

# Topeng: A Mask Dance Theatre of Bali

*Topeng, an historical theatrical art form of Bali, is a mesmerizing drama of masked dance, music, mime and comedy. It is believed to have originated in A.D. 840 and perhaps earlier, based on the stories and genealogy found in ancient palm-leaf manuscripts known as "lontar". The performance celebrates the mythology and folklore of the island, heroism of a kingdom or clan, and its relevance to the present society, with the characters reflecting the social structure and circumstances. In the following article, I Wayan Dibia presents the history, role and a description of the various forms of this performing art, and speculates on its future.*



*Old man (Tua) character in one of the solo introductory dances. He is the personality to appear in the beginning of Topeng Pajegan. Drawing after 'Indonesian Heritage: Performing Arts', Archipelago Press*

## Introduction

The island of Bali, in Indonesia, is the home of various performing art forms featuring mask. Presently, there are no less than seven forms of dance theatre on the island, and each form utilises different types of masks to enact different stories.<sup>1</sup> Among these is *Topeng*, the mask dance theatre enacting the Balinese chronicles, *babad*.

The Balinese word for masks is *tapel* (*tup* means cover) which is literally translated as "to close or press against the face". Perhaps, it is called *Topeng*, not only because most of the actor-dancers of this dramatic form wear masks, but more importantly that the artistic beauty of its performance lies in, and is very much determined by, the ability

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to *Topeng* mask dance theatre, masks are also used in other performing art forms, such as *Barong*, *Wayang Wong*, *Telek* and *Jauk*, *Legong*, *Calonarang*, *Kecak*, and the modern Balinese dance drama known as *Sendratari*.

of its actor-dancers to give breath and soul to their masks by utilising the right movements, voices, actions, and energy. Making the mask come to life is, in fact, the key to the success of the *Topeng* performance. The dancers usually operate this principle not by simply putting their masks on but through a process of transformation they become the characters represented by the masks. In a sense, the actor-dancers “enter the world and life” of the masks.

*Topeng* is essentially an improvisational theatre; there is no script for the actors to follow, no one who directs the actors, or composers who write the music. Instead, the performers use a set of conventions as general guidelines when improvising their parts, and they work from their memories. The success of the performance, therefore, does not depend on how exact and precise the actors tell the story, or how they perform the choreography, but on how creatively they bring all the elements together to make the drama come to life.

Despite the changing culture of Bali, *Topeng* continues to have a special place and it is still highly valued by nearly all in the Balinese community. Perhaps this is because of the importance of *Topeng* in ritual and cultural activities on the island; its dramatic form continues to present and speak about the values and spirit in contemporary Balinese society.

### The Variants of Balinese *Topeng*

For centuries, mask performances have been an important part of the Balinese cultural tradition. The origin of Balinese mask performances can be traced to the ninth century. One of the earliest records on mask performances was found in the *Bebetin* manuscript dating back to the Caka year 818 or 896 A. D. Among the important terms found in the manuscript, which suggest performances using masks, are *partapukan*, *atapukan*, or *hanapuk* (tapuk means “to cover” or mask). It is strongly believed that mask performances have developed well at that time, but no one knows whether the mask performances mentioned in the manuscript are similar to the *Topeng* mask dance theatre flourishing in Bali today.

Currently, there are four variants of the *Topeng* genre in Bali: *Topeng Pajegan*, *Topeng Panca*, *Topeng Prembon*, and *Topeng Bondres*. These variants evolved during different periods of the Balinese history. The first and the second evolved between the seventeenth to



A performer preparing to perform his role as the *panasar*. Drawing after 'Indonesian Heritage: Performing Arts', Archipelago Press

nineteenth century, and the others were created during the modern era (twentieth century).



*Mask of Sidhakarya. At the conclusion of the performance, Sidhakarya would bless the audience with a sprinkling of rice grains and holy water. Drawing after 'Indonesian Heritage: Performing Arts', Archipelago Press*

*Topeng Pajegan*, also known as *Topeng Sidhakarya*, is a mask dance drama performed by a solo actor-dancer.<sup>2</sup> It is believed that *Topeng Pajegan*, considered as the oldest variant of *Topeng*, developed around the seventeenth century during the reign of King Watuarenggong's grandson, King Demade, in Gelgel-Klungkung. The King and his Prime Minister, I Gusti Pering Jelantik, created a dance drama using the masks brought home from the palace of Blambangan in East Java during the invasion of the Blambangan Kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

To portray the different characters in the play, the dancer changes his mask and headdress every time he appears on stage, but without changing his costume. He moves, sings and speaks according to the facial expressions of the mask. He also narrates the story, and describes the dramatic action of the play. One of the most important characters on *Topeng Pajegan* is Sidhakarya, which means "to finish the task", and refers to the ceremony in process. Wearing a white mask with narrow slits for eyes, buck teeth, and sporting wild white hair, he is indeed frightening. His movements are sparse, he hops around and laughs eerily. A young child in the audience will be snatched up and given Chinese coins with square holes in the centre, also a symbol of prosperity.

Due to the complex dramatic role the actor must perform, and the priestly duty he must carry out, *Topeng Pajegan* is usually performed by a reputed and mature actor who also has priestly knowledge. Therefore, it is not surprising if the *Topeng* is acted by a real temple priest, or a shadow puppet master (*dalang*). Alternatively, the actor must have undergone a purification ceremony called *mawinten*.

*Topeng Panca* (meaning *Topeng* theatre of five actors) is a derivative of the *Topeng Pajegan*. It is believed that *Topeng Panca* first appeared in the eighteenth century, if not later. *Topeng Panca* also called *Topeng Gede* (large *Topeng* performance featuring more dancers), requires a longer performance time. It began to reach its

<sup>2</sup> One can now see a performance of *Topeng Sidhakarya* at religious rites of two to three dancers. This is because nowadays it is becoming more common for Balinese dancers to dance in a ritual as a part of performing their religious duty.

