

**Damp dreams**  
**Some problems with dance in Bali**

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How should we set about understanding dance in Bali? Is it one of the great non-Western traditions to be appreciated and studied alongside classical Indian and Japanese performance? Is it inextricable from religion and best considered as ritual? As a spectacle watched by hundreds of thousands of tourists a year, is it a culture industry? Or is it all these woven together to produce a hybrid mass pilgrimage? And what can the critical study of Balinese dance contribute to a broader understanding of cross-cultural performance?

### Some problems with Balinese Dance

That which distinguishes the choreographic art of Bali is traditional character. The dances, the dialogues, the choruses, have been repeated in exactly the same way for centuries. A dancer would never dare modify them, and I'm not referring to a body position or a step but not even the movement of one finger. And yet these ritual dances retain a living beauty and an extraordinary youthfulness. When watching them, one has the impression of seeing the bas-reliefs of ancient Khmer monuments come to life: what appears before us is the supernatural world of the celestial nymphs that covers the walls of the temples of Java.<sup>1</sup>

There is no word in the Bali language for "art" or "artist". In Bali, art is not a thing but a profound sentiment, indefinable and indefinite... Dancing is a ritual, dance poetry, movement created by the soul, possessed and conquered.<sup>2</sup>

Dance is the main art form of Balinese culture and is performed at main temple festivals and ceremonies, especially for the cycle of life and death. Taught and kept in secrecy in villages, halls and palaces, the dances that tourists witness in hotels and specially constructed stages are merely a fraction of the dance scene.

In many cultures dance and drama are important to pass on customs and mores from one generation to the next. Such is true in Bali where dance & drama has historically been used to pass down cultural values through the tales of Ramayana, Mahabharata and other epic stories from Balinese history. It is interesting to note that the Balinese never tire of watching these dances even though they may have seen them umpteen times before and know each movement by heart.<sup>3</sup>

The serious study of dance in Bali encounters the problem of how to extricate it from more than a century of European – and now Balinese and Indonesian – fantasy. Granted the singular place Balinese dance has held in the world of non-Western performance, remarkably there has been virtually no critical analysis of received accounts, of its history and social background, or of the relationship between Balinese and outsiders' understandings. Despite reviews of the pervasive Orientalism to which Bali has been subject,<sup>4</sup> as the quotations above suggest, not all that much has changed.

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<sup>1</sup> Prunières, *Musique*.

<sup>2</sup> Fels, *À l'Exposition*, both cited in Savarese, *Antonin Artaud*. Both are commentaries on the Paris Colonial Exhibition of 1931.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.marimari.com/content/bali/best\\_of/dance.html](http://www.marimari.com/content/bali/best_of/dance.html),

<http://www.balihotels.com/info/dancebali.php>. Both are tourist sites accessed 2nd. August 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Boon, *The anthropological romance*; Vickers, *Bali*; Picard, *Bali*. My thanks to Richard Fox, Peter Worsley and Adrian Vickers for their comments on the draft of this article.

Awash as we are with reiterated truths, what do we actually know about theatre and dance? As Bali was only finally conquered by the Dutch between 1906-10, what kind of knowledge we have of the pre-colonial period becomes salient. And what impact did the demise of the *ancien régime* and the advent of cultural tourism have on performance? Are we seriously to accept, as do most commentators, the colonial dogma that Balinese culture was effectively untouched by conquest? What were the circumstances under which the accounts were written? For what purposes? How were the authors themselves positioned and implicated? For what readership were they designed? How have Balinese imagined and represented their own theatrical practices at different times? Indeed, what attitudes do Balinese take to the documentation, classification, understanding and analysis of their theatre, dance and music as cultural products? Are such issues as central, say, as concern with the quality of performance, or with addressing the demands of changing circumstances, audiences' tastes and new media like radio, television and VCDs? Far from knowing all there is to know about Balinese dance, we are still struggling to work out what questions we might intelligently ask.

