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Suggested Reference

Davies, S. J. (2011). The role of Westerners in the conservation of the Legong dance. *Contemporary Aesthetics, Special Issue 3*. Retrieved from <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/>

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ABSTRACT

The role of Westerners in the conservation of the Legong dance

Stephen Davies

The image of legong—sumptuously costumed girl dancers crowned with frangipanis—is the face of Balinese culture. Yet it is only one of twenty dance/drama genres and prominent in only some centers. Legong, a secular court dance, has often been (and still is) in danger of extinction. Balinese are now less interested in legong than ever before and musicians prefer to play other kinds of music.

Since the 1930s, legong has been presented at tourist concerts and by ensembles touring overseas. Western expatriates have founded legong groups and generally brokered the relation between Balinese and foreigners. Foreign scholars have studied, recorded, and filmed Balinese performers. Balinese scholars take higher degrees abroad and

co-author books on Balinese dance with Westerners. Balinese performers teach across the world, while US and Japanese student dancers in Bali employ teachers at rates of pay locals cannot match. Legong groups tour Bali from the US and Japan. Non-Balinese influence what aspects of Balinese culture are promoted and sustained. The impetus for the current (modest and localised) revival of legong seems to come mostly from non-Balinese.

Despite all this, legong has retained its autonomy and integrity as an emblematic Balinese dance form, and for some surprising reasons.

The role of Westerners in the conservation of the Legong dance

Introduction

Legong is a genre of Balinese dance in which (usually three) sumptuously costumed girls crowned with frangipanis perform to the accompaniment of a metal gamelan orchestra. Legong is more than this, though. It is the face Bali presents to the outside world. The image of the Legong dancer is used to advertise and promote Balinese culture to foreigners. Yet the Legong dance is only one of Bali's many genres of dance or drama and is prominent in only some areas of the island. Moreover, the survival of the Legong dance has been insecure at best. In this paper I discuss the role of Western influence in the preservation of Legong.

The precarious survival of the Legong dance

The Legong dance achieved its modern form in the 1920s and 30s.ⁱ Yet it was under threat from the outset.

A new type of orchestra, gong kebyar, was invented in the north about 1918. It became increasingly popular and soon spread to other parts of the island. It did so at the expense of the pelegongan or semar pegulingan orchestras that accompanied the Legong dance.ⁱⁱ By the mid-1930s, many of these older orchestras were melted down and recast as gong kebyars (Seebass 1966). Even as late as 1966, the famous pelegongan orchestra of Binoh was threatened with the same fate (Dr. Wayan Sinti, pers. comm.).ⁱⁱⁱ In the early 1990s, only a "handful" (Tenzer 1991) of pelegongan or semar pegulingan orchestras survived. And while the Legong dance can be and usually now is accompanied by gong kebyar, that orchestra's weightier tone and different tuning are universally deemed unsuited to the dance.

Moreover, there has never been a religious requirement for the performance of the Legong dance.^{iv} Legong is a secular entertainment—originally for the nobility and later for the wider Balinese public. As such, it had to compete for the audience's affection against other genres, such as Gambuh, Arja, Joged, and Janger. The village of Peliatan is one of the most famous centers for the Legong dance, but it was not always dominant there, as the musician I Wayan Gandera explained in 1978: "From 1930-37, the Legong dance was much liked by the people and there were many requests to perform abroad. Between 1937 and 1949, the Legong dance was not much performed and the Janger dance was to

the fore. From 1949-54, Legong came back into favor with the public and there were important requests from America [for its performance]. The Jaged Bumbung dance was preferred in 1954-58, with the Legong dance rarely done. Since 1958, the village has been active in performing the Legong dance for tourists in the yard of Puri Kaleran" (Wartini 1978, 12-13, my translation).

With the 1980s, the challenge to Legong's popularity increased. The new forms of Sendratari and Drama Gong captured the enthusiasm of the Balinese public, and it would be remiss not to mention the introduction and spread of television in the same period. The Legong dance was already thought to be endangered by 1974 (Rembang et. al. 1974/75), with both depletion in the repertoire, as the dancers who remembered the choreographies and music died, and decline in the number of orchestras and groups committed to its performance.^v Despite a continuing dedication to the dance in some of the centers that are famous for it—Saba, Peliatan, Binoh—the popularity of the Legong dance with Balinese has continued to wane, as is true also for other "classic" genres such as Gambuh and Arja. It is widely reported that musicians prefer to play newer music and that the local audience no longer likes or understands the Legong dance. Many Balinese now cannot follow the narrative significance of Legong's highly stylized movements.