<sup>3</sup> These masks can be seen at the Penataran *Topeng* Temple in Blahbatuh-Gianyar.

popularity around the 1930s, and is still a popular dramatic form in Bali today.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike *Topeng Pajegan*, the requirement for *Topeng Panca* actor-dancers is relatively lighter. In the *Topeng Panca* performance, the dancers divide the dramatic roles in the play among them; the dancers are assigned to act as the king, minister, buffoon, clown, etc.. Those who are strong dancers with limited skills in dialogue, or story-telling, may take roles with less or no dialogue. However, the roles, such as the buffoons and the clowns, who narrate the story while making contemporary jokes, must be played by more mature and experienced actors.

*Topeng Prembon* is essentially a mixed mask dance drama featuring characters with and without masks. A derivative of the *Topeng Panca*, combining elements of *Topeng* and the opera dance-drama *Arja* of Bali, this dance theatre was created in 1942 through a collaborative production by a group of artists from Gianyar and Badung regencies. Many believed that the creation of this dramatic form was strongly stimulated by the growing awareness among the people of Bali, concerning their new provincial and national roles during the revolution of Indonesia. With the inclusion of these *Arja* roles, *Topeng Prembon* becomes a theatre of male and female artists although the performance is still dominated by male actors.<sup>5</sup>

*Topeng Bondres* or *Babondresan* is a mask dance theatre dominated by comic characters, such as buffoons and clowns, and its play contains endless amounts of spontaneous humour. Created around the early 1980s, the *Topeng Bondres*, the youngest in the *Topeng* genre, is a flexible dramatic form that does not rely on a formal performance structure. It tells no literary story and its entire performance is filled with humour. The play may be based on a classical story as a starting point but then it digresses into spontaneous criticism and comment on current issues.



A *bondres* mask for a comic character. Drawing after 'Indonesian Heritage: Performing Arts', Archipelago Press

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<sup>4</sup> Lately in Bali, it is common for a *Topeng Panca* performance to involve only three or four dancers. Once in a while, it may involve seven performers.

<sup>5</sup> *Prembon* is considered an important concept for art creativity, especially in Balinese performing arts, for it allows artists with different artistic skills to interact and to share their talents.

During the last five years, *Topeng Bondres* has been including female *Arja* roles of similar character types (comic characters). With the inclusion of these roles, *Topeng Bondres* has become a shorter version of *Topeng Prembon*.

## Performance Elements

*Topeng* is a complex theatrical form integrating dance, story-telling, music, and mask. When performing a story, there are moments when a *Topeng* dancer must dance and sing, and later tell the story. Since mask, the most essential element of this theatrical form, is considered a sacred object, *Topeng* performance usually requires elaborate offerings.

The masks (or *tapel*) used in *Topeng* usually portray human faces. They are handmade of wood, painted with Balinese pigments and accentuated with hair and jewelry. The masks are held in place by a rubber strap.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the performance, the actors adorn their masks with *gegirang* leaves and flowers to enliven the performance.

There are normally eight to twelve different masks used in a *Topeng* performance. Based on their sizes and physical forms, these masks can be classified into three groups: full mask or *tapel bungkulan* which covers the entire face; half mask or *tapel sibakan* which covers from the forehead down to the upper lip; and mini mask, *tapel mini*, covering only the forehead and nose, or nose and jaw. The full masks are for *Topeng keras* (the strong characters), *Topeng tua* (the old man), and *Topeng dalem* (the refined king); the half masks are used by the buffoon or *panasar*, and some of the clowns (*bondres*); and mini masks are also for the clowns.<sup>7</sup>



*Pajegan carver, working on a Topeng mask. Drawing after 'Indonesian Heritage: Performing Arts', Archipelago Press*

The dance movements adopted in *Topeng* are based on the classical Balinese dance drama – *Gambuh*. *Topeng* dance, in general, consists of four main categories of movement: *agem*, *tandang*, *tangkep*, and *tangkis*. *Agem* are non-locomotive actions and *tandang* are locomotive. Together, these two aspects make up the main choreography.

<sup>6</sup> The first masks found in Bali had mouthpieces (*canggem*) that the dancer bit on to hold the mask in place. This type of mask is still used in Ketewel villages in the sacred *Legong Topeng* dance.

<sup>7</sup> To make a *Topeng* mask for sacred dramatic form, the carver must first go to the graveyard where the *pule* (*Alstonia scholaris*) tree grows. Offerings are made and permission requested to take wood from the trunk of the tree.

*Tangkis* are traditional phrases, which connect *agem* and *tandang* movements, and *tangkep* are facial expressions. Since there are many speaking sections in *Topeng* performances, *Topeng* choreography is dominated by in-place movements and hand gestures. The actors move creatively, either leading or following the gamelan music, to suit the expressions of the masks, which at first appear static and neutral yet once animated, take on a multitude of emotions.

Although there are parts of *Topeng* performance in which the actors perform a rather fixed choreography, in most parts of the play the dance is improvised. The gamelan music is always responsive to the dancer's actions; in fact, many musical changes are initiated by dance movement cues. This signaling system between dancer and musicians, through the drummers, allows the actors to shorten or lengthen their dance sequences depending upon their artistic impulse and the response of the audience.

In *Topeng*, as in most Balinese theatre, dance is a means of defining the social status, gender, and persona of the characters for the audience. The principals, representing the aristocracy, dance formally in more stylized and structured movements. To maintain their sense of formality, they reinforce their spoken lines with dance. In contrast, the servants and clowns who represent people of the lower class utilise rather informal, spontaneous movements, and their dances are relatively simple.

In most cases, the *keras* – strong characters – incorporate more percussive and forceful movements, and those of refined character adopt more flowing and softer movements.

