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### **Balinese Aesthetics**

According to the Balinese expert, Dr. Anak Agung Madé Djelantik, “no writings about aesthetics specifically as a discipline exist in Bali.”<sup>1</sup> The arts are discussed in ancient palm leaf texts, but mainly in connection with religion, spirituality, ceremony, and the like. However, there are famous accounts by expatriate Westerners and anthropologists.<sup>2</sup> There have also been collaborations between Balinese and Western scholars.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there is a significant literature written in Indonesian by Balinese experts, beginning in the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Considerable experience of the culture is necessary to appreciate the full detail of these analyses and to be able to understand the arts from a Balinese perspective. I attempt neither task in this article.

What I have written is addressed more to the cultural tourist than the anthropologist. Tourists are often captivated by the colorful opulence of Balinese culture and the centrality of art to the daily lives of ordinary Balinese. At the same time, all but the most indifferent or obtuse cannot fail to notice that the Balinese attitude to the arts is sometimes strangely different from our own Western culture. In following sections, I outline what is likely to strike non-Balinese as puzzling or unique in the Balinese attitude to and treatment of the arts. I focus on four areas: the relation between art and religion

and between art and community, the competitive aspect of the arts, and the high value placed on novelty, innovation, and adaptation. I begin, though, by discussing notions that are foundational in Balinese aesthetics.

#### <A>I. BASIC AESTHETIC CONCEPTS

One central concept is that of *taksu*.<sup>5</sup> *Taksu* is the name of a temple shrine at which one can pray for strength, and artists do pray there for success. *Taksu* also refers to the spiritual inspiration and energy within a mask, puppet, character, or ceremonial weapon.<sup>6</sup> Above all, *taksu* denotes the charismatic power of a great performer to please the audience and to become the character or role he or she plays.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, it refers to the artist's being at one with his or her musical instrument, mask, puppet, or costume.<sup>8</sup> As such, *taksu* is a condition that performers aspire to. Though the term applies primarily to the performing arts, some Balinese extend it to other arts, such as painting, and even to other skilful activities, such as cooking. It is inherited by relics of famous artists from the past, such as antique recordings of famous musicians or old paintings.

The word '*taksu*' is distinctively Balinese.<sup>9</sup> It expresses a notion with which we are very familiar, however. We too attach the highest value to the special ability of great performers to move the audience with the excellence, virtuosity, and conviction of their efforts. We also regard the special qualities that make for greatness in an artistic creator or performer as divine gifts that cannot easily be taught, analyzed, or conveyed. And we, too, have a special reverence for, say, an old recording of Rachmaninov playing his own compositions or a costume once worn by Nijinsky.

General judgments of what is beautiful (*becik*) in the arts invoke other central concepts in Balinese aesthetics: unity and balance between elements and form, along with technical excellence, and the bond between art and life or nature. All these ideas have a long pedigree in the art of the West and also of other non-Western cultures.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the universality of such aesthetic criteria, their mode of realization in Balinese art is often distinctive. For example, the measurements for a Balinese house are traditionally based on the bodily parts of its occupants in order to ensure mutual harmony and balance between the building and its occupants. The layout of houses and temples pays regard to cosmological principles that are no less vivid to the Balinese than are visible, material aspects of their world.<sup>11</sup> In addition, pairs of drums and gongs in the gamelan [Id.] orchestra are characterized as male and female and the relation between the parts of the ensemble mirror social and cosmological principles of order.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the traditional codes of proportion for human depictions do not come directly from life but from the puppets of the Balinese shadow puppet play.<sup>13</sup> This is not regarded as a departure from verisimilitude, however, because the size, shape, physiognomy, and proportion of many puppets are regarded as relevant to character and spiritual traits that also stand in need of representation. The reflection of the iconography of the shadow puppet play in traditional styles of painting and human depiction is paralleled by mutual reactions between other art forms: the poses of statues are often modeled on narrative gestures or positions found in old dance and drama genres, for instance.

Art must be infused with life, and that means movement. “In popular Balinese thinking there are three elements: water, fire and air, from which all visible form is composed. Each element moves (typically, water downwards, fire upwards, air laterally or freely) or indeed may change nature. The corollary of this mutability is that composite forms are also continuously transforming (*matemahan*).”<sup>14</sup> Although the voice of the Balinese puppeteer is now electronically amplified, electric lights cannot replace traditional oil lamps because they “kill” the puppets. Electric light is steady, so the puppet characters cannot be seen to breathe. By contrast, their shadows constantly pulse with the flickering of the oil lamp, even when the puppets are stationary. Something similar applies to dancers and actors; they can never be entirely still. They constantly move their fingers (*jeriring*), even when their bodies are otherwise at rest. The effect is also integral to Balinese music. In most Balinese gamelans, the instruments are paired. The pair’s

members are tuned slightly apart, so that four or five beats a second are heard when the same note is played on both instruments. The result is a seemingly magical, shimmering iridescence in the sound, even through passages of sustained notes.