In general, the Balinese prefer innovation and change to preservation and repetition, at least so far as the secular arts are concerned. Indeed, Bali is surely among the most culturally volatile of

societies. So it would not have been surprising had the Legong dance gone the way of the Janger dance, which in past times was enormously popular but now is little performed. In fact, though, Legong has persisted and attempts to revive it continue. Perhaps this is due more to its emblematic status with Westerners than to inclinations natural to the Balinese. If the Legong dance is synonymous with Bali for Westerners (as observed in Vickers 1989), perhaps it owes its survival to its exotic attractiveness to foreigners. That is a hypothesis I explore further in the following sections.

The export of Balinese culture

Westerners have been exposed in their own countries to the Balinese arts, especially music and dance, for at least eighty years.

When Balinese culture was first exported from the island, the Legong dance was prominent. It was featured in the first overseas tour by a Balinese ensemble, a composite group from the Ubud region that represented the Dutch at the Paris Colonial Exhibition of 1931 (Saverese 2001), as it was also in the European and American tour of the Peliatan group in 1952 (Coast 2004). Subsequent international journeys by ensembles such as Gunung Sari of Peliatan and Gunung Jati of Teges became regular from the 1970s. And it was about the same time that Balinese teachers of dance and music found employment offshore, especially in the US, while a few Balinese dancers and musicians (such as Dr Wayan Sinti, Dr Nyoman Sumandi, Ni Made Wiratini, Dr Made Bandem, Dr Wayan Dibia, Dr Nyoman Wenten, and others) took scholarly higher degrees in the US.

Balinese music and dance also gained Western exposure through sound recordings and films. Noteworthy among the latter is Henry De La Falaise's *Legong: Dance of the Virgins*, shot in two-color Technicolor in 1933. The first sound recordings were made by Beka and Odeon in 1927-28 and inspired Colin McPhee to go to Bali (McPhee 2000). More recordings were made by the Fahnstock brothers in 1941 (McKee 1988), but those with the biggest impact in the West, due to their widespread dissemination on affordable LPs, were from the 1960s and 70s and done by Jacques Brunet, David Lewiston, and Robert E. Brown.

The import of Western influence

Attracted to Bali's exotic beauty and its arts, foreign scholars and émigrés have played a crucial role since the 1920s in brokering the relation between Bali and the outside world. Their impact on the direction of the arts in Bali was considerable. For example, in the 1930s, not only was Walter Spies, with Rudolph Bonnet, a major influence on new styles of Balinese painting, he was also responsible (with Katharine Mershon) for commissioning the creation of the Kecak dance as a tourist entertainment. He was, as well, a great collector, founder of the Bali museum, and co-author with Beryl de Zoete of the first book devoted to Balinese dance and drama (Spies & de Zoete 2002). Other long-term residents—Colin McPhee, Miguel Covarrubias, John Coast, Fred B. Eiseman Jr.—and anthropologists or ethnomusicologists—Mantle Hood, Margaret Mead, Michael Tenzer, among others—have written at length in English or Dutch on Balinese dance, drama, and music. Several studies of Balinese dance and drama—Bandem &

DeBoer 1995 and Dibia & Ballinger 2004—have resulted from collaborative authorships between Westerners and Balinese.

Colin McPhee, who wrote the most important early study of Balinese music (McPhee 1966) as well as a significant commentary on Balinese dance (McPhee 1948) was devoted to preserving the classical pelegongan repertoire; that is, the music and orchestra associated with the Legong dance. Writing of the 1930s, which he describes as a period of great change in Balinese music, he observes: "To try to preserve in some form of record this period in Balinese music, while older styles and methods survived, became my desire" (McPhee 1966:xiv). McPhee arranged for musicians to be taught the music and encouraged its revival (McPhee 2000).

Active participation by expatriates in the preservation of Legong still continues. Yayasan Polosseni of Teges, which is directed by an Australian, Douglas Myers, has issued a series of recordings of Legong dances performed by a replica of McPhee's semar pegulingan orchestra. Myers employs the famous dance teacher, Sang Ayu Ketut Muklin, to pass on the old choreographies from Bedulu, where she was taught in the 1930s. Meanwhile, a New Zealander, Von Hatch, advertises to the expatriate community in the following terms: "Gamelan and Dance Association, Mekar Bhuana, appeals for donations to buy dance costumes for our young legong dancers. Help us preserve the endangered Sanur legong dance," and again, "MEKAR BHUANA - Classical Gamelan & Dance - performances for Weddings, Hotels/Villas, Events (Lessons, Wedding Costumes, Dance Costumes, Dress up,

Instrument sourcing). You will be helping to preserve endangered Balinese art forms" (*Balinese Advertiser*, September 1-15, 2004, pp. 39, 42).