A further problem is that, anecdotal stories apart, the actualities of performances in pre-colonial Bali remain uncertain. The result is an open season for retrojecting onto an imagined past whatever has suited the needs of particular works or authors. Unfortunately, accounts from the colonial period and later are not problem-free either. De Zoete and Spies's magnificent pioneering *Dance and drama in Bali* set itself the task of introducing the various main genres of Balinese theatre to a readership with no background to Indonesia. However Spies was a key figure in the romanticization of the island and in helping to forge the hegemonic account that subsequent works replicate – largely uncritically.<sup>5</sup> Later works, like Bandem and deBoer's *Balinese dance in transition*, had different aims, namely to describe what had happened to theatre and dance since de Zoete and Spies. More recently Dibia and Ballinger's *Balinese dance, drama and music* broke new ground in including how Balinese, not just Europeans and Americans, approach their performing arts. However, as the sub-title suggests, it is an introductory guide, rather than a critical account.

A comprehensive study is beyond the scope of an article. Instead a critical review of what we presume we know is long overdue. Sceptical as my argument is, my aim is positive: to encourage serious reconsideration of theatre and dance in Bali. The idea that dance was ancient, widespread, popular and demotic and the defining feature of Balinese culture is, I submit, largely a western fantasy driven by its own imperatives. Rather, there was, in most European senses of the term, almost no dance in Bali until after conquest and the arrival of tourism in the 1920-30s. European colonialists and tourists expected the natives to dance. And the Balinese obliged their conquerors brilliantly – *inter alia* by inventing *Kebyar* (see below). Balinese dance began life in effect as an international phenomenon, the outcome of a double encounter of Europeans and Balinese – notably through tourism and international exhibitions.

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<sup>5</sup> Vickers, *Bali* 105-24; Hitchcock & Norris, *Bali*.

What exactly am I arguing? First there is a problem with method. Pre-colonial textual references to performances are not of themselves necessarily informative, because what terms refer to changes. Balinese continually rework dance. Pre-conquest *Lègong* was probably virtually unrecognizable from its present forms. Retrojection and anachronism are the bane of Balinese dance studies. While it would be relatively simple to string together references from the patchy sources on pre-colonial performance either to support or to refute my argument, both are ‘scissors-and-paste’ history.<sup>6</sup> Such exercises in positivism are distinct from a critical interrogation, which calls for both an understanding of the background, motives and interests of outside commentators and the lived worlds of Balinese at the time. We need to rethink how we – and, crucially, Balinese – understand performances and appreciate these in the full complexity of their different contexts.

For the record, I am not claiming that there were no performances in pre-colonial Bali that we might loosely label ‘theatre’ or ‘dance’. Courts were notionally patrons of the arts.<sup>7</sup> But quite what is at issue? Part is a semantic problem. Part is ignorance of Balinese categories. It is necessary to distinguish dance from theatre because the creation of the phenomenon of ‘Balinese dance’ involved the determined and meticulous stripping out of singing, dialogue, narrative, philosophy, and historical and cultural referents, which marked theatre at least as scholars knew it from the 1930s on. ‘Dance’, as it came to be, requires a separate label for a quite distinct phenomenon.

What is it about dance in Bali that is so special? If princely courts entertained themselves and visitors with occasional performances, how did Bali differ from most other stratified Asian societies? Were they not to have held dances, now *that* would have interesting. What is supposed to make Bali distinct however is that dance was popular. But was it popular in being widespread, frequent, accessible, public and engaging a substantial proportion of the populace? Or did it emerge from and exist for ordinary people? I doubt either was the case. Another argument for the special status of dance in Bali is that it constituted a privileged trope through which to understand, Balinese culture more broadly.<sup>8</sup> What, however, singles out dance as against a whole host of other cultural practices?