There is a further way the connection between art and life is forged in Balinese art. The Balinese dislike blank spaces. They fill their artworks with complex, fine, exquisite detail. In the depiction of a forest scene, for instance, every leaf is shown. This predilection acknowledges the fecundity of the tropical environment in which they live. Djelantic makes the connection explicit when he observes: “The compelling desire to be one with nature made the Balinese use his hands to decorate his dwelling with artefacts derived from nature. Flowers and leaves that impressed him by their symmetry, rhythm, and harmony found expression in decorative stone and wood carving in houses, on walls and entrances of compounds. Its practice through the ages has established the general propensity of the Balinese artist towards decorative art, prevailing until the present day.”<sup>15</sup>

The same tendency to ornately fill every available space is expressed in music and dance as well. In some Balinese music, one-half of the orchestra plays extremely quickly, yet precisely, and the other half does the same but in syncopation. The air becomes awash with breathtakingly complex passagework that moves twice as fast as seems humanly achievable.<sup>16</sup> A similar delight in intricate detail is shown not only in the elaborateness of Balinese dance costumes but also in the subtle complexity of the movements. I have catalogued the Balinese names of nearly 200 dance positions and attitudes (*agem*), link movements between positions (*abah tangkis*), postures, strides, and foot movements (*tandang*), facial expressions (*tangkep*), movements of the head and neck (*guluwangsul*), and shoulder, hip, hand, finger, and fan movements.<sup>17</sup> The eyes, face, neck, arms, hands, fingers, and fan can be used in dozens of ways.<sup>18</sup> Every cross-accent and drum stroke in the music is echoed by some part of the dancer’s body, though often the movements are extremely subtle and small.<sup>19</sup>

Mastery of the complex, decorative detail characteristic of Balinese art obviously provides for the virtuosity the Balinese value so highly. Creating it requires patience, skill, and technique. This is immediately obvious to anyone who views the rococo richness of paintings or of carvings in wood or stone. The same applies to the performing arts, though there the performance can seem so effortless and deadpan that its difficulty could be overlooked. Dancers and musicians train for years, starting as children, to achieve the control, dexterity, strength, and flexibility they need. Consider the fast gamelan playing mentioned above. Most of the instruments have brass keys suspended over resonators. Once struck, these continue to sound until manually damped, which is done as the next key is hit. If the damping is not precise, the sound is either too clipped or one note bleeds into the next, and if the damping is not perfectly coordinated, when twenty-five musicians play in unison the music is turned to mush. Imagine the skill required to play music with perfect clarity at the rate of up to seven notes a second.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the precise coordination of the ensemble is the minimum standard required by Balinese for an adequate performance.

Virtuosity takes other forms, of course. To stay with the musical case, works sometimes contain prolonged passages in free rhythm and with changing tempos and unexpected accents. Like all else in the music, these must be learned by rote and require hours of rehearsal to be played with perfect coordination. Or, to mention woodcarving, great artistry is shown in integrating features of the grain and shape into the scene or depiction that is carved. As in the art of all cultures, a crucial aspect of technique is the skill with which the artist reconciles content and form, subject and medium.

## <A>II. ART AS RELIGION

In Bali, the creation and presentation of art is a devotional act. Officially, the Balinese are Hindu, but a strong element of animism shapes religious observances on the island. Along with ancestors, they recognize spirits of the earth and air, many of which are not

friendly and must be placated. In general, the goal of Balinese religious practices is to keep the forces of good and evil in balance. Offerings are made on a daily basis at many sites where people live and work, but the most elaborate are reserved for temple ceremonies (*odalan*). Every village and every household compound possesses three temples, and numerous other temples are located in rice fields, intersections, and elsewhere. (It is said there are as many temples as people in Bali.) The anniversary of each temple comes every 210 days according to the Balinese calendar and is the occasion for a ceremony lasting from one to ten days; the more significant the anniversary, the bigger the ceremony. As well as spectacularly ornate and intricate food, flower, and blood offerings, which are widely regarded as art forms in their own right, temple ceremonies include music, dance, masked dramas, and shadow puppet plays for the gods' delectation. Some temple ceremony dances (for example, *rejang* and *mendet*) are performed by ordinary members of the community and do not involve rehearsal or formal training.<sup>21</sup> Other of the entertainments are presented by trained and practiced groups, though these groups typically draw their membership from the local community. Artists and performers are regularly expected to offer their services free (*ngayar*) for ceremonies at their village's temples.