Not everyone with an interest in Balinese culture moves there, of course. Some come to study for a relatively short period. In addition to musicians, significant numbers of young women from Japan and the US have arrived to study dance. A few of these stay and contribute to performance in the Balinese context.^{vi} The norm, though, is for these foreign musicians and dancers to return to their home cultures, and to help kindle in their compatriots a passion for the arts of Bali.^{vii}

In addition, foreign donors have earmarked funds for the preservation of indigenous art forms. One prominent source is the Ford Foundation. In 1974-78, this financed study of the status of Legong, documentation of the tradition (including film of famous teachers), and attempts to revive endangered dances. One result of this initiative was a series of scholarly studies by Balinese dancers and musicians, including *Proyek Pengembangan Sarana Wisata Budaya Bali: Perkembangan Legong Sebagai Seni Pertunjukan* (Project to promote Balinese cultural things/events: Promotion of Legong as a performance art), which was produced in 1974/75 by a committee including Pak Panji, the late I Nyoman Rembang, and Dr Wayan Sinti. The Ford Foundation continues to support endangered Balinese arts, such as Legong and Gambuh.

The most powerful and obvious Western force acting on Balinese culture is that of tourism. Though cultural performances were arranged for tourists as early as the 1930s, it was not until the advent of mass

tourism, beginning in the 1970s, that the impact of tourism became significant.^{viii} Among other results, it was in the late 1970s that groups began weekly performances for tourists. Prominent among these are shows advertised as "Legong Dances". Typically (but not inevitably), these contain one Legong dance—usually Legong Lasem, also identified as Legong Keraton—along with a potpourri of other dances in other styles. Since the late 1980s, tourists in the Ubud region have had the choice of three or four different concerts on every night of the week. The tourists who attend these shows are interested in the cultural experience, but most have no prior understanding or appreciation of Balinese dance and music.

The risks of negative effects from tourist performances are frequently discussed. By repeatedly performing before ignorant audiences, musicians can become slipshod and bored. Performers sometimes cater to the inappropriate expectations of the audience; for example, by posing for "photo opportunities". The dancers and musicians are semi-professional (though frequently underpaid), and this has translated into a widespread, assumption among musicians that rehearsal and practice are necessary only where a paid concert (or a temple ceremony) is in view.^{ix}

In the case of the Legong dance, tourist concerts involve clear departures from the tradition. Usually only one work from the repertoire, Legong Lasem, is played; frequently this is given on unconsecrated stages that are not appropriately aligned according to Balinese cosmological principles of spiritual purity and power; young

women, rather than prepubescent girls, perform; the sung narrative frequently is dropped; and, whereas the complete version of the piece lasts up to 50 minutes, the tourist rendition is ruthlessly cut, sometimes to only 12 minutes. Cokorda Istri Ratih Iryani, then a 22-year old dancer from Peliatan, is quoted in the mid-1980s as saying: "The shorter dances for tourists are not true Balinese culture. The movements are the same but the dances are not complete" (Mabbett 1985:136).

One does not have to be duped by government propaganda (as critically discussed in Vickers 1989, Picard 1990) alleging an intimate tie between the preservation of culture and the development of tourism to find benefits from tourism for Balinese dance, however. Tourism has increased the general level of wealth to the point where many banjar—the basic unit of sub-village community government—now can afford two or three different kinds of gamelan and thereby can support more clubs playing a greater variety of music and dances. The *semar pegulingan* orchestras that had become so rare are now making a comeback, which draws attention again to the Legong dance. Moreover, some groups have come to realize they can exploit tourist concerts to expand and maintain their repertoires. For example, since 1995 the Legong group Tirta Sari of Peliatan have performed two Legong dances in their tourist concerts (each of 20-25 minutes' duration). By alternating their program, they have added the Legong dances *Jobog*, *Kuntir*, *Kuntul*, *Pelayon*, and *Semarandana* to their tourist repertoire. Another group, the Peliatan Masters, have regularly performed a more or less complete, 45-minute version of Legong *Lasem* for tourists.