Maybe I am barking up the wrong tree. Perhaps it is its religious or ritual nature that singles out Balinese dance? By the 1930s, we have accounts of plays such as *Calonarang*<sup>9</sup> and *Basur* being performed when Balinese felt threatened by disease or witchcraft, and *Topèng Pajegan*<sup>10</sup> as part of temple ceremonies (*piodalan*), or dances

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<sup>6</sup> Collingwood, *Idea of history*, p. 257-66. To Collingwood, scissors-and-paste was opposed to historical and cultural understanding, which involves a dialogue between scholarly analysis and appreciating events as the participants themselves did.

<sup>7</sup> Establishing what actually went on behind idealized or hagiographic representations of courtly life is exceptionally difficult, see Vickers, *Journeys*.

<sup>8</sup> Such synecdoche (using part to typify the whole), as Clifford has argued (*On ethnographic authority*), is an established, but problematic, method in social and cultural anthropology. Bali is a notable casualty of this method, where a single image like theatre promises to reveal the complexities of Balinese culture as a whole.

<sup>9</sup> Accounts of each genre can be found in Dibia & Ballinger, *Balinese dance*.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly Moerdowo dates *Topèng Pajegan* to 1919, *Reflections*, p. 68.

like *Réjang*, *Baris Gedé* and *Mèndèt*. We need to be cautious. For example, *Réjang Déwa*, which ‘has now become the standard in many villages throughout the island’<sup>11</sup> and many villagers swear is ancient, was choreographed in 1988 by Swasti Wijaya Bandem from STSI.<sup>12</sup> In North Gianyar, where I worked from 1970-72, *Baris Gedé* consisted simply in ordering the nearest youths to hand: ‘Oi. Grab those spears. Now walk up and down three times’. *Mèndèt* comprised elderly women desultorily offering holy water and incense to shrines, while caricaturing dance movements delightfully replete with gestures most Europeans would consider obscene. Balinese indeed now often say that religion and performance are inextricable. However this articulation is modern and relates to the need to make Balinese religion acceptable to the Indonesian state.<sup>13</sup> Then again the relationship between what westerners usually call religion and what Balinese call *agama* is a twisted tale.<sup>14</sup> What constitutes dance, what religion, when and according to whom? Designating dance in Bali as religious raises new problems and explains little.<sup>15</sup>

### How dance got into Balinese theatre

There is no single story as to how Bali became identified with dance as an international brand. Here I have space for only two strands. The first, as Michel Picard has shown, is how cultural tourism demanded a new kind of performance. Beginning in the 1920s, the Dutch organized weekly dances to attract visitors at a growing number of hotels in Denpasar. Existing Balinese theatre was unsuitable for many reasons. It lasted all night; it was extemporized to adjust to audiences’ reactions; the singing was strange to western ears; the lengthy dialogue was in Balinese; and westerners were unfamiliar with the stories. The answer was radically to re-imagine theatre as dance.

The problem of duration was resolved in the same way as at the Bali Hotel – that is, by the juxtaposition of short dances and, in the case of dance theatre, by the reduction of a dramatic genre to an accelerated series of the most spectacular episodes.<sup>16</sup>

After the Paris Exhibition of 1889, Central Javanese music and dance had been hailed in Europe as high art. However

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<sup>11</sup> Dibia & Ballinger, *Balinese dance*, p. 56.

<sup>12</sup> The role of STSI (The Indonesian Academy of Arts, later ISI, the Institute of Arts) Denpasar in codifying, standardizing, promoting and determining what constituted dance is crucial.

<sup>13</sup> Visitors are often given a neat division of dance into *Wali* (offerings, ‘sacred’ dances performed in temples), *Bebali* (Semi-ceremonial dances, which supplement ritual) and *Balih-Balihan* (dance for entertainment). This classification was invented by a committee of Balinese intellectuals in 1971 in response to perceived threats to Balinese culture from tourism and even its authors now admit it does not work.

<sup>14</sup> Fox, *From text to television*.