The Balinese performing arts were classified in 1971 into the religious (*wali*), the intermediate (*bebali*), and the secular (*balih-balihan*).<sup>22</sup> This was done in order to identify those special dances (*tari wali*) that should not be performed for tourists apart from the religious setting with which they are connected. In fact, though, all three types of performance take place at temple ceremonies and all are offerings to the gods. *Wali* performances are reserved for the temple's inner compound, *bebali* ones take place in the temple's outer courtyard, and *balih-balihan* ones occur on stages immediately outside the temple entrance. Art-enriched ceremonies mark other important calendar events as well, such as the Balinese new year of *galungan*, which involves ten days of festivities, and rites of passage and death, such as when the baby is first allowed to touch the ground at the age of 210 days, tooth filing, marriage, and cremation.

The fact that performances at temple ceremonies are intended for the gods is apparent when one comes across a puppet show with musical accompaniment in a corner of the temple's inner courtyard, with not a single member of the busy throng attending to it. Similarly, the pair of instruments played high on the bier for cremations can never be heard above the hubbub of those who carry it. The cacophony of noise at other times indicates that the gods are multitaskers. It is not uncommon in temples for different kinds of gamelans only a few yards apart to play different pieces while from loudspeakers comes the voice of a priest intoning scriptures or describing the entertainments that are to come, all this accompanied by the monotonous pounding of the *kul-kul*, a slit drum used to call people to the temple, the high-pitched ringing of priestly bells, and the constant chatter of the crowd.

Fortunately, most of the Balinese gods partake of the human aesthetic that values beauty and fineness in clothes, decorations, offerings, architecture, drama, music, and dance. However, not all the gods are decorous or friendly. The Balinese world includes witches (*leyak*), nasty spirits (*bhuta* and *kala*), monsters (*raksasa*), and the evil Rangda and her followers. These are also represented and acknowledged in temple and other ceremonies, which contain powerful elements of the bizarre and grotesque as a consequence. Another aspect of Balinese religion that can strike Westerners as strange is the occurrence of trance and the violent forms this can take. Young girls dance standing on the shoulders of men in one form of temple trance dance (*sanghyang bidedari*), while Rangda forces men who attack her to turn their daggers (*keris*) on themselves in another. Trances are often faked for tourists, but not in the temple.

One expects to encounter religious art at temple ceremonies but not when one attends a tourist concert at one's hotel. Nevertheless, the devotional aspect of Balinese art persists in contexts that seem entirely secular to Westerners. At the start of a tourist performance, a priest often says some prayers on stage and splashes performers, costumes, and instruments with holy water. Many tourists think this ritual is bogus, but it is not. The priest will be genuine, and it is important to recall that the gamelan



symbolizes both the cosmological and the social orders, so that the playing of music can never be entirely purged of religious significance. Moreover, most performance spaces, including many at tourist venues, are positioned according to the same traditional principles that dictate the alignment of temples.

In summary: “Balinese music in its traditional setting is essentially religious ... Every performance is an offering to the gods or an attempt to placate evil spirits ... Music for entertainment is also religious. Unlike ceremonial music, however, it is a spectator performance. Although the visible audience is composed of Balinese, its primary purpose is to entertain and propitiate an invisible audience: the gods ... However, the same music that is played for the entertainment of the gods is also used on secular occasions when it is performed for tourists or official government guests.”<sup>23</sup> And: “Nearly all traditional Balinese performing arts are ultimately rooted in religion and ascribed functions relating to religious practices. The major theater, dance, and musical performances, and even those seemingly nonreligious in character, are frequently presented at festivals to enhance the ritual’s power. In addition, arts considered relatively ‘secular,’ such as *drama gong*, are held in spaces ritually purified, and both performers and performance space are positioned to acknowledge the mountain-sea axis that also informs the positioning of temples.”<sup>24</sup>

### <A>III. ART AS SPORT

All commentators mention that the Balinese love competitions. Kite clubs battle to have the largest kite and to keep it in the air the longest, for instance. The arts are not exempt from such passions. Djelantik observes: “The inherent tendency in the Balinese people to compete against each other in any kind of public performance stimulates [them to] strive for perfection [in the arts].”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, music and dance are frequently presented in a competitive mode. The word for this is *mabarung* or *mebarung*.

Competitions also are common in Western art, ranging from classical music concerto contests to pub talent quests and paintoffs in shopping malls. Also, audience members sometimes express their support for one artist or group over others. Distinctive to the Balinese context are the pervasiveness of the competitive ethos and the depth of involvement and arousal it provokes in participants and audiences.

