

THE GAJAH MINA

To me, much of the attraction to this Island is the many mythological references that are drawn upon to construct the social fabric of daily Balinese life. Being raised in suburban Melbourne, as a child, Australian culture offered few fabled characters for me to explore. The indigenous Aboriginal culture has the amazing Dreamtime, yet, this is neither part of my heritage, nor something introduced to the inhabitants with migrant ancestry. Being a Christian society, of course children could rejoice in the Easter Bunny and Father Christmas and also the many characters from American pop culture.

Nowadays, when I learn more of the Balinese culture and folklore it is readily consumed by my passion for the fantastic. So, it is with enthusiasm that I share with you this local character: the Gajah Mina.

Picture your ideal Balinese beach setting. Tropical sun, white sand, turquoise blue water and palm trees gently swaying in the sea breeze. In the background canoes are perched up beyond the high tide mark. Upon the bow of the Jukung, the traditional Balinese double outrigger canoe, we find an incarnation of this legendary creature. You may know the face already. One colorful eye carved on each side of the bow and the open, elongated beak of a being somewhat like a marlin. This is the Gajah Mina.

Its' origins derive from the Hindu mythological creature called the Makara, the elephant headed fish. In the sacred Hindu text the Makara became the vehicle God Varuna and the Goddess Ganga. The character of the Gajah Mina is also a symbol of the Balinese Astrology. Traditionally, the Balinese fear of the supernatural has prevented them from climbing great mountains and taking to the oceans. They believe that the mountains and the skies are the realms of the Gods, the middle world for humans and the oceans the home of the malevolent and the spirits of the underworld.

The Gajah Mina's bulging round eyes, with big black pupils, are larger than one's fist. The stylized upper beak of the snout is up to a meter and a half in length, protruding menacingly upward, on a forty-five degree angle. Often a large hooked tooth is carved into the lower jaw. The inside of the beak is colored flaming red. A small elephant trunk may be fixed at the junction of where the bow and the upper beak intersect. The Jukungs are brightly painted white, yellow or green, powered by sail and outboard motors, yet they are also equipped and ready to encounter foes from the underworld.

Although the Jukung undergoes a rigorous process of ritual and ceremony during its construction, it is the mythical persona of the Gajah Mina that bestows the vessel with the necessary spiritual fortitude. The Gajah Mina's spirit empowers the vessel with the ability to navigate treacherous waters and the fierce bulging eyes are to ward off the evil spirits and to see in the dark. Many Hindu temples are nestled on the coastline, directly facing the ocean. Yet, in only a few will you see the manifestation of the Gajah Mina as a temple guard statue, watching over those visible and otherwise that enter the grounds. Or, as to my surprise, I discovered it as the pivotal deity of a temple, beautifully enshrined and attentive to the ceremonies and prayers held in its' presence.

The Gajah Mina is immortalized in temples in Sanur, Serangan and Amed, however, by far the most impressive specimen is to be found on the large southern island, in the village of Ped, on the east coast of Nusa Penida. Here, in the Pura Penetaran Dalem, hallowed within his very own temple, is the most magnificent Gajah Mina sculpture to be found in Bali. It is longer than 2 meters and with a scaly fish body, more than a meter high and wide. Its open jaw is lined with large fangs, it has elephant ears and tusks, as well as a trunk, raised in defiance. Constructed in concrete, adorned with an elaborate ceremonial headdress and painted white with red, black and gold highlights, this beast has attained God like status.

Along the east and northern coasts of Bali you will find Jukungs lining the beaches. So be on the look out for this guardian creature. When you encounter the Gajah Mina please take a moment to appreciate and to fantasize about its presence. And then, you too, may be seduced by another of the mythical wonders of Pulau Dewata (the Island of the Gods).