**The stories** for *Topeng* are drawn from Balinese chronicles (*babad*), which are usually written on palm leaf manuscripts or *lontar*. Usually, the outline of the dramatic plot for a *Topeng* story is taken from the historical past of the Balinese, which may depict, for example, the journey of the Javanese priests and noblemen to Bali from Java between the ninth and the fourteenth century; the historical journey of Balinese ancestors that took place later; the founding of many Hindu-Buddhist temples around the island; the inauguration of the local villages; the marriages of the local kings and their royal family members; and the role or emergence of clans in Bali. Among the most important literature containing *Topeng* stories, to mention only a few, are: *Babad Dalem* or the Chronicle of the Kings which tell of the



*Topeng* choreography is dominated by in-place movements and hand gestures.

glorified history of the ancestral heritage of the more prominent caste on the island; *Kidung Pamancangah* which describes the family line of Balinese kings; *Babad Blahbatuh*; *Babad Wug Gianyar*; and *Babad Mengwi*. Whatever the story, there are always scenes depicting present-day inhabitants of Bali discussing contemporary issues and narrating jokes, despite the fact that the drama is set in the eighteenth century, or even earlier. Impressed by *Topeng's* mixed plot, some dramatists claim that *Topeng* bridges the past and the present, the distant and the immediate.<sup>8</sup>

*Topeng* stories are always heroic and didactic. They are heroic in that they tell of many great battles involving local kings, clan leaders, and other heroes. They are didactic since *Topeng* stories convey philosophical concepts, such as the duality (*rwa bhineda*) in life involving two conflicting forces: good (*dharma*) and evil (*adharma*). The stories usually end with the victory of the good.

In *Topeng*, stories are vehicles chronicling lineage and the pite wars between local kingdoms as told in *babad* chronicles. The stories are generally about the *karma* or fate of the heroes, the stock-characters represent people of high and low classes, and the structure of the stories reflect the duality in the Hindu-Bali culture.

*Topeng* stories integrate balanced elements of both serious drama and comedy making the performance neither too serious nor frivolous. No matter what story is being enacted, there will always be four types of characters appearing in the play: knights and guards, servants and buffoons, king, and clowns. Some of these characters do not use spoken dialogue but only employ gestures, while others speak Balinese with Old-Javanese flourishes. Today, these characters may also speak the national language, *Bahasa Indonesia*, as well as other languages in order to reach much larger audiences.

A *Topeng* story is chosen in many ways; it can be based on the specific request of the host, or the actors choose one that is based on local situations as well as take into account the type of acting skills required. The story follows the structure of a performance in that they must include audience scenes with the king, the appearance of the villagers, and conclude with a fighting or meeting scene.

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<sup>8</sup> See Jhon Emigh. *Mask Performance: The Play of Self and Other in Ritual and Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 105-156.

**The music** accompaniment for *Topeng* in most cases is gamelan *Gong Kebyar*. This is one of the largest gamelan ensemble on the island, employing between 30 to 35 musicians, and the most popular ensemble that can be found throughout Bali.

*Gong Kebyar* is a relatively new gamelan ensemble. It was first created in 1915 in Buleleng (northern Bali) by using elements of the older gamelan ensembles, such as *Gong Gede*, *Gender Wayang*, and *Gamelan Palegongan*.<sup>9</sup>

This five-tone *pelog* scale gamelan is composed of eight different kinds of instruments, most of which are percussive. The more important instruments in the ensemble are the vertical gongs (*gong ageng*, *kempul*), flat gongs (*bebende*), knobbed gongs (*reyong*, *trompong*, *kajar*, *kempli*), gangsa metallophones (*jegogan*, *jublag*, *ugal*, *penyacah*, *pemade*, *kantil*), drums (*kendang*), cymbals (*cengceng*), bamboo flutes (*suling*), and the two-stringed fiddle (*rebab*). Playing these instruments, the ensemble produces 'bursting' sounds (the meaning of the word *kebyar*), rich, dynamic, and complex music.<sup>10</sup>

**The costumes** for *Topeng* are based on the male costumes of the classical *Gambuh* dance drama. Known as the *sesaputan*, the basic costume is composed of many pieces of cloth worn together in many layers. Some of the most important items of the *Topeng* costumes are: an ornamented split robe (*saput*) covering the body (from chest to knee), a pair of white pants (*jaler*) and a white waist cloth (*kamen*), a belt, a dark jacket, a pair of leggings, a decorative back panel, decorative collar, a pair of long aprons, and a pair of epaulettes. Each dancer wears a dagger or *kris* across his back.

The head-dress used in *Topeng* includes the crown-like head-dress or *gelungan* used by the principals; a wig or *sobrat*; and head cloth or *udeng* for servants and clowns. Some clowns may also wear hats, caps, or even army baretts. The commonly crown-like head-dresses used in the *Topeng* are called *cecandian* and *keklopingan* for ministers and guards, and *lelungsirana* for the king.

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<sup>9</sup> In the old days, two ancient gamelans, *Gong Kembang Kirang* and *Gong Gede*, were usually used. Nowadays, while some villages may use gamelan *Gong Luang*, *Semar Pagulingan*, or even gamelan *Angklung*, most villages use gamelan *Gong Kebyar*.

<sup>10</sup> I Wayan Dibia. *Selayang Pandang Seni Pertunjukan Bali* (Bandung: Masyarakat Seni Pertunjukan, 1999, p. 127).

The offerings for *Topeng* performance is quite elaborate. *Topeng* dancers believe that their masks possess the soul and spirit of the respective characters. They always treat the mask with profound respect by always keeping them in an appropriate or special place, making regular offerings to them, at home and at the performance site, before and after the performance.

There are at least two sets of offerings usually required in every performance: an offering for the head-dresses (*banten gelungan*), and an offering for the musical instruments (*banten gamelan*). Presented before and after the performance, these offerings can serve to consecrate the stage, and also as rituals requesting for permission to perform on the stage – from the spirits who occupy the space. The offerings at the beginning of the performance are to invoke and invite the divine spirits of the arts to descend and embody the materials that would be used. At the end of the performance, the offerings are for sending the spirits back to the upper world.

In *Topeng Pajegan*, the *Sidhakarya* emerges with an offering bowl in his hands. He walks towards the main shrine, or to the main area of the ceremony, and throws out yellow rice in four directions, dispensing wealth and fertility to everyone.

In addition, every 210 days or six months of the Balinese calendar, many art troupes conduct an annual ritual known as *weton gelungan/gamelan*. On the day of this ceremony, all head-dresses will be displayed in an elevated place, and the gamelan instruments in a special place nearby, to be blessed and acknowledged. Frequently, the ritual is preceded by a feast for the troupe members.

In Balinese culture, all gamelan ensembles are considered sacred, since spirits may reside in one or two of the instruments. In the case of *Gamelan Gong*, the spirits may enter the large *gongs*. This is also true with the head-dress, where the divine spirits of the arts may also reside. To invite the spirits of the arts to join the performance, and to keep them happy, the troupe conducts rituals before the performance, and to keep the spirits from going away, annual rituals may be performed.