Sometimes, Balinese art competitions are relatively informal. *Jegog* is a form of gamelan in which all the instruments are made of bamboo. *Mabarung* between side-by-side *jegog* groups involves the simultaneous playing of different pieces, with each ensemble trying to drown out and outlast the other. “Shortly after one of them begins to play, the music becomes highly animated, and suddenly the other group enters into the midst of the musical argument. Both groups seem to attempt to destroy the music of the other by interfering. The result is something quite at odds with our normal concept of ‘music.’ Rather than music, this is closer to sports.”<sup>26</sup> “As the evening progresses, the groups begin to play simultaneously in a cacophony of short, driving ostinato patterns. The focus then shifts to determining who can play louder, harder and for as long as possible without stopping or losing their place in the melody. Shirts soak through with sweat and fingers get ravaged by blisters as musicians push themselves to the absolute limits of their physical abilities in pursuit of such distinctions. Around 2 a.m., after a trial by a jury of peers, the exhausted players finally disperse.”<sup>27</sup>

I should add that the sight of a *jegog* in full flight is truly remarkable. The bass instruments, like the others in the ensemble, are bamboo xylophones, but they are made from bamboo so massive that the player crouches on top of the instrument and strikes the tubes with a heavy rubber mallet. As he bounces around on the frame to reach different tubes, the instrument sways dramatically from side to side, which movement is accentuated by the colorful Balinese umbrellas that bedeck it. Meanwhile, other musicians in the ensemble sway and leap to the rhythm of the music. Viewed from the front, the orchestra seethes and moves like some frenzied machine, energized by the music issuing from it.

More formal competitions usually involve groups taking turns to play the same pieces, or pieces of similar types, before judges. The contest often lasts two or more hours, and the rival groups sit opposite each other on the stage. Island-wide competitions along these lines date back at least to the early years of the twentieth century. Winning such a competition attracts great prestige to the group.<sup>28</sup> “*Gamelans* are extremely competitive, and most groups actively seek to improve their skills and maintain their equipment ... A Balinese musician loves to tell you about the year he won first prize; a *gamelan* group might tell you that they are striving to be in first place next year.”<sup>29</sup>

The most important competition now takes place at the annual arts festival (Pesta Kesenian Bali [Id.]) between *gong kebyar* groups representing the island’s eight regencies. Performances in this competition attract an audience of thousands of Balinese. Many people are bused in to support the group representing their region. There is constant catcalling, whistling, and bantering between these claques, even as the music sounds. Despite such behavior, most members of the audience have a deep appreciation of the music and what is required in playing it. “The atmosphere at these events is much more reminiscent of a sporting event than a concert ... The audience are thoroughly responsive to everything taking place in the music or dance, reacting instantaneously with approving cheers at well-executed passages, or jeering with abandon at the slightest mistake. (At one such concert in Amlapura in 1977, a missed jegogan tone [bass note] brought 3,000 people to their feet in a spontaneous chorus of boos).”<sup>30</sup>

As these remarks suggest, Balinese audience etiquette is more like that for popular than high art in the West. The audience is usually attentive and knowledgeable, but is inclined to mock errors. Positive appreciation is less usual; applause has been adopted from tourists only in the last decade, and is not common at the close of a performance. Indeed, with the first notes of the end-of-show music for shadow puppet plays and other forms of dance or drama, the Balinese audience rises and leaves. The venue is often nearly empty by the time the closing tones sound.

#### <A>IV. ART AS COMMUNITY

I have already observed that Balinese artists are intimately involved in their community's religious observances. Something similar happens at the political level. The smallest political unit, the *banjar*, is a hamlet or subvillage unit, usually of one hundred or more households, ruled by the heads of these households. It plays a central role in governing and organizing the immediate community. All members are expected to contribute (*gotong-royong* [Id.]) to the *banjar*. This can take the form of labor, money, or other donations. In meeting this obligation, painters and carvers may put their talents at the service of the community, for example, by providing statues and pictures for the shrines at the open-sided meeting/performance space (*balé banjar*) that is the hub of *banjar* life.

Communalism is an aspect of Balinese life in general. Wherever an activity is pursued, a club (*sekaha*) is organized to facilitate it. If kites are flown, there will be a kite-flying club. If a gamelan is played, there will be a club associated with that gamelan of which all players and administrators are members. Sometimes, the members of the *sekaha* all come from the same *banjar*, sometimes not. The musical instruments, costumes, and props of performance groups are rarely owned by individuals. They might belong to the temple, the *banjar*, or the *sekaha* itself.

The same applies to arts thought of as individual in the West, such as painting or sculpture. The Balinese tend to form schools, associations, or communities of painters. As far as I know, it is not common for artists to work jointly on a given painting or sculptural relief—say, with one doing the skies and another the birds—but the members of a group usually share a common style and coordinate their efforts and their resources. As with other clubs, financial revenues and costs are also typically pooled. The signing of paintings is a comparatively recent development and shows the influence of Western models of art creation.