<sup>15</sup> Anthropologists use ritual as a residual category for whatever appears to defy rational or material explanation and is therefore deemed ‘symbolic’. Here, calling dance ‘ritual’ or ‘symbolic’ merely defers analysis. If anything, it is the European obsession with projecting fantasies onto Bali that is ‘ritual’ and requires study.

<sup>16</sup> Picard, *Bali*, p. 141.

unlike Javanese dances, appreciated by European connoisseurs since the end of the last century, Balinese dances acquired the prestige that they have today only after becoming tourist attractions.<sup>17</sup>

So most of what we know as dance in Bali emerged to meet foreign tastes.

To satisfy this demand, dance had to be radically re-imagined. What is at issue is nicely encapsulated in the Indonesian name given to this genre, *tari lepas*, ‘free dance’, that is dance detached from all the contexts of its cultural performance, then branded and franchised as uniquely and authentically Balinese. It is in this sense that I use dance in what follows, as opposed to theatre, which I take to be the kinds of dramatic stories Balinese performed for themselves. This leaves what Europeans, and now sometimes Balinese, understand by dance appropriately problematic.<sup>18</sup>

Decontextualizing took several forms. *Baris*, *Topèng*, *Jauk* and *Tèlèk* were extrapolated from theatre and religious rites. Other dances, such as *Panyembrama* and *Olèg Tamulilingan* were choreographed for western audiences, the latter at the request of an English impresario.<sup>19</sup> Some, like *Lègong*, were so stripped down that it is difficult to know quite what relationship they bore to their precursors.

The Balinese were far from passively compliant in the creation of dance. From their first encounter with the Dutch, Balinese rulers had been preoccupied with how to deal with these alien beings. Conquest shattered the Balinese vision of the world and left them urgently seeking a suitable medium through which to relate to the new rulers with their mysterious wishes. Put this way, *kebyar* becomes partly a complex act at cultural translation. In 1971 the late Cokorda Gedé Agung Sukawati gave me his account, which contained fascinating glimpses of how Balinese purposefully set about determining Dutch predilections. Living opposite the Hotel Bali in Denpasar and through becoming a guide, the Cokorda inferred what Europeans wanted was art. Realizing that Balinese could neither yet appreciate nor deliver what the colonial masters wanted, the family decided to lure to Ubud the only foreigner they knew who seemed to have the right qualifications, the then bandmaster to the Sultan of Yogyakarta, a certain Walter Spies. The outcome was a celebrated chapter in the history of the romanticization of the island.

By the late 1990s, Bali had grown into a multi-billion dollar tourist industry. How is dance implicated in all this? On the one hand, dance is constitutive of Bali as a brand in a highly competitive market. As the island is increasingly built over with unplanned industrial development, what distinguishes it from its Asian competitors if not its artistic culture (*seni budaya*), exemplified by its most accessible form, dance? On the other hand, dance has become a major industry. No one is sure, but tourist dances probably account for well over 90% of performances, except perhaps on a few

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<sup>17</sup> Picard, *Bali*, p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> There was almost certainly much local variation within Bali. And the dichotomy between ‘authentic’ and tourist performances was complicated by becoming part of the singular dialogue or heteroglossia that is contemporary Bali.

<sup>19</sup> Coast, *Dancing*, p. 105ff.

festival days. The musicians and dancers are shipped not in buses, but packed together in the back of trucks that are used otherwise to transport cattle and merchandise. Balinese dance epitomizes the brute commoditization of labour. Fels's vision of dance as 'poetry, movement created by the soul, possessed and conquered' now has a darker sense.

The commoditization of dance in Bali adds a twist to Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry, in that it is not, as in America, one among many industries, which happens to specialize in the production of new cultural forms for mass markets. In Bali the sale of 'culture' now comprises many of the island's major industries and has come to constitute what Bali itself is. The industrial tail now wags the cultural dog.