Besides, some of the departures from tradition noted earlier are not all bad. Agung Rai of Saba suggests (pers. comm.) there is no virtue in performing long versions of Legong dances; even the Balinese find these tiresome. Provided the dances are edited tastefully (cutting excessive repetition but not eliding whole sections), there is no loss in shortening them. Moreover, older dancers who otherwise would have retired can continue to display their talents in public performance, as well as going on as teachers.^x

There is another way tourists could play a vital role in the future of the Legong dance: they have created a massive legacy of recordings and films covering many Balinese regions.^{xi} Many Balinese musicians and dancers believe regional varieties of the traditional dance forms cannot be lost, even as the older teachers die, so long as the current generation can access such films and recordings. Not surprisingly, the sourcing and archiving of film materials is now attracting attention.

Renewal from within

My claim is not that Legong owes its survival to the influence, both direct and indirect, of Westerners through the interest they take in Bali's culture or in its other attractions. I do think that, one way or another, Westerners have contributed significantly to the preservation of Balinese culture, however. They could do this successfully, though, only by supporting a genuine commitment to the same result from the Balinese themselves. Westerners cannot dictate for Balinese what their culture means to them. If the wealth, presence, and interest of Westerners provide prospects for cultural renewal and conservation,

still it is the Balinese alone who can take up and use those opportunities. Some have done so, as I indicated in discussing programming options adopted for tourist concerts in Peliatan.

Support for cultural invigoration and conservation is official policy in some Balinese quarters. For example, the Walter Spies Foundation has as its mission the development of Balinese art, with an emphasis on the preservation of traditional Balinese values and art forms. To further this mission, it supports and arranges a biennial festival. In 1995, the festival was held in Peliatan and focused on Legong and closely related dances. Meanwhile, the university of the arts (ISI, formerly STSI, formerly ASTI) in Denpasar encourages scholarly theses on, and practical mastery of, traditional art forms, including the Legong dance. Inevitably, though, the style of the dance is that with which the teacher is familiar. The "official" ISI version of Legong Lasem derives from Binoh and glosses over the many differences—some subtle, some not—that distinguish the dance's choreography and music in other areas.^{xii} A similar risk of homogenization is created by "how to learn dance" television shows that first appeared in the late 1970s (Dibia & Ballinger 2004) and with VCD compilations of Balinese dance issued by Aneka and Bali Records in the 1990s.

Valuable though these approaches are, they *preserve* a few performances without thereby *conserving* the tradition and practice that makes Legong a living art form. That tradition is one that expects change and evolution within the dance and its styles. It also values and respects regional differences in the music, choreographies, and styles of

movement of the Legong dances.^{xiii} (Moreover, particular Legong dances are sometimes associated with particular areas or villages. Kupu kupu Tarum is identified with Bedulu and Candra Kanta with Saba, for instance.)

The survival of the Legong dance requires more than the preservation of glass-case, academic specimens, then.^{xiv} It depends on the widespread involvement of ordinary people in those villages that pride themselves on their history of excellence in the Legong dance. When these grassroots are examined, the sources of Legong's resilience become clearer.

The Legong dance can be mastered only by those who start very young, so great is the suppleness it requires and the technical difficulties it presents. Moreover, a foundation in the Legong dance is regarded as essential in any female dancer who aspires to perform other genres, such as the gong kebyar dances. The Legong dance survives only because a constant stream of young, village girls have the desire and discipline to submit to the relentless, prolonged training that it demands. The passion for dancing that formerly energized centers of Legong excellence continues to burn in Balinese girls to this day.^{xv} In the mid-1980s, Cokorda Istri Ratih Iryani said "It is an embarrassment for any girl from Peliatan not to dance. Everyone here must dance" (Mabbett 1985:134). And the same still holds, apparently, for the several hundred young hopefuls who come each day to the free 90-minute lessons provided in Peliatan by Anak Agung Gede Oka Dalem and his sister.^{xvi} Only the most talented and charismatic few will

graduate eventually to performing in public. They are the future and life of the Legong dance.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁱ I am skeptical of claims tracing the origins of the Legong dance back to the early nineteenth century (as in Bandem 1983), for reasons I outline in Davies 2008. (See also Vickers 2009.) The proto-form of the Legong dance was based on Nandir, a dance for boys, and was created in the late-nineteenth century by Anak Agung Rai Perit (dance), I Dewa Ketut Belacing, and I Made Duwaja (music). The role of the condong, servant to and introducer of the two legongs (as the other dancers are called), was first created by Ida Bagus Boda, a teacher of Badung, after 1910 (Rembang et. al. 1974/75). (Bandem 1983 gives the date as 1932.) Until the 1930s, the role of the condong could be danced by a boy. (I Wayan

Rindi of Kelandis was famous as condong (Spies & de Zoete 2002) and there is a photograph of 1925 picturing him in the part.) The role of condong was not introduced in Peliatan until 1916 (Wartini 1978) and in Saba until the 1930s (Agung Rai, pers. comm.). By the 1930s the form of the dance was set and girls performed it.