There is also a dynastic tendency within Balinese arts—mask carvers beget mask carvers, dancers spawn dancers, musicians father musicians, and so on. As people sharing

the same artistic interests tend to gather together, this has given rise over time to a distinctive sociogeographical distribution of the arts. Particular art forms have become associated with particular villages. The mask carvers of Mas are famous; for silver jewelry, go to Celuk; *geringsing* weaving is associated with Tenganan; the artists of Keramas are renowned as performers of *Arja* (Balinese opera) and those of Batuan for *Gambuh* (a genre of dance drama); for stone carvings, visit Batubulan; Nyuhkuning specializes in frog carvings; the best Balinese carved doors are made in Pujung; Pejaten is the home of traditional ceramics; Saba, Binoh, and Peliatan are known for the quality of their *Legong* dancers.

The Balinese inclination to communalism affects the creation of their artworks. Individual painters, carvers, composers, and choreographers gain renown for the excellence and success of their achievements. They will receive commissions for new works and they will be eagerly sought as teachers. They become famous. But it is also common for all creative artists to draw heavily and explicitly on the creative tradition to which they are the heirs. Creativity often involves the adaptation and arrangement of familiar materials, not radical originality, and what is created, sometimes via group input, is not sacrosanct. It is expected that individual groups will change what they receive from the creator or from another group to suit themselves.

The communalism of the Balinese is also apparent in the content of their artworks. Favorite subjects in the depictive arts are “life of Bali” scenes, showing rice farming, religious rituals, and the activities typically found in the village (along with tourists and their cameras). These representations can be packed with people, none of whom is a primary focus. Or the scene might show only a few people but make them peripheral to the details of nature that surround them. In other words, depictive works often show sociality or the integration of human life with the natural, rather than accentuating individuality and difference. In music, along with the close cooperation and coordination between players and the pairing of instruments described earlier, the social aspect of the orchestra is apparent in elements of musical form. Similar instruments

frequently interlock their parts. This interlocking (*kotekan*) generates an integrated pattern, so that what is heard is the composite, and not the separate, contributions of the individual parts.

Djelantik emphasizes the artist's immersion in his or her wider community, the endemic artistic legacy within which he or she works, and the religious ethos that infuses both of these: "At the aesthetic level this being part of the cosmos and of the community in particular have given the traditional artist the specific Balinese *attitude towards his art*. His aim is not to express in his work his personal concepts or aspirations, but to execute what is expected from him. His satisfaction lies in the devotion which he can put into his activity and to achieve the highest perfection in his product. His aesthetic ideal is not only the conformity with the norms but also the achievement of perfection, in which he aims at the unison with God the Almighty as the symbol of ultimate perfection."<sup>31</sup>

#### <A>V. ART AS INNOVATION

Though the arts draw heavily on local traditions, they are not always conservative or static. Special effort is taken to preserve the most sacred forms as they have always existed, along with older dance and drama genres such as *Arja*, *Gambuh*, and *Legong*, but other genres are subject to constant development and innovation. Indeed, Bali is among the most culturally volatile and eclectic places I have visited.

There is a constant demand for new dramas, musical works, and dances (*kreasi baru* [Id.]). Because the tradition is oral (and perhaps also because Indonesian cassettes are fragile at best), the shelf-life of most new performance pieces is brief. They can be lost within months, and this is accepted with equanimity. In this respect, the attitude of the Balinese to their arts is more like that of Westerners to pop culture than to high art.

Paintings and carvings are more permanent, but they wear quickly in the tropics and are often consumed by insects. The stone used traditionally for statues, called *paras*,

is so soft that it is easily marked by one's thumbnail. Sculptures made from *paras* weather badly within decades.

The Balinese are innovative in the readiness with which they adopt and adapt new media and technologies in art production. Djelantik records how cement casts and "carvings" first challenged stone in the fields of sculpture and architecture in the 1930s. In the 1970s, production expanded and centered on the village of Kapal. "At present the whole town of Kapal consists of rows and rows of workshops producing traditionally shaped cement casts of every kind, providing a cheap substitute for expensive manually produced carvings of stone or brick."<sup>32</sup> Djelantik observes that, in regard to Balinese aesthetics, the new technology of cement casts did not change anything fundamentally because cement works are assessed in terms of traditional criteria: the artist's skill and the perfection of the work's execution as apparent in the use of the materials and the texture of its surface.