Under these circumstances an interesting tension emerges between the demands of industry for the mechanical reproduction of dance and the élite national arts' academies, which claim a European-style conservatoire model of excellence. If the economic impact of the culture industry is fairly obvious, the political implications have gone less noticed. As Benjamin wrote

For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual... But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics.<sup>20</sup>

Politics has come to permeate performance. After all, what is more political than the bland naturalization of feudalism? And a hallmark of the New Order was a genre, borrowed from Java, and endlessly reproduced. In *Sendratari*, a spectacular mass dance ballet, the dancers silently mime to the dialogue of a single *dalang* (or puppeteer),<sup>21</sup> in a (presumably unintended) caricature of the political order itself.

Bali's increasing dependence on its industrialized culture is reflected in its new commercial mass media. BaliTV, launched as the medium of Bali's cultural arts, for nineteen hours each day reproduces for Balinese an imaginary island of endless beautiful dances and ceremonies, which is even more insidiously political. Commercialization has come full circle because it is widely rumoured that, instead of receiving fees, dance troupes pay for the privilege of performing on TV, which is now unashamedly advertising, straight-faced, under the banner *Pulau Dewata* – the Island of the Gods.

### **Bali as difference**

Another way that Bali became linked with dance was through exhibitions. Most spectacularly the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931 brought Bali to Europe and to the

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<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, *The work of art*, IV.

<sup>21</sup> Hough, *Contemporary Balinese*. Suharto (or his wife) was often dubbed the '*dalang*' behind New Order machinations.

attention of European intellectuals at a crucial moment. The Dutch constructed a special East Indies Pavilion, the highlight of which was dances by a full Balinese troupe. It was an unequal encounter. One of the musicians, Anak Agung Gedé Ngurah Mandera, remarked afterwards: 'We were hidden away, we Balinese, like serfs, and we saw little of Paris or foreigners'.<sup>22</sup> In a sense the European visitors to the Exposition saw equally little of Bali and its theatre. As the quotations earlier make clear, as with contemporary tourism, what they saw had been largely pre-articulated for them along familiar Orientalist lines.

Within the broader scheme of things, Bali was significant insofar as it was different in ways that fitted European needs. That Balinese theatre occupies an important niche in the theoretical world of performance, through the work of Artaud, is not accidental. As Savarese put it:

Artaud was not in fact interested in Balinese culture; he used the Balinese performance because its extraneousness to his own culture made it possible for him to delineate a difference. Artaud, finally, did not want to increase knowledge about Balinese dance but to use it to create a short-circuit... Artaud's vision distorted the meaning of a tradition and a culture of which he was essentially ignorant: the Balinese performances represented something very different from what they actually were, but something nevertheless necessary for him.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, Bali's greatest asset, whether to artists, scholars or tourists, was not what it was, but what it was not – its difference. If, as Baudrillard argued, the basic commodity that underpins consumer society is not a positivity (a particular good or service),<sup>24</sup> but promising access to difference then Bali, epitomized by Balinese dance in its exquisite, timeless, ritual, arcane Otherness, was beautifully designed to fit tourists' and aesthetes' predilections.

### **Problems of cultural translation**

Lurking in the background is the question of cultural translation. If in Balinese conventionally there was no word for art, nor was there a word for dance.<sup>25</sup> Balinese generally referred to theatre, shadow plays and non-narrative dance simply as *sesolahan* or *igelan* (in high and low Balinese respectively), and acting, singing, dancing or acting as a puppeteer as *masolah* or *ngigel*, perhaps best glossed as 'performance' and 'performing'. Tempting as it is to dismiss the confusion as trivial, misunderstandings not only continue to thrive, they bear on the asymmetrical relations of power that westerners have long exerted over Balinese and are loth to relinquish.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Coast, *Dancing*, p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> Savarese, *Antonin Artaud*, p 71. We necessarily represent something *as* something else (Goodman, *Languages of art*). At issue is the kinds and purposes of representation.

<sup>24</sup> Baudrillard, *La société de consommation*.