Another important purpose for conducting rituals is to attain *taksu*, the spiritual power for stage appearance. The presence of *taksu* will not only alter the artistic quality of the performance,



*Topeng Tua (old man), one of the four introductory masks. Drawing after 'Dance and Drama in Bali', Oxford University Press*

it will also transform the actor into the character he or she plays. *Taksu* transforms all “raw” materials and the *mise-en-scènes* of the drama into a “live” art production. It is through the presence of *taksu* that the performance can be “elevated” above a mundane performance. While there is no set formula for attaining *taksu*, rituals are certainly one of the most essential means for Balinese artists to invoke and awake their *taksu*.

### **Topeng as Community Theatre**

*Topeng* is essentially the theatre of the Balinese community. This art form is well-loved by members of the community, so much so that it exists almost everywhere on the island. More importantly, it is produced and performed for the entertainment of the community by its members.

A *Topeng* performance may involve between thirty and forty performers; these include about thirty gamelan players and between five and ten dancers and their assistants. The dancers are usually chosen by the host (for a temple congregation, or a family ceremony); they may never have performed together as a group. It is important to mention that, to date, *Topeng* is still a male-dominated theatre.<sup>11</sup> It is rare to find principal female figures in a *Topeng* play; these characters are usually revered.<sup>12</sup>

The musicians, who organise themselves into a club or *sekaa*, are locals. Dancers can be from the local village, but if one is not available then dancers from outside will be brought in.

The audience for *Topeng* is comprised of all ages: children, adults, and the elderly; and they are from all levels, upper, middle, and lower class of society. Although the performers are exclusively male, *Topeng* plays appeal to everyone in the community. There are parts of the *Topeng* performance, which appeal to the children, and there are

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<sup>11</sup> The most recent development is *Topeng Sakti*, an all women's group, which performed at the 2001 Magdalena Festival in Denmark. The musicians were women from the Mekar Ayu *gamelan* group in Pengosekan, Ubud and the dancers were Ni Nyoman Candri and Cokorda Istri Agung from Singapadu, and Cristina Formaggia from Italy.

<sup>12</sup> In the past, several experiments on *Topeng* performance involving female characters acted by female performers have been conducted in Denpasar, but so far, the results have not been too satisfying.

many sections in the play that can be enjoyed by the adults. Moreover, the themes of the play relate to social, cultural, and political issues for all classes in the community.

*Topeng* is usually performed for free. The performers, especially the musicians, who are local villagers, may participate in the performance as part of their social and religious duty known as *ngayah*. While this is also true for the local dancers, dancers from another village would receive a relatively small fee. In many cases, dancers from other villages, who have close relationships with the host, may also perform for free. In addition, *Topeng* performance can be held in any place, with relatively simple decoration and lighting. The only stage prop required is the split curtain, or *langse*. Hence, it is not necessary for the host to collect admission fees from the audience.

*Topeng* is entertainment for both the *rural* and *urban* communities. During certain holidays, such as Galungan and Kuningan, one may encounter *Topeng* performances in many villages, as well as in Denpasar city. Nowadays, many of the wealthy in Bali invite *Topeng* groups to perform and enrich various ceremonies arranged by their families, which are held inside family compounds, or in community halls. Each dancer brings a box of masks and various head-dresses and costumes. Before starting, a small ritual is carried out by one of the dancers to ensure success for their performance. The masks and head-dresses are set in a high place of respect, never touching the ground, and incenses are wafted towards them.

### ***Topeng* In Performance**

Broadly speaking, the formal structure of *Topeng*, as performed in *Topeng Pajegan*, *Topeng Panca*, and *Topeng Prembon*, is composed of two parts: the introduction or *panglembar*, and the drama or *lampahan*. *Topeng* dancers consider the introduction as the part during which they can demonstrate their virtuosity through pure dance movements. The two most popular characters for the introduction are *Topeng keras*, a strong prime minister figure with a red or brown face denoting strength and courage; and *Topeng tua* or the old man. These characters do not speak, but move around the stage space as if they are spreading energy to the entire performance space.

The drama begins with the appearance of the clown servants, in the roles of two brothers who wear half-masks, speaking mainly

Balinese, and are the storytellers (*panasars*). The *panasars* pave the way for the entrance of the king, and more importantly to set the flow of the entire play. The older brother (*panasar kelihan*) begins by singing his tale behind the dance curtain. Stepping into the stage arena, he regales the audience with glorious facts about his Lord and kingdom, and his joy at being able to work for the king. Only then he drops hints about which king, what century and which place he is talking about. He then calls for his younger brother (*panasar cenikan*), whom he always blames for being invariably late and lazy, despite the fact that it is the younger brother who philosophises and educates the audience.

These two traverse around the stage space discussing the issues of the day, always with humour that leaves the audience chortling. It is their responsibility to keep the story line going as well as integrate modern references in the ancient stories (such as the issues of development or the annoyance of handphones ringing while they're trying to tell the story). Thus, the audience can appreciate both worlds at the same time. In this way, the actor-dancers impart important social, religious and moral issues without sounding too pedantic.

The two *panasars* raise the problem or issue at hand: a princess has been kidnapped, land has been stolen, a large ceremony is to be held. Then the music suddenly changes and the two go into supplicating postures, sitting on the floor cross-legged with their hands set in respective poses.

The *Dalem* (king) then appears between the two halves of the curtain; his flowered head-dress quivering. His movements are dainty and refined, and his mask is a light cream colour with mother-of-pearl teeth shining below his trimmed moustache. He sits on the top of a chair back to show his status. He then approaches his servants, and tells them through gestures what needs to be done. One *panasar* speaks for the king (as it is difficult to speak through a full mask, and also unseemly for such a refined character), and the other simultaneously translates into colloquial Balinese so the audience can understand. The King then takes his leave.

