versions of this mass-produced protective imagery.

covers, the kind of exercise book available at most Indonesian stationary stores. The glued seams of Ama Yanti's volumes disintegrated long ago. Now they are held together with a tatoo of staples and yellowing cellophane tape, a record of their travels around Nias as Ama Yanti gathered magical knowledge from the best dukuns in the land.

Inside the imprint of time and travel is just as apparent. The pages are worn and stained. Some are now illegible. All are covered with diagrams, symbols and script in a spiky, uneven hand, sometimes cursive, sometimes block-lettered. Some pages are in pencil, some are in ballpoint, others are in felt-tip. Photocopies of other dukuns' work are folded and pressed here and there between the leaves. Explanatory writing is in both Romanized and Arabic-style Indonesian as well as Romanized Niah.

Ama Yanti began his books when he began his magical training, soon after he began to learn to read the Koran. He had many teachers, sought out as his family moved from town to town: first to Gunungsitoli in the north, then to Telukdalam in the south and finally to Lagundri. Some of Ama Yanti's magical gurus were Islamic religious teachers; others were Christians. Some were powerful dukuns; others were but simple farmers who cast spells and wrote magic formulas as a sideline. Ama Yanti himself never became a professional dukun. Today, he employs his magical talents only on family and friends and only for free.

Nor is he secretive about most of his magical knowledge. He shares the contents of his magic books willingly, explaining formulas and diagrams as best he can. With especially powerful magic, however, he must be pressed. The famed nurcahaya, for example, the magic of the eyes, is considered dangerous in the hands of novices; it can be used to influence the thoughts and actions of friends and enemies alike. Ama Yanti will divulge such secrets, but reluctantly. Perhaps he has some magic more secret still, known only to himself.

Ama Yanti's magic volumes are each divided into two sections. The first sections are diagnostic, describing diseases and their symptoms. The second sections are curative, with magic diagrams, incantations, spells and procedural instructions. Once an ailment has been located in section I of either book it is matched with a cure in section II.

Though Ama Yanti claims to have gleaned the very best magic formulas, discarding the chaff, some of his treatments are surprisingly vague. Whole categories of affliction, poisoning for example, rate only a few magic diagrams. Elsewhere, page after page is filled with detailed descriptions of the various permutations of an illness and the time consuming rituals necessary to heal, as in childbirth. In all, the volumes read more like traditional recipe books than medical texts, providing guidelines, not dogma, except where specificity is absolutely necessary. Much goes unstated. Yanti has put in only what he needs to jog his memory - the underlying ritual structure is often pretty much the same from treatment to treatment: write, apply, wait. Hope.

Pregnancy madness, or buru, is apparently widespread on Nias. It gets quite a bit of attention in Ama Yanti's magic books. The Niah, in common with other Southeast Asian peoples, believe that women, especially when pregnant, are vulnerable to evil magic. Often a Niah man's enemies will attack him

through his pregnant wife, using magic to drive her to morose despondency, giddy idiocy, suicide (from the roof, by jumping; in the sea, by drowning) or simple listlessness. Some mild forms of buru require but a diagram or two and perhaps an incantation. But in the particularly vicious forms, where a woman is possessed by the spirit of another woman who died in childbirth, a complex exorcism is required. Ama Yanti has some ten buru cures in all. Some have been used on Ina Yanti, with apparent success: though she has had four children, she appears healthy and strong and of a cheerful disposition.*

Ama Yanti is a "good" dukun, a practitioner of white magic. His treatments and charms are employed to help, to protect. Buru and other spiritual afflictions are usually the work of evil dukun, the practitioners of black magic. Some of these latter even run Nias-style "protection" rackets, offering to protect a man's wife from evil magic, perpetrating the evil, and then collecting a handsome fee for the cure. How does one tell black and white dukuns apart? Well, evil dukuns don't always look evil; but they do like to meditate near the sea, the abode of poisonous serpents and evil spirits. Peninsulas and headlands are their favorite meditation spots. White dukuns, on the other hand, prefer mountaintops and other high places, the abodes of the gods and good spirits. Though Ama Yanti lives near the sea, he traces his lineage to Orohili, a mountain village some fifteen kilometers (nine miles) from Lagundri. He visits there often.