<sup>25</sup> Terms for training, judging and commenting on dance and theatre remain primarily technical and aids to performance. The vocabulary of aesthetics has had to be borrowed from Europe and is supplementary, comprising dollops of the ethnic gloss and cultural marketing that westerners demand – and duly receive, for a price – of the authentic Balinese dance experience.

<sup>26</sup> Hobart, *Who?*

Among the problems – here assuming Balinese and ‘Western’ ideas of dance (the latter itself deeply contested) to be commensurate – two are immediately relevant. First there remains the curiously colonial-looking presupposition that Western categories of analysis are ontologically unchallengeable and *ipso facto* epistemologically sufficient to describe and comment on the entire congeries of practices of a society with a quite different philosophical and cultural history.

Further, most accounts assume an unproblematic transparency between the object of inquiry and the frame of reference. There is an unremarked circularity in representing Balinese practice *as* dance *tout court*. If nothing else, out of good intellectual manners, we should first ask how Balinese have articulated their own dramatic practices, indeed whether they constituted a distinct category. Quite simply, it is tautological and essentialist to represent dance simply *as* dance.<sup>27</sup> The question is what have people represented *as* dance – and, more important, represented dance *as* – under different circumstances and to whom? For Bali, a plethora of possibilities present themselves. Among the most obvious are theatre/dance as a religious offering required to complete rites; as the practice of disciplined self-transformation; as exemplifying techniques of mastery over body and mind; theatre as social commentary and criticism; and more recently Balinese ‘dance’ as a brand label, a means of livelihood or a way out of poverty. The presumption that we know what dance is and how to translate it is old fashioned Eurocentrism refried.

As this discussion has been theoretical, let us consider how it might bear on the important question of appreciating the body in dance. The fact that dancers universally have bodies makes the step of projecting culturally specific western model onto Balinese alluring.<sup>28</sup> Balinese however imagine bodies differently according to several possible schemes. One popular model indicates the degree of disjuncture. On this account Balinese bodies are labile. They are capable of reshaping themselves through will, but can easily be entered (*karangsukang*, ‘trance’) or disintegrate into constituent parts. So mastery, or command, over the body is important. This is quite different from the mechanical metaphor of control, widely used in Europe to discipline bodies. By contrast Balinese, on this account, imagine different body parts as having different proclivities, which the disciplined human must weave into an elegant working whole. Similarly pre-conquest polities depended on the ruler managing to command the agreement of other lords and ordinary subjects to pursue a common venture.<sup>29</sup> Bodies and the world are not separate but affect one another. So dance, in instantiating momentary mastery, helps order the world; while material process always brings the threat of disjuncture. In practice a lifetime of work (through *manusayadnya*, life cycle rites), discipline and care are needed to develop a mature

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<sup>27</sup> See Goodman, *Languages of art*. As accounts suggest pre-colonial theatre lasted for days, even the idea of a discreet performative space and time is questionable.

<sup>28</sup> I take it that universalist and naturalist accounts are cultural. Even were they not, such schemes would be little use in explaining what makes Balinese dance different.

<sup>29</sup> Philosophically this account draws, among other things, upon Balinese rescensions of *Sāmkhya*, in which material process is tripartite, comprising spontaneous activity (*rajas*), rational ordering (*sattwa*) and objectification or inertia (*tamas*).

being. The distinctive grace and poise of trained Balinese bodies is not achieved casually.

### **An alternative account**

By way of social background, it is useful to appreciate that, behind the appearance of luxury in the tourist sector, much of the capital is foreign and Bali shares many of the problems of the rest of Indonesia. Parts of the island remain desperately poor. During his voyages in the 1850s, Alfred Russell Wallace remarked on the abject poverty and misery of ordinary Balinese in contrast to the wealth and comfort of the rulers. The economics and politics of pre-conquest Bali run counter to fantasies of an island where dance and music were popular pastimes. The image of traditional Balinese villages as full of beautiful young dancing maidens and throbbing gamelans is anachronistic. Until the second half of the twentieth-century, most villagers could barely afford everyday clothes, far less the gilded ornamental costumes and expensive gamelan, which were owned mostly by the courts and by some richer village groups.<sup>30</sup> Bali is not alone in having depended heavily on patronage for the arts.