Then, the two brothers decide that they must gather their forces, whether it is an army or the people of the *banjar* (hamlet). Here, the clowns (*bondres*) come in, stuttering, with multiple layers of teeth, gimp legs, deaf ears, monkey faces and so on. The *panasar* stays on stage while his younger brother and one of the actors who plays an introductory role, or even the actor who is the



*The panasar's half mask.  
Drawing after 'Indonesian  
Heritage: Performing Arts',  
Archipelago Press*



Mask of the *patih* (prime minister)

king, change masks and headgear backstage, and come back on and engage in a dialogue. The brilliance of Balinese improvisation really shines here as the actors banter back and forth on issues of the day, contemporising events that happened hundreds of years ago, and making fun of everybody from priests to cab drivers to tourists.

If the plot or storyline involves an enemy (e.g. kidnapper, land snatcher), then before the clowns come out, other characters such as a Prime Minister (*patih*) or a messenger would emerge to converse with the King (*Dalem*).

### Functions of *Topeng* Performance

In Bali, nearly all performing arts are presented in accordance to the tripartite concept – *wali*, *bebali*, and *balih-balihan*.<sup>13</sup> In brief, the *wali* arts include all art forms which are considered sacred and religious, and are traditionally performed as an integral part of ceremonies. *Bebali* arts consist of all ceremonial arts, usually dramatic in nature, which are staged to complete the ceremonies. *Balih-balihan* arts are composed of non-religious or secular arts that are performed as public entertainment, almost without time and space restriction.

Based on this concept, *Topeng Pajegan* is considered as *wali* and *bebali* arts (*Topeng* for ritual) that is traditionally performed for a myriad of rituals and religious ceremonies. *Topeng Panca*, *Topeng Prembon*, and *Topeng Bondres* are mainly performed for secular entertainment, but sometimes in conjunction with religious activities.



Nearly all Balinese performing arts adheres to the *wali*, *bebali* and *balih-balihan* concept.

### *Topeng* for Ritual

As *wali* or *bebali* arts, the performance of *Topeng Pajegan* normally takes place inside the temple, near the sanctuary, and within the area of the ceremony, along with *Wayang Lemah* (ritual Shadow Play), and during the same time that the priest is conducting the ritual. The arts serve as an obligatory part of the ritual, and the performances are intended to please an invisible audience: comprising of the gods and deities residing temporarily inside the temple, as well as deified ancestors.

<sup>13</sup> The *wali*, *bebali*, and *balih-balihan* concept was a result of the 1971 art conference sponsored by the Bali Provincial Government. One of the best work explaining this concept is *Kaja and Kelod Balinese Dance in Transition* (1981), by I Made Bandem and Frederik Eugene deBoer.

In the Hindu Bali culture, sacred religious practice includes different kinds of rituals and ceremonies, collectively known as *Panca Yadnya*. The five main ceremonies are *dewa yadnya* (ritual dedicated to the gods and deities), *resi yadnya* (ritual to the priests), *bhuta yadnya* (sacrifice to *bhuta kala*), *pitra yadnya* (rituals to human souls), and *manusa yadnya* (rites of passages).

The most significant *Panca Yadnya* ceremonies which *Topeng* performance is associated with are: temple ceremony (*odalan*), cremation (*ngaben*), weddings, tooth-filings, and other rites of passage. Due to the importance of the *Topeng* to these ceremonies, many Balinese consider a ritual to be incomplete without the *Topeng* performance.

### **Topeng for Entertainment**

As *balih-bali* arts, the performance of *Topeng Panca*, *Topeng Prembon*, and *Topeng Bondres* traditionally take place just outside the temple, inside a village hall or theatre, outdoor stages in hotels, or at other places. As secular art forms, the primary goal of these performances is to entertain the audience, even though the performances may also be held in conjunction with religious ceremonies listed above. As these performances are held in a secular space, outside the temple, they are observed by the public.

During rites of passage ceremonies, such as wedding receptions, tooth-filing, etc., *Topeng Bondres* may also be performed in the yard of a house. Presently, it is very common for a Balinese family to arrange a *Topeng Bondres* performance before inviting the guests to eat. *Topeng Bondres* is usually brief, less than an hour, mainly to entertain the guests.

There are several secular events in which a *Topeng* performance may be included. Some of these events are: village fairs or *rame-rame* which may be organised after harvests, or during the inauguration of a new building, other public facilities; national fairs (*pasar amal*), a regional or national celebration sponsored by the government (Indonesian Independence day, for instance) or art festivals, such as the Annual Bali Arts Festival, *Pesta Kesenian Bali*.

It is clear that there are many religious ceremonies and festivals to which the Balinese commonly relate *Topeng* performances. This also explains the importance of the *Topeng* mask dance theatre in the modern Balinese society.



The mask of the old man character (*Tua*). Drawing after 'Indonesian Heritage: Performing Arts', Archipelago Press

## The Future of *Topeng*

As a *Topeng* dancer myself, and from my observations and performing experiences during the last twenty years, it is apparent that *Topeng* remains a favourite theatrical form because of two major reasons. First, *Topeng* is a community theatre that is produced and performed by the locals, and cherished by the community. In a sense, the *Topeng* performance becomes a place for community members to socially and artistically interact. Secondly, *Topeng* is a multi-functional dramatic form that is required in the sacred and secular realms of Balinese culture. The Balinese perform *Topeng* in conjunction with their myriad religious occasions and festivals. It does not, however, mean that *Topeng* will not have obstacles to overcome in the years ahead.

The most serious challenge to *Topeng* is the decreasing use of the Balinese language (*Bahasa Bali*). During the 1970s, after the removal of *Bahasa Bali* from the core curriculum of school programmes, Balinese students have been encouraged to speak more *Bahasa Indonesia* at school, and most classes are taught in this language, rather than Balinese. This condition has lowered the interest of young Balinese in learning their native language, and their literature, which are the two most important aspects of Balinese art and culture.

Meanwhile, people of the middle class tend to prefer speaking in *Bahasa Indonesia*, even at home with their families and relatives.

Such a trend has gradually created an image whereby the use of *Bahasa Bali* is perceived as unsophisticated. Fortunately, for the past ten years *Bahasa Bali* has been reinstalled in the provincial curriculum for both secondary and high school students. There is a great optimism that this programme will fortify the use of Balinese language.