It is in the realm of painting that the most dramatic appropriations and adaptations have taken place. The oldest traditional style draws on the iconography, characters, and themes of the shadow puppet play. (This style is called *kamasan*, after a village where it flourished and still continues.) Balinese painting changed considerably, though, under the influence of Western artists (in particular, Walter Spies and Rudolph Bonnet) who introduced modern materials and Western styles in the 1920s and 1930s. But the Balinese quickly adapted their paintings to local preferences and genres; distinctive regional differences were already apparent in the "modern" paintings of Ubud, Sanur, and Batuan by the late 1920s.<sup>33</sup> The association of artists established in Ubud in 1936, Pita Maha, aimed to preserve the quality of Balinese visual arts, which were to be judged primarily in terms of traditional aesthetic criteria, demanding skillful technique, harmony and balance in colors and design, and so on. Later, the Young Artists of the 1960s (inspired by Arie Smit) adopted a freer style, with strong colors and hard-edged figures, but in time they incorporated finer, more complex decoration, and therefore fell into line with traditional Balinese aesthetic values.<sup>34</sup> Whatever their favored style, the best and most

respected artists retain a commitment to the aesthetic virtues listed previously: technical virtuosity, subtlety and complexity of fine detail, balance of form and color, themes from traditional and religious epics, or depictions of communal or natural scenes.

Some indigenous Balinese artists inevitably consider what will appeal to the tourist market and a huge quantity of kitsch paintings and carvings is produced. Indeed, many of the tourist carvings sold across the Pacific as belonging to Polynesia, Micronesia, and so forth are in fact manufactured in Bali, and Balinese tourist shops sell locally made *dijeridu* and *djembe* drums, as well as Balinese fare. Balinese artists imitate indigenous Pacific, Australasian, and African styles as effortlessly as they do their traditional ones. Though the influence of religion is surprisingly far reaching in Balinese arts, it does not extend to these products. Yet they also illustrate pervasive aspects of the Balinese aesthetic, such as the supposition that art should be practically useful. Innovation, appropriation, adaptation, and fusion have not been adopted from the postmodern West but are, instead, thoroughly Balinese ways of approaching the arts.

#### <A>VI. CLOSING COMMENTS

Modern-day anthropologists mock Miguel Covarrubias for writing in 1937: “Everybody in Bali seems to be an artist. Coolies and princes, priests and peasants, men and women alike, can dance, play musical instruments, or carve in wood and stone.”<sup>35</sup> His claim does not strike me as ludicrously exaggerated, however. Few Balinese are professional artists, of course, but an extraordinary number are involved in the arts one way or another, especially when one counts among the arts silverwork, weaving, basketwork, and the creation of elaborate food and floral offerings, as well as traditional forms such as the shadow puppet play.

A similar response would apply to the observation that the features I have highlighted as distinctive to the Balinese arts are found in other cultures. It is probably true of most cultures that the arts are involved in religious observances, social ritual, and



interpersonal cooperation, that they also foster competition and skill, and that they are often valued for introducing what is novel. What is distinctive to Bali is the degree of intimacy between the arts and these further, important aspects of life. There, the arts are the lifeblood and pulse of community existence, not merely an accompaniment.

And how could it be otherwise? The arts attract and entertain the gods to the religious festivals at which their attendance is crucial if the delicate balance between good and evil is to be maintained in the community and the wider world. The arts are integral to the rites of passage that guide individuals from birth to death and reincarnation. Moreover, through tourism and cultural exports, the contribution of the arts, directly or indirectly, to the Balinese economy is far greater than in most other societies. The Balinese attitude to art (and all else) is pragmatic; there is little of the effete preciousness that goes with high art in the West. But because they are inevitably aware of the value of art to their way of life and what they hold dear, they are masters of its creation and connoisseurs of its appreciation.

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<NOTES>

1. Anak Agung Madé Djelantik, "Is There a Shift Taking Place in Balinese Aesthetics?" Paper presented at the Third International Bali Studies Workshop, the University of Sydney, July 3–7, 1995, p. 2.

2. For example, Miguel Covarrubias, *Island of Bali* (Singapore: Periplus Editions; reproduction of the Alfred A Knopf Inc. edition of 1946; first published 1937); Walter Spies and Beryl De Zoete, *Dance and Drama in Bali* (Singapore: Periplus Editions; first published by Faber and Faber in 1938); Margaret Mead, "The Arts in Bali," *Yale Review* 30 (1940): 335–347. More contemporary perspectives are offered in Andrew Duff-Cooper, *An Essay in Balinese Aesthetics*, Centre for South-East Asian Studies, Occasional Papers No. 7 (University of Hull, 1984); Edward Herbst, *Voices in Bali: Energies and Perceptions in Vocal Music and Theater* (Wesleyan University Press, 1997); Mark Hobart, *After Culture: Anthropology as Metaphysical Critique* (<http://www.criticalia.org/>, 2002; first published in Yogyakarta by Duta Wacana University Press in 2000).

