



Balinese Hinduism is called Agama Tirta, the religion of holy waters, and the spring waters of Tirta Empul are the holiest on the island. There is a very old stone that is brought to Tirta Empul from a nearby island to be ritually bathed on each full moon of the fourth month of the Balinese year. Only recently has the inscription on the stone been deciphered. It was dated 962 and describes the ritual bathing that has been going since ancient times.

How did this spring come into its reputation? Long, long ago King Mayadanawa of Bedulu practiced magic to keep control over his subjects. He had great pride in his magical powers. He boasted, "I have more power than the gods themselves! Why should anyone give offerings to the gods? My people should give their offerings to me!"

The gods were outraged to hear this. And the great god of thunder, Indra, led a punishing army of gods against this foolish, boasting king. Indra was most powerful, and appeared with a weapon in each of his four arms, riding a golden chariot onto the battlefield beside the river Petanu. Each of his gods and goddesses had special weapons and magic of their own. It was a fierce battle that made the mountains tremble and the winds moan, but the gods eventually defeated the mortals, as you would expect.

But though Mayadanawa's army was gone, he escaped harm. "Indra shall not have the last word. I will have my revenge. These gods are always bathing. They stay by the river and they think they have defeated me. But I have put a special poison in the river that even a god cannot survive. When the gods bathe in the Petanu, they will die horrible deaths."

The next morning when Indra came flying down in his chariot, he saw his gods lying dead along the riverbanks. Fury rose in him, but he pushed it back down. He walked into the forest and sat to meditate and focus his energy. Then he stood and struck the ground with a thunderbolt to bring forth a healing spring of water with such power that it could heal even the dead. Indra walked among the gods and goddesses, pouring the precious drops of water into the mouths of each who had died. Immediately the gods were brought back to their immortal lives.

The King of Bedulu grew afraid and tried to disappear. He first turned himself into a cock. Indra looked and swung at the cock with his war mace. But the king had become a stalk of rice, blowing in the wind. Indra slashed with his kris to harvest the rice, but the king had become a stone, sitting in mossy silence. Indra saw through his disguise and quickly shot an arrow into the stone. Bright red blood poured from the stone into the river Petanu, until King Mayadanawa was dead.

For many generations the waters of the Petanu were believed to be impure, and they were not even used to irrigate the rice paddies. The Balinese feared that if you cut rice watered from this river, it would bleed. Only in the last century was a long and complex ritual performed to cleanse the river so that it could be of use to the people again.

Balinese from all over the island and now tourists from all over the world travel to Tirta Empul to bathe in the curative waters, and leave offerings of flowers and incense and rice by the 14 water spouts. Here the holy spring water fills pools where water lilies float and great mossy carvings of Indra and Garuda look down on the refreshed bathers.