Ama Yanti's first concern is his family, and to protect them he protects his home. Before placing the first house-post of his losmen, the tongkat tuo,

* Throughout the region, what a pregnant woman sees, hears, does or otherwise experiences is thought to affect the health of the fetus. Light, clear skin, for example, is considered a desirable attribute throughout Southeast Asia. Some pregnant women will spend months poring over magazine photos of light-skinned film stars and models in the belief that their child will then be fair and beautiful. Others will try to avoid exposure to direct sunlight for the same reasons. Javanese women are advised not to bear ill-will towards anyone during their pregnancy, else their child will most assuredly look like that person. Sundanese women have similar beliefs. They also carry a small, sharp object, perhaps a small knife, for the duration of the pregnancy, to ward off devils and demons. Many Southeast Asian peoples believe that the fetus must actually be informed of what the mother is doing during the pregnancy, else it will be affected by that action, often adversely. A Chinese woman in Jakarta for example, decided to remodel her house while pregnant. A wall separating two adjoining rooms was removed in the process, but the fetus was not informed. When born, her baby had a harelip; its nose lacked a septum. Another Jakarta woman decided to replace the stuffing in her mattress while pregnant. The fetus was not informed and when born proved to be a ravenous eater. Yet another mother neglected to consult her fetus while cutting up pillow material. The child was born missing a hand. In each case the deformity or personality trait is thought to have been the direct result of an action during the pregnancy. Such beliefs are tenacious; few mothers are willing to chance the health of their child by ignoring them.

he first sacrificed a chicken, muttered an incantation and placed a piece of magically-charged paper in the post-hole. The front corner poles of the home were similarly treated. Later, protective diagrams and incantations were written on paper and affixed to the tongkat tuo. Pieces of red cloth and aromatic woods were attached to the main roof supports. Ama Yanti didn't make these protective charms himself. Not one to take chances, he purchased them from a dukun who specializes in home magic. Thus far they have worked: nothing has ever been stolen from his losmen and no one has ever come to physical harm there.

And what does Ama Yanti think of Western medicine? Some illnesses, he admits, are best treated by a doctor, not a dukun. Ama Yanti's malaria cure, for example, is of questionable efficacy: a louse inserted in a particular type of banana (pisang mas) and eaten once a day for three successive days. Malarial prophylactics and curative medicines like Fansidar and Chloriquin, seem to work better. To be sure, Ama Yanti uses both types of medication, Western and local. Broken bones, however, are best treated by local means. Ama Yanti cited two cases where Western-trained Indonesian doctors were proven wrong. In one case a patient who had fallen and broken his leg was declared a cripple: he would never walk again. Another, injured during a soccer match, was ordered to undergo a leg amputation. Both victims ignored the doctors' advice and visited dukuns. In each case, after a few months of massage and magic treatment, both were walking. The soccer player was even back on the field, scoring goals for his team.

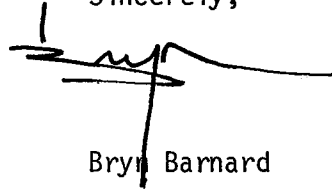
Such stories may say more about the quality of Western-style medical practitioners on Nias than the efficacy of local cures. Nias is considered an outpost by most Indonesians, far from the mainstream. Government bureaucrats, teachers and doctors view service on the island as a sort of purgatory and work there with reluctance. The best positions, the choice plums with the best salaries and most prestige, are in Jakarta or other large cities like Medan and Surabaya. The best hospital facilities are in these areas as well. Consequently, though the cities are not immune to medical incompetence and mis-diagnosis they tend to have the best doctors. The dregs end up in Timor, in Sabu - and in Nias. Though the medicines they dispense may be of a quality comparable to that of their urban colleagues, their training often is not. To have a bone set, or for surgery, one might do better with a dukun.

The best doctors on Nias have traditionally been the German missionaries. For a time they ran a small hospital in the southern Nias town of Hilisimaetanö. But the missionaries are leaving now. The Indonesian government, rightly enough, prefers local religious officials to foreigners. With their departure, the hospital is said to have closed. Now the Niah must depend on Indonesian doctors in Telukdalam and Gunungsitoli.

As long as Western-style medical treatment remains confined to the towns and of questionable quality, traditional Niah medicine will undoubtedly continue to thrive, even as other aspects of traditional Niah culture deteriorate and vanish (a phenomenon discussed in BEB-16). But even good Western-style medical treatment, widely available, may by no means vanquish the traditional Niah healing system. Countries like Malaysia and Singapore, with modern hospitals, the latest drugs and world-class surgeons, doctors and psychiatric specialists may have fewer dukuns per capita than Nias, but these certainly do not suffer from any lack of clientele. Many people in Malaysia and Singapore swear by their dukun (called

bomohs locally) as the only way to treat certain types of illness. The West certainly has no proven love charm, no cure for impotence induced by a jilted lover, no protection against demons, ghosts, or the spirits of slighted ancestors. For such culturally-specific ailments, the dukuns are still the best alternative available. Even for more universal afflictions, like broken bones, the dukuns can occasionally succeed where doctors cannot. The Niah, like other Southeast Asians, are practical people when it comes to medicine. They use what they can afford. They use what seems to work best. Are they really so very different from us?