3. For example, Madé Bandem and Frederik Eugene deBoer, *Balinese Dance in Transition: Kaja and Kelod*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995); Wayan Dibia and Rucina Ballinger, *Balinese Dance, Drama, and Music* (Singapore: Periplus Editions, 2004).

4. For instance, Madé Bandem, *Ensiklopedi Tari Bali* (Denpasar: ASTI, 1982).

5. Italicized terms are in the Balinese language, unless followed by (Id.), which indicates they are in the Indonesian language.

6. Herbst, *Voices in Bali*, p. 182.

7. Females have always danced in the temple and also in secular dance genres, such as *Legong*, which featured them from early in the twentieth century. Indeed, in the traditional dramatic genres of *Gambuh* and *Arja*, women replaced men in many roles from about the 1930s. Refined male characters are typically performed by women and other kinds of cross-gender roles are fairly common. Many women performers have gone on to become renowned teachers. Nowadays, women are encouraged to play music, though almost always in all-women ensembles. Also in recent times, women have achieved success in painting and literature. Some artistic roles, as in *topeng* (mask)

dancing or *dalang* (puppeteer) in the shadow puppet play are more or less the exclusive preserve of men.

8. See Michael Tenzer, *Balinese Music* (Berkeley/Singapore: Periplus Editions, 1991), p. 137; Dibia and Ballinger, *Balinese Dance, Drama, and Music*, p. 108.

9. “The etymology is probably from Sanskrit: *caksu* eye, faculty of sight, look. The *taksu* as a shrine is a derivative, linked to witnessing, which is a key role. Again, there are links to India and the vital role of *saksi*—witnessing—as a quite different relationship here from ‘watching,’ ‘spectating’. There is a distinguished South Asian literature on *saksi*, but nothing on *taksu*, which is pure Balinese” (Mark Hobart, personal communication, November 28, 2005).

10. See Richard L. Anderson, *Calliope’s Sisters: A Comparative Study of Philosophies of Art* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990); H. Gene Blocker, *The Aesthetics of Primitive Art* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993); Denis Dutton, “Aesthetic Universals,” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, D. Lopes and B. Gaut, ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 279–291.

11. See L. E. A. Howe, “An Introduction to the Cultural Study of Traditional Balinese Architecture,” *Archipel* 25 (1983): 137–158.

12. The Indonesian word ‘gamelan’ refers to the orchestra and the instruments that comprise it. In Balinese, the term is *gambelan*, though the verb form, *ngambelin*, to play music, is more common than the noun. More often, an orchestra is referred to as a *gong*. Eighteen or more different kinds of *gambelan* occur in Bali. The most common is *gong kebyar*. There are about 1,500 *gong kebyar* groups, each with a membership of thirty or more musicians and dancers. The population of Bali is about 3,000,000. On the way the orchestra echoes the social and cosmological order, see Sue Carole DeVale and I Wayan Dibia, “Sekar Anyar: An Exploration of Meaning in Balinese Gamelan,” *The World of Music* 33 (1991): 5–51.

13. Balinese puppets are more lifelike and generally smaller than Javanese ones (where the strictures of Islam require more abstracted characterizations of the human

form), but the heads, shoulder span, and arm lengths are exaggerated. Note that the music and other aspects of Balinese shadow puppet plays are also very different from those elsewhere in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

14. Mark Hobart, *After Culture*, pp. 112–113.

15. Anak Agung Madé Djelantik, “Is There a Shift Taking Place in Balinese Aesthetics?” p. 7.

16. It is useful to contrast Balinese music with that of the courts of central Java. Both involve layers of sound and cyclic, gong-punctuated structures, but they target entirely different sonic ideals. The Balinese seek explosive energy, contrast, and a degree of controlled rhythmic instability, where the Javanese look for calm, restraint, rhythmic regularity, and evenness of tone. Balinese music includes abrupt tempo changes, whereas gradual acceleration or slowing is preferred in central Javanese court music. And while the Javanese also decorate the music to a high degree, this decoration forms the background texture, whereas it is foregrounded by the Balinese.

17. For descriptions, see Madé Bandem, *Ensiklopedi Tari Bali*; R. M. Moerdowo, *Reflections on Balinese Traditional and Modern Arts* (Jakarta: PN Balai Pustaka, 1983), pp. 87–90; Colin McPhee, “Dance in Bali,” *Dance Index* 7–8 (1948): 156–207.

18. To mention only a few neck movements: *ngepik* means to shake the neck right and left without twisting it, *ngelidu* means to look to right and left, *nyulengek* means to look up, *ngetget* means to look down, *kidang but muring* means to shake the neck.