The patih warrior. Drawing after 'Indonesian Heritage: Performing Arts', Archipelago Press

Sadly, educated Balinese are less able to enjoy performances of traditional drama, such as *Topeng*, because they have lost pride in their native language, including the understanding of the three-speech levels (low, middle, high), the metaphors, riddles and proverbs used by the actors. Actually, the decline of Balinese language and literature is a threat to all Balinese tradi-

tional performing arts in two ways: losing audience and failing to inculcate a new generation of actors and dancers. If the language and literature are dying out, how can the arts survive?"<sup>14</sup>

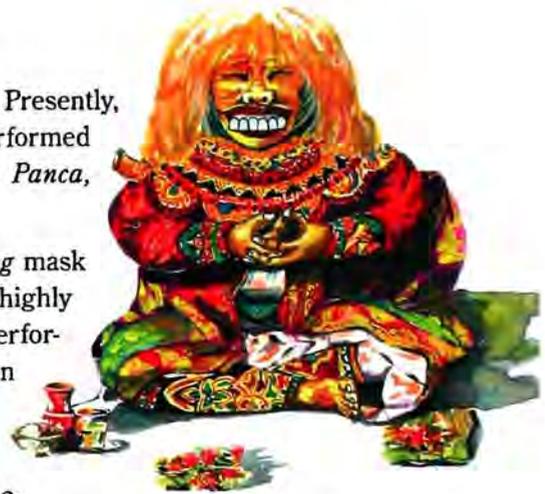
<sup>14</sup> Putu Setia. *Menggugat Bali* (Jakarta: PT Pustaka Gratitipers, 1986), p. 83

## Conclusion

*Topeng* is one of Bali's most important theatrical forms. Presently, there are four variants of *Topeng* that are being actively performed throughout Bali; these include: *Topeng Pajegan*, *Topeng Panca*, *Topeng Prembon*, and *Topeng Bondres*.

Amidst the rapid changes of Balinese culture, *Topeng* mask dance theatre continues to have a special place and it is still highly valued by the Balinese. This is mainly because *Topeng* performance, known as *wali* and *bebali* art forms, is required in Hindu-Bali rituals; it also enriches non-religious activities, as a *balih-balihan* art form.

In response to the modernisation of Bali, *Topeng* dancers continue to introduce new ideas in their performances by selectively adopting elements of contemporary cultures, without neglecting *Topeng's* artistic conventions. A traditional art form like *Topeng* will remain popular and relevant only when it speaks about the values and reflect the spirit of contemporary life.



*Sidhakarya, the awe-inspiring character with long white hair, in Topeng Pajegan. Drawing after 'Indonesian Heritage: Performing Arts', Archipelago Press*

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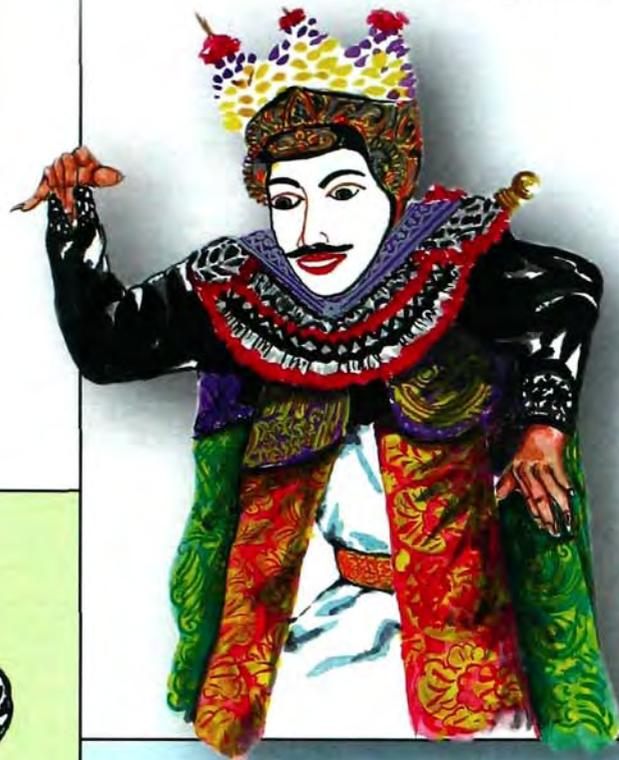
*Paper presented for Seminar and Workshop on Southeast Asia Performing Arts, SEAMEO-SPAFA, Bangkok University, Thailand, 10-14 November 2003. Illustration by Pattanapong Varanyanon*

**I Wayan Dibia is a distinguished performer, choreographer and scholar specialising in Balinese performing arts. He started experimenting with elements of traditional Kecak (a well-known performing art form of Bali, also known as Cak) to create innovative works in the 1970s that have achieved widespread appreciation. Dibia served as Director of STSI Denpasar (Indonesia College of the Arts) from 1997 to 2002, and lectures at ISI, the Institut Seni Indonesia (Indonesia Institute of the Arts), Denpasar. He holds a PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies in Southeast Asian Performing Arts from UCLA (U.S.A).**



*A section of a gamelan. In Balinese culture, all gamelan ensembles are considered sacred.*

*The hero-King, epitomising nobility of character*



*The patih (minister) in Topeng Keras.*



*A collection of bondres' masks for the clown characters*



### Two Sides of the Golden Coin

2003, installation

Nguyen Dam Thuy

Vietnam

*The atmosphere that envelops the viewer as he steps into the display hall is warm and welcoming; the materials and textiles used exude an air of security and well-being. The blue of the silk and of the oil paintings evokes a feeling of depth and infinity. The landscape of traditional hats and lamps, and the "little flame" that symbolizes the individual in the great mass of humanity, create a mood of harmony - if not for the barbed wire that connects the row of coins in the centre picture, gold coins that are associated with traditional funeral rites. What we have here is a metaphor that draws from an ancient tradition according to which the departed, in keeping with their social status, are to symbolically take their money with them to the other world in the form of a gold coin placed on the tongue of the deceased, so as to obviate the necessity of them having to start from scratch again in the other world. This may be understood as a sign of monetarisation of society and the growing demands made of life by its individuals, particularly in the instance of a "hat" gathering several coins beneath it. At the same time, however, this also poses a tremendous challenge to Vietnamese society to strive hard to preserve values that were once important and provided the community with a regulatory framework.*