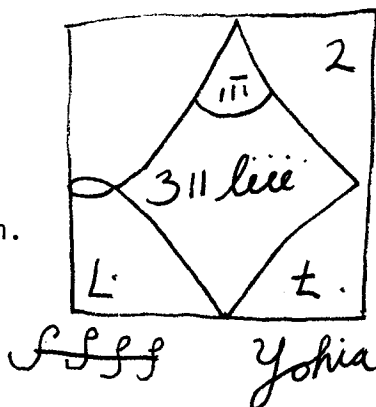
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bryn Barnard'. The signature is stylized with a long horizontal stroke and a vertical line extending downwards from the center.

Bryn Barnard

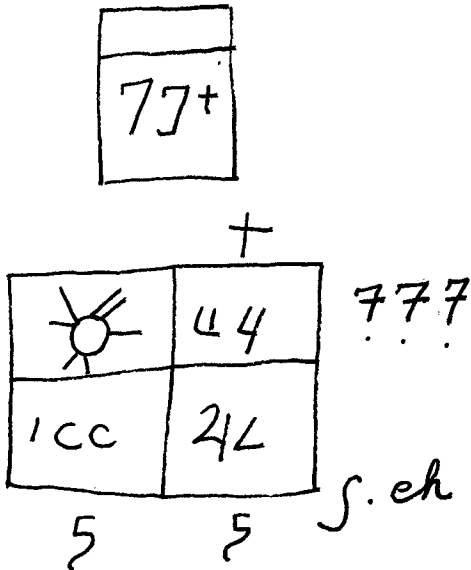
Following are samples of magic formulas as copied from Ama Yanti's magic books. Information from the first and second sections of each volume have been combined here.

1. For infection. Write the diagram on paper in red pencil. Place in coconut oil. Rub the coconut oil into the infected area with a circular motion.



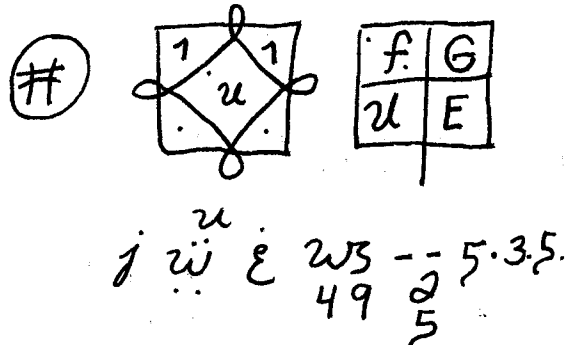
2. For someone who has met a ghost and has chills and fever such that he cannot eat. Write the diagram in red pencil on paper, dissolve the writing in a glass of water and drink.

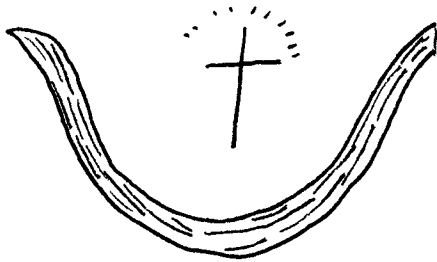
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3. For the evil spirit of a pregnant woman who died while pregnant and tries to eat the spirit of a living pregnant woman. Write the diagram in red pencil on paper; place in coconut oil until the colored writing has dissolved. Massage into skin.

4. For a breast infection caused before a child refuses to breast feed. Write this diagram in red pencil three times on three pieces of paper. 1. Put in water and drink. 2. Add to some coconut oil and after the red pencil dissolves massage into skin. 3. Place under the victim's pillow .

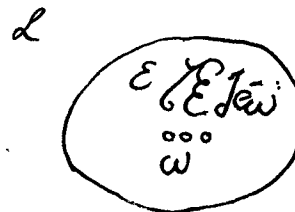
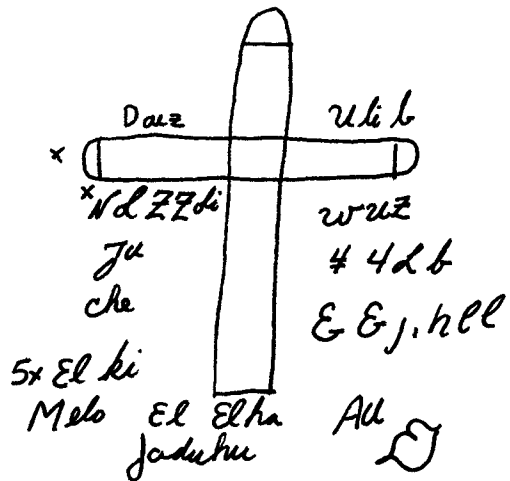
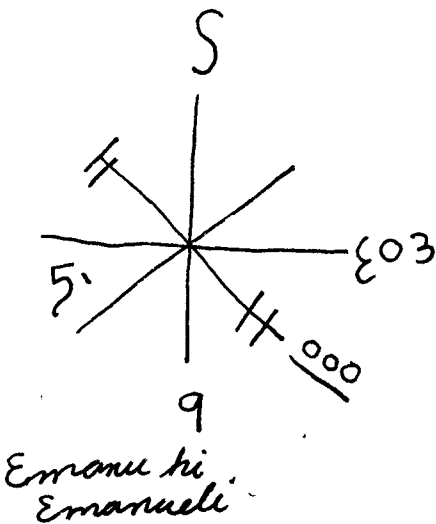