19. Again, the contrast with classical Javanese dancing is instructive. McPhee writes: “Against these two opposing styles [Cambodian and Javanese] the Balinese stands out dramatically in its freedom, its exuberance and almost feverish intensity. Although the ritual dances of the temple and the ancient dance plays of the court have the grave serenity of the Javanese, the trained dancers of today, who appear in plays or by themselves, give theatrical, dynamic performances, wild, moody, filled with sunlight and shade like the rushing, shimmering music of the Balinese *gamelan*. Rhythms are taut and syncopated throughout, and filled with sudden breaks and unexpected accents. Gongs and

metal-keyed instruments are struck with small, hard mallets so that tones are bright and incisive. Dance movement is not conceived in a single broad, legato line, but is continually broken by fractional pauses that coincide with the breaks in the music; on these the dancer comes to a sudden stop, and the eyes of the spectators focus momentarily on a motionless, sharply defined pose. These breaks are not endings but phrase accents, like brief ‘rests’ in music; they last no longer than a flash, and serve as starting points for renewed and vigorous movement. Unlike the almost inaudible drumming in Javanese music, Balinese drums throb continuously in agitated crescendos and diminuendos that forever urge the dancers onward or hold them back” (“Dance in Bali,” p. 160).

20. A gamelan from Peraan recorded in the 1970s “displays the absolute summit of gamelan speed and virtuosity: [interlocking] played at a rate of 200 beats per minute. At four subdivisions per beat that breaks down to 800 notes per minute, or an average of 400 notes each for [the two interlocking parts], which in turn translates to almost 7 notes per player per second! Can one conceive of 25 people doing *anything* together that fast? All of this was executed with crystalline clarity and accompanied, one might surmise, by facial expressions of utter nonchalance and boredom [as is the custom] during performance” (Michael Tenzer, *Music in Bali*, p. 80).

21. See Francine Brinkgreve and David Stuart-Fox, *Offerings, The Ritual Art of Bali* (Sanur: Image Network Indonesia, 1992).

22. Anonymous, *Projek Pemeliharaan dan Pengembangan Kebudayaan daerah Bali: Seminar Seni Sacral dan Seni Profan Bidang Tari* (Denpasar: typescript, 1971).

23. Ruby Sue Ornstein, *Gamelan Gong Kebyar: The Development of a Balinese Musical Tradition* (Los Angeles: University of California; Ph.D. Dissertation, 1971), pp. 8–11; see also pp. 65–66, 369–373.

24. David Harnish, “Balinese Performance as Festival Offerings,” *Asian Art* 4 (1991): 9–27; quotation from p. 9.

25. Anak Agung Madé Djelantik, “Is There a Shift Taking Place in Balinese Aesthetics?” p. 8.

26. Minagawa Koichi, Liner Notes (G. Groemer, trans.) for CD *Jegog of Negara* (World Music Library KICC 5157, 1992).

27. Michael Tenzer, *Music in Bali*, p. 92.

28. A further reward went to the famous *gong kebyar* group of Peliatan when it won in 1936: the Dutch exempted the members from universal labor on road building.

29. Margaret Eiseman, “Gamelan Gong: Traditional Balinese Orchestra,” in *Bali: Sekala & Niskala*, F. B. Eiseman Jr., ed. (Singapore: Periplus Editions, 1990), pp. 333–342; quotation from p. 339.

30. Michael Tenzer, *Music in Bali*, p. 110.

31. Anak Agung Madé Djelantik, “Is There a Shift Taking Place in Balinese Aesthetics?” pp. 7–8. The Balinese recognize Sang Hyang Whidi Wasa—the unmoved mover of the universe, representing both ordering and disordering forces—as the supreme being.

32. Anak Agung Madé Djelantik, “Is There a Shift Taking Place in Balinese Aesthetics?” pp. 12–13.

33. Representative early twentieth-century Ubud painters include Ida Bagus Kembeng and Anak Agung Gedé Sobrat, Sanur artists include I Sukaria and Ida Bagus Madé Pugug, and Batuan artists include Ida Bagus Madé Togog. Other painters of the time, such as I Gusti Nyoman Lempad and I Gusti Madé Deblog, remained aloof from Western influence while developing distinctive personal styles.

34. For discussion, see Anak Agung Madé Djelantik, *Balinese Painting* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986). Balinese paintings can be viewed via the web, for example, by searching for the names of artists or the sites of ARMA (Anak Agung Rai Museum of Art), Puri Lukisan, the Neka Museum, and the Rudana gallery, all in the Ubud area. A list of the more important art museums is found at <http://www.bali-paradise.com/museum.cfm>.

35. Miguel Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, p. 160.

<end NOTES>