*We Vietnamese are known for retaining our integrity in the face of tremendous challenges and preserving our national character. I believe in a future in which the best of our national traditions and attributes stand preserved, not blindly succumbing to the power of money. The faces on the blue background symbolize the great mass of humanity which toil hard every day to earn a small income, but is nevertheless ready to share.*

### The Follower ▶

2003, installation

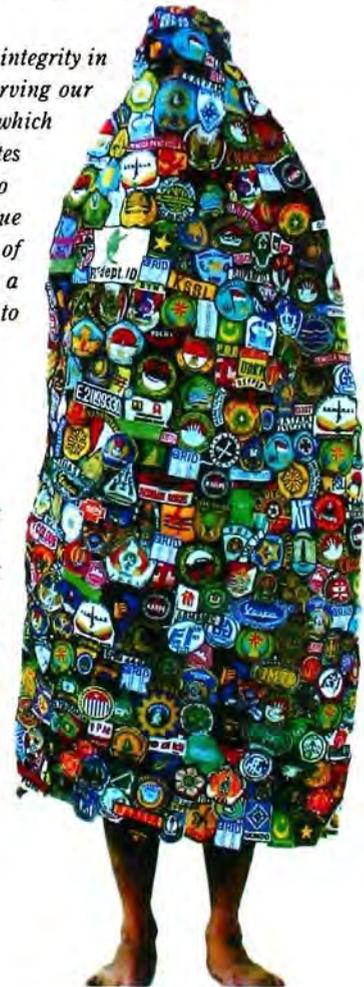
Mella Jaarsma

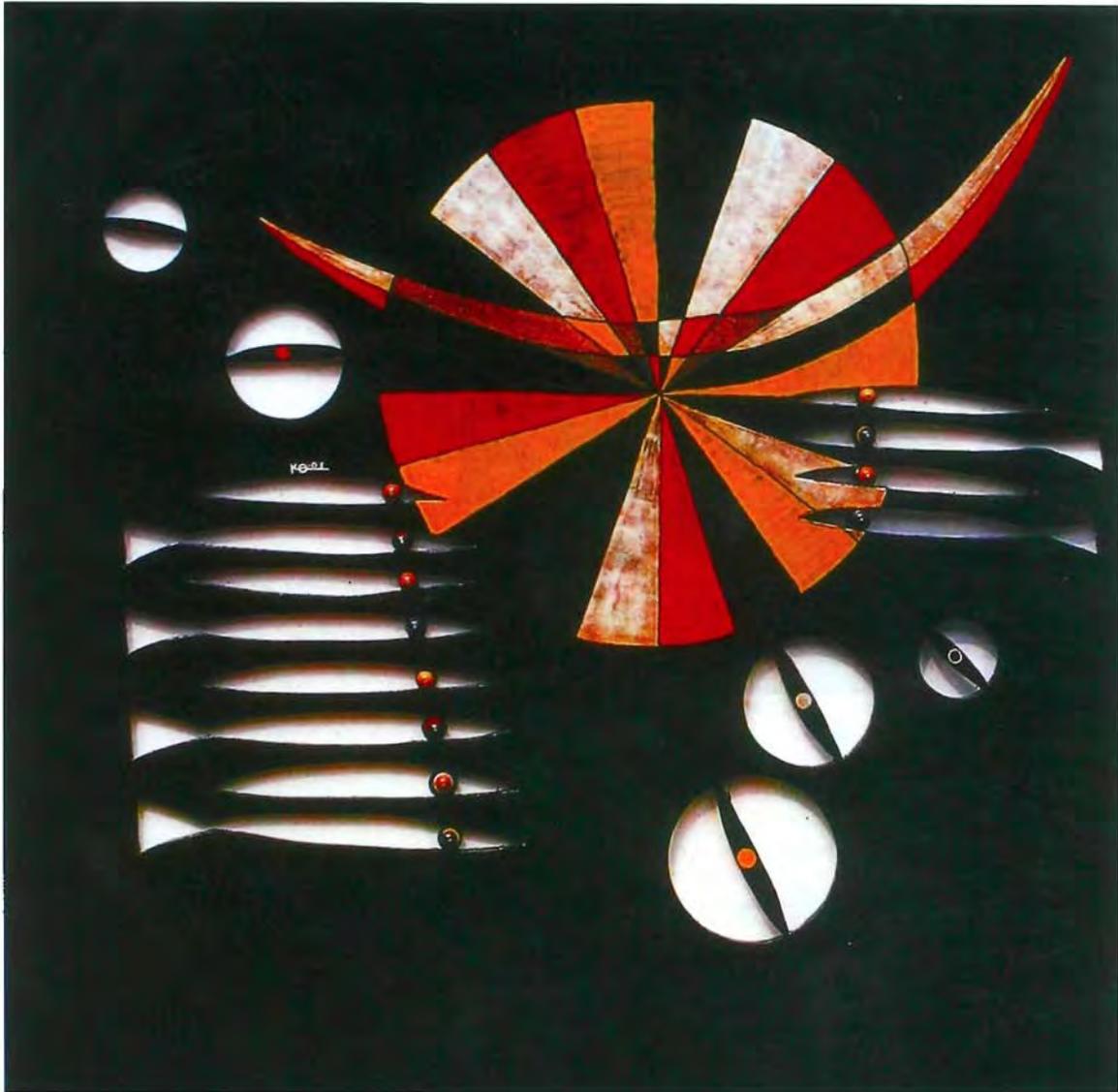
Indonesia

*Through my work I try to reject the question of origin and actually deconstruct identities by producing renewable identities, seeing identity as a transient invention.*

*We wear a second skin every day that indicates, for instance, our membership of specific groups in our cultural, social and religious surroundings. Wearing a veil, covering the body and face, on the one hand, can be seen as a dress code that signifies the group to which we belong. On the other hand, it conceals identity much in the same way that camouflage does. In both cases, it is about giving up individuality and personal identity for the sake of becoming unapproachable and untouchable - the person's identity becomes totally blurred.*

*In "the Follower", I sewed the badges of all manner of organizations together, which I collected in Yogyakarta; from religious groups, political parties, schools, separatist movements, sports clubs, etc..*