A long period of centralized rule ended in 1651 and Bali was thrown into a hundred and fifty years of internecine struggle between rival warlords. Many were low caste upstarts who butchered or connived their way to power. The theatrical celebration of an unchanging world-order, founded upon noble aristocratic values, in which kings were mostly heroic, wise and just, and their subjects loyal, devoted and happy is starkly juxtaposed to the terror of sudden death, enslavement, rape, pillage, and poverty that was most people's lot.<sup>31</sup> It was probably close to a condition with

no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.<sup>32</sup>

However in Bali arts and letters articulated a vision of society that stood in such magnificent contrast to, and denial of, what was actually going on.

Bearing in mind the difficulties of determining quite what the names of genres referred to, let me offer the suggestive sketch of the development of theatre and dance.

- In the late seventeenth century, stable government collapsed, life became anarchic. Balinese developed *Gambuh* and *Wayang Wong* celebrating a noble ordered world.
- In the nineteenth century, upstart rulers claimed fabulous genealogies (*babad*), while masked *Topèng* subsequently legitimized such rampant status-climbing.

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<sup>30</sup> That *gamelan* and costumes were loaned to client villagers for practice does not transform the relations of power.

<sup>31</sup> Vickers (*Journeys of desire*) offers a fascinating analysis of how Balinese articulated this period through the idealized figure of the desiring, bellicose and artistic prince.

<sup>32</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan* Ch 13.

- With the collapse of royal power, after 1915 popular dance-opera *Arja* promptly began to flourish, which celebrating the lives of ordinary Balinese.
- Simultaneously a spectacular new musical and dance style, *Kebyar*, sprang up in precisely the village in North Bali, Jagaraga, where the Dutch had first set foot to conquer Bali.
- After 1910, as the Dutch established their administration and tourism begins in earnest, Balinese suddenly (re)discovered dance. *Légong*, seemingly moribund, was resuscitated or re-imagined; and *Jangèr* was created.<sup>33</sup>
- In 1942, as Dutch colonial rule collapsed before the Japanese invasion, cross-dressing dance, *bebancihan*, suddenly became the vogue.
- In 1965, following a supposed communist coup and the execution of some 100,000 people in Bali alone, *Derama Gong*, spoken theatre in ordinary Balinese, burst into fashion.

How are we to relate this to the received accounts of dance?

### Some confusions

The meetings between westerners and Balinese often involved misunderstandings. What about the beautiful dancers, epitomized by the little *Lègongs*? As Vickers noted, a persistent tendency to eroticize Balinese often veered towards fantasies about pre-pubescent girls and Balinese as objects of paedophilic desire.<sup>34</sup> The advent of tourism inevitably required dance to conform to such projections. An American visitor in the thirties observed of tourist performance in Denpasar, that it

has also attempted to inject as much sex as possible into the dances, and sex is the one quality that is almost entirely absent from the Balinese dance, therefore its appearance strikes a false note<sup>35</sup>

There is a countervailing risk of sanctifying the Balinese. The Dutch doctor, Julius Jacobs, suggested another face when he wrote about how one king 'offered him a dancing girl as company for the night and recounted how some of the court dancers were in fact prostitutes, whose livings supported the rajas'.<sup>36</sup> During fieldwork elderly women would recount to me how their parents fearing the attention of rapacious aristocrats, sometimes used pre-emptively to scarify the most beautiful. Did the notoriously randy princes, whose power over their subjects was hard to challenge, actually treat the *Lègongs* as sexually untouchable?<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Granted its iconic status, unsurprisingly stories and histories of *Légong* abound (e.g. Moerdowo, *Reflections*, p. 90-97).