- ii For descriptions and an account of the differences between these two forms of the Legong orchestra, see Tenzer 1991.
- iii Informed sources (such as Bu Ketut Arini Alit and Dr Wayan Dibia) describe this particular orchestra as having the most beautiful sound for Legong of any on the island.
- iv An ancestral relative of the modern Legong dance, however, is Topeng Legong, a religious masked dance associated with the village of Ketewel. This dance is still performed.
- v Among the core Legong dances that were lost by this period are Raja Cina, Gadung Melati, and Bremara. A Legong version of the Calonarang story was performed in Peliatan as recently as World War Two, but now is gone (Herbst 1997). Among the Legong dances that have been reconstructed and revived are Kupu kupu Tarum, Sudasarna, Candra Kanta, Guak Macok, Legod Bawa, and the regionally distinctive Prabangsa from the village of Tista. Few groups can perform all the remaining dances from the traditional repertoire—Lasem, Jobog, Pelayon, Kuntir, Kuntul, and Semarandana. New Legong dances can be and are created, but few of these have survived for long. Among the most long-lived in this category are Supraba Duta, Untung Surparta, and Adipati Awangga.

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- ^{vi} A notable case is that of Cristina Formaggia, an Italian, who is active as a performer in the revival of Gambuh.
- ^{vii} A potentially negative aspect of this commerce has been remarked (see the article on Sang Ayu Ketut Muklin in the **Bali Post** of December 6, 1998): foreign students are willing to pay for classes at rates locals cannot match and threaten to monopolize the time of the best teachers, thereby denying local children access to them. In practice, though, this concern seems unjustified. The best teachers recognize a responsibility to pass on their knowledge and skills to Balinese children, and most teach the most talented of their local pupils free of charge.
- ^{viii} Mabbett (1985) records that the number of tourists increased from 23,000 in 1970 to 133,000 in 1978. The figure for 2001 was 1,500,000. (There has been a subsequent decline, following the terrorist bombings in Bali.)
- ^{ix} A number of older musicians have voiced this concern to me. As I Wayan Gandera, leader of the group Gunung Sari, put it in 1996: "Everything now is a little bit money." The Balinese culture has generally become less communalist and more money-focused in recent decades. That this is an inescapable consequence of Indonesia's move toward a modern economy does not make it less regrettable when one recalls how deeply the Balinese arts are rooted in a shared sense of local community.
- ^x Cokorda Istri Ratih Iryani, who was quoted earlier, speculated in 1985 that she would not be able to continue performing as she aged, yet she was still dancing Legong with Tirta Sari in 2005. Appropriately, the group uses some extremely skilled and experienced older dancers in the more dramatic works, such as Legong Jobog and Legong Kuntir.

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- ^{xi} In this respect, the Legong dance is much better off than Gambuh and Arja, which have had considerably less tourist exposure and appeal.
- ^{xii} For further discussion, see Davies 2006.
- ^{xiii} Versions of the Legong dance vary from village to village, and the local style is usually known only to teachers trained in it. Sang Ayu Ketut Muklin teaches the Bedulu/Teges style, which is neither so calm and simple as that found in Saba nor so realistic and frenetic as that promoted in Peliatan. Many teachers have been influenced by various sources. Both Ni Gusti Ayu Raka Astuti and Ni Ketut Arini Alit were first trained in the Lebah/Kelandis (Badung) style of dancing, which is more refined and abstract than the styles of Saba, Bedulu, Peliatan, and Tabanan, but later learned other legong dances in Saba or elsewhere.
- ^{xiv} Anthropologists and others are rightly wary of approaches to the analysis of authenticity in non-Western art assuming that such cultures inevitably generate long-standing, static practices that are impervious to outside influences. Nevertheless, they go too far sometimes by rejecting the meaningfulness of attempts at cultural conservation. I discuss this and related issues in Davies 2001, chapter 6.
- ^{xv} Some Balinese teachers describe the girls of today as lazy. Others observe that, with today's schooling, extracurricular activities, and other distractions, girls can no longer dedicate as much time as in the past to learning to dance. Nevertheless, Westerners are usually astonished at the prolonged concentration delivered by pupils even as young as five, and at the hours of practice they put in.
- ^{xvi} In the past, the best dancers retained enormous fame and respect long after they retired from live performance, and many married into the

higher castes. As well, dancers earn money from their tourist performances. But it is unlikely that young children are motivated by such considerations. They plainly love dancing for its own sake.