**Young Moon**  
2003, laquer on board  
**Kim Quang**  
Vietnam

*The reflection of the earth's structures on the new moon varies with the yellow terrestrial segment of the Asians covering the black of the Africans and the Americans - every division will be overcome.*



**The Looks**  
 2000, mixed media  
 Pg. Timbanng bin Pg. Hj. Tuah  
 Brunei

*Man makes man human and inhuman. My work expresses the inevitable destruction humanity shall face when we are not able to live up to our responsibilities: as an individual, community, nation and part of the world.*

*"The looks" depicts the morality of man in the diversity, harmony and unity of art-form.*

*"The looks" portrays a father in emptiness and a child in aimlessness. The beautiful woman symbolises materialism and greed. In this new millennium of sophisticated technology, moral decay is represented by fusion of vicious elements by which men prey on men. The motives in "The Looks" represent the diversity of senses behind each look. We are therefore urged to be cautious of anybody as their looks are just masks concealing their true selves.*

**Aggression**  
 2003, oil on canvas  
 Kongphat Luangrat  
 Laos



*The powerful monopolise and use information to the detriment of poor countries and people around the world, giving birth to global chaos. This is sold to people as progress and the nails are hammered into the coffin of human cultural diversity.*

*Laos is defined by the cultural diversity of the various ethnic groups that have lived sustainably within its boundaries for centuries. Their livelihoods, culture and values are under threat as media and advertising attempt to redefine and dictate how they will live their lives. They begin the descent into a chaos precipitated by displacement. This loss of cultural diversity is a loss for humanity, ensuring the success of globalization can be nothing more than a pyrrhic victory.*

### **Khmer Identity and Globalisation**

2003, oil on canvas

**Chhoeun Rithy**

Cambodia

*I want my country to develop rapidly. As a Khmer artist, I must contribute to this process by preserving Khmer identity as the basis for the country's modernization and integration in a globalised world.*

*The Apsara with the face of Preah Brum (the Hindu god Brahma) represent the Khmer culture as well as the four basic moral precepts of conduct (compassion, empathy, joy at another's happiness, sincerity). The Apsara has many arms holding various implements of arts; Bisnakar, the celestial architect who represents all Khmer artists is invoked. Two of the Apsara's arms are brought together with the palms joined in the traditional form of greeting, welcoming all visitors to Cambodia and symbolizing the country's openness and desire to integrate in the world after years of isolation and civil war. Her remaining arms hold artifacts representing the various arts of painting, sculpting, singing, dancing, architecture, etc. that brought Cambodia fame and recognition in the past. Depicted around the Apsara are signs of a growing tourist industry with airplanes, buses, boats, bullock carts and the famous temples of Angkor. In the background is a representation of Cambodia in the form of a map with the Tonle Sap Lake. Ensclosed in the heart of the Apsara is the city of Phnom Penh, marked in red as the political center of modern Cambodia. Roads, rivers, canals and railways all run through the city like streams providing the requisite infrastructure of Cambodia's modernization and participation in the globalization process.*



### **Images and captions reproduced from 'Identities versus Globalisation', Heinrich Böll Foundation**



### **The Aura of Globalisation**

2002, mixed media

**HJ. Md. Abidin bin HJ. Rashid**

Brunei

*We are at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. People are striving to meet the new challenges it brings in its wake. The world is connected via modern communication technology enabling high-speed transfer of data, money and all manner of visual information. In this way, we learn of events in far remote corners of the planet. But with all this information, my view of the world has become extremely contradictory and confusing. This confusion is symbolised by the image of a computer chip forming the background of my work. Globalisation promised to provide human beings a better life, but it has many adverse impacts that are not in keeping with this promise. Egoism is growing worldwide. People are simply out to grab advantages and benefits, forgetting their obligations to society in the process. Globalisation creates huge gaps between the rich and the poor. I can see this gap getting wider. I have expressed my criticism through different images of the impact globalisation directly has on people's lives. I am trying to highlight with my artwork the urgent need to do something to halt the negative aspects of globalisation and to minimise global injustice in all areas of development. Poor children in particular need better care. There must be a global responsibility for them, as they are our future.*

**Producing and Reproducing**

2003, installation

**Nindityo Adipurnomo**

Indonesia

*My work raises the question of items of local origin being reproduced on a massive scale; items that originally represented a particular local identity and tradition.*

*At a time when it seems that the world is unceasingly producing diverse images in every segment of life, both through scientific discoveries with applied technologies and through art expression, contemplating the issue of "identity and globalisation", art as a "media of expression", faces an increasingly imposing challenge. Art is like a trap which perpetually emerges, sinks and re-emerges in testing out understanding of the issues of identity or globalisation. Art also represents an extremely fertile field to sow the seeds of ideas about identity and globalisation.*

*My work more than just "uses" several general stereotypes in the tradition of "fine art", such as "self-portrait", idioms and "local" material, such as Javanese hair coils and rattan handicrafts. At the same time, it introduces a prime opportunity for items to be produced and to reproduce themselves on a massive scale; and the eternal question that follows is: which segment of the community must view the Javanese hair coil and rattan as their idioms and local materials?*



**Monument of Round Trays**

2003, installation

**Ly Hoang Ly**

Vietnam

*My monument can be seen as a depiction of the inner conflict that Vietnamese women struggle with during this time of modernisation and globalisation, combining the potential for more personal choice with the pain of self-liberation.*

*I have built a conic-shaped tent, a monument for Vietnamese women using round aluminium trays, the traditional tool used for serving meals. This monument reflects colors of the sky changing in sunlight, electric light, and when it rains, it can describe the sensibility and perseverance of Vietnamese women facing daily challenges. It also resonates as the trays tease each other when the wind blows, an audible monument.*

*The similar pattern of the structure create an image of monotony, which is seen as "perfect" for the routine of a traditional women. I invite people to explore the inside of the "hut" to find out about the most intimate aspirations of these women being imaged by one hundred nude female figures flying in spite of the restriction imposed by conditioning.*



**Development is a Lie**

2003, oil on canvas

**Myint Swe**

Burma

*Development often focuses on material infrastructure, such as construction of buildings. People are left behind - feeling small and insignificant. Women are especially vulnerable. They are frequently exploited as they make rather easy targets for abuse of power.*