<sup>34</sup> Vickers, *Bali*, pp. 95-130.

<sup>35</sup> Hiss, *Bali*; cited in Picard, *Bali*, p. 141. Whether Balinese considered it absent is another question.

<sup>36</sup> Vickers, *Bali*, p. 87.

<sup>37</sup> Coast, *Dancing*, p. 33, records the military commander abducting a fifteen year old dancer with the connivance of two rajas as late as the 1950s.

Such misunderstandings often rested on unrecognized differences in cultural presuppositions.<sup>38</sup> One of the most celebrated is about theatre. Clifford Geertz famously depicted Balinese kingship as

a theatre state in which the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience.<sup>39</sup>

An entire category of South East Asian polity rests on an image of theatre, which Geertz imported from Europe without ever inquiring what Balinese conceptions might be – so leaving them constituting their politics through a model of which they had no inkling. Remarkably no one even commented on it.

Similar presuppositions bedevil discussion of creativity in Balinese dance. Europeans and Americans presuppose evolution and progress to be good. So, artistic and cultural production ideally is innovative. For many peoples, however, a previous order may be the ideal. Then creativity involves re-imagining the past differently or more perfectly. Much Balinese creativity arguably consists in elaborating, rather than going beyond the received framework, a proclivity underwritten by Balinese social structure, which largely comprises corporate groups. Such groups are exceptionally efficient at organizing activities, but tend to be conservative. If one Balinese opens a successful art shop, cafe or dance group, soon after fifty similar ones will spring up.

There is however a more interesting sense of creativity, linked to crisis. When the existing order breaks down irreparably, Balinese are driven furiously to articulate some new order, as the links between social disruption and theatrical innovation above suggested. Further confusion arises when Europeans and Americans insist on identifying the creative genius behind a dance or composition, because for them the knowing and creative subject should be an individual. Balinese, by contrast, tend to stress the degree to which a finished composition or choreography is inevitably the work of a complex agent,<sup>40</sup> which may be one reason westerners' hagiography of Balinese star dancers often ends disastrously. Cross-cultural studies of performance need to engage not just in critical history but also with different, potentially incommensurable, cultural presuppositions without sliding back into Eurocentrism.

Balinese can however be equally caught up in their own presuppositions. A striking aspect of the explosion of supposedly original *kebyar* dances is the way they are locked into an ever-inflating portrayal of royal opulence, the rigid codes of which lead to wonderful absurdities. Gold crowns and gilded vestments may look fine on princes and princesses (even if bearing no relation to historical actuality). But quite

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<sup>38</sup> This critical study of absolute presuppositions Collingwood argued to be the study of metaphysics proper, see his *Essay on metaphysics*. A serious study of Balinese theatre should perhaps start with how Balinese judge performance. For example, actor-dancers listen to the *angkiang*, literally 'the breath' of the music and, conversely, musicians work to the *angkiang* of the dance. The dialogic quality also emerges in how dancers talk of the necessary condition for extemporizing, *saling enyuhin*, to make a path for your fellow actors, without which performance dies on stage. The most fascinating is *taksu*, what makes a particular performance come to life, what makes an audience forget they are watching theatre and become absorbed, what imbues an actor with something special.

<sup>39</sup> Geertz, *Negara*, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> On complex agency, see Inden, *Imagining India*.

what is up when padi finches, fisherman and farmers in rice fields are decked out in gold? However, if *kebyar* suffers from cultural involution, is it more closed and inward-looking than western ballet and contemporary dance?

Multiculturalism and globalization assume inter-cultural contact in principle to be fruitful. However the extraordinary cultural encounter that is Balinese dance hardly seems to have fostered deeper understanding. Balinese dance remains primarily acceptable so long as it promises to embody exoticism and difference. That hot tropical island of the imagination must still be there to offer visitors damp dreams.

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