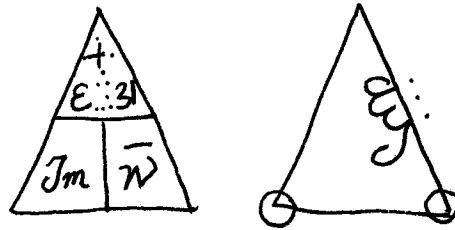


7. For a woman who wants to make birth easier. Dissolve the diagram, written in red pencil on paper, in a glass of water. Drink.

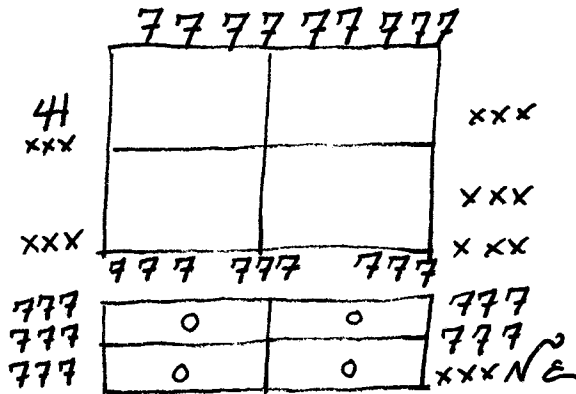
5. For someone who has eaten poison. Write the diagram in red pencil on paper and place in some young coconut water with some sugar. Drink.

6. For someone with bara ula, a snake-like swelling in the legs that if left untreated can kill the victim. Write the diagram in red pencil on paper; place in a dish of coconut oil and burn it. Rub the residue into the affected area with a circular motion.





8. For a pregnant woman afflicted by masuk angin (evil humors). Write the diagram in red pencil on paper and dissolve the writing in water. Drink half the glass; use the rest for massage.



9. For a pregnant woman unable to give birth. Write the diagram in red pencil on paper and dissolve the writing in water. Drink half the glass; use the rest for massage.

10. A three day treatment for a pregnant woman unable to give birth.

Day I

1. Collect six kapas leaves at 4:00 in the afternoon.
2. Around 6:00pm take a walking stick and wedge it under the rafters of the atap thatch roof with the head of the stick pointing up. Take the six kapas leaves and wedge them between the stick and the atap.
3. Early the next day remove two of the leaves and wash them.
4. Take two bowls. Put some water that has been heated and cooled in each bowl until one-half full. Then squeeze the washed kapas leaves, one into each bowl.
5. The husband should then drink from one bowl and the afflicted wife from the other. Do this three times a day until all six leaves have been used.
6. On each of the following afternoons for a total of three days collect more leaves and follow the same procedure.

Day II.

1. On the second day, after the first round of kapas water has been drunk, take two young coconuts.
2. Get some rock sugar the weight of two Dutch coins.
3. That evening husk the coconuts and place the skin in the well for the night.
4. Early the next day, take the skin from the well and place it in an aluminum pan. Put this in the sleeping room.
5. At 6:00pm take the young coconuts and in each punch a hole in one of their eyes. Put the rock sugar inside. Wash your hands. Place the coconuts in a plate full of water and place this on top of the atap roof to collect dew for one night.
6. Early the next morning take the two coconuts and pour the contents into a bowl each. The husband and wife should then drink from one of the bowls each.

Day III.

1. Two white ripe pineapples.
2. Two cents worth of batu dawe (a type of spice)
3. Procedure: Husk the pineapples, remove the eyes and finely shred the meat. Place the meat in a one-half jumba (a measure of volume) pot with the batu dawe. Place a new banana leaf on top of the pot and then close it with the lid. Cook the mixture gently over a low flame, without boiling, until well-cooked. The mixture should then be eaten and drunk by the couple. Each time they want to eat some of the mixture it should be heated.

Remember:

1. During the period of treatment, the couple cannot have sexual intercourse.

2. Afterwards they should only have sexual intercourse one week following the cessation of the woman's monthly menstrual periods.
3. On the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first and twenty-eighth day of the lunar month the couple should refrain from sexual intercourse.
4. After the treatment the couple should surrender themselves to Allah and not forget that mankind follows but one path, and that is the path of Allah.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Ama Yanti for permission to reproduce his magic formulas for this newsletter and to Carrie Hammes for use of her copies of Ama Yanti's formulas (diagrams 1,3,4 and 7).

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