

The Traditional Performing Arts of Indonesia

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*The Performing Arts have three functions :
religious, ceremonial and entertainment.*

Indonesia is the largest archipelago in the world. It consists roughly of 13,000 islands, 6,000 of which, covering 60% of the land area, are populated. It has extremely diverse population, with different historical and socio-cultural backgrounds. Over 300 ethnic groups which speak over 250 distinct languages are found in the various islands. As a nation, however, Indonesia is bound by one language commonly known as Bahasa Indonesia.

Aside from its inherent diversity, the culture of Indonesia has been mingled with foreign influences. Hinduism left a strong mark in the way the society stresses formal etiquette and recognition of class distinction between aristocrat and commoner, the admiration given spiritual and social refinement, and the intensive cultivation of the arts.

The international spice trade brought in both Orientals — Malay, Makassarese, Chinese, Moslem Indians and Arabs — and Occidentals — Portuguese, Dutch, English and Americans. They left their imprints on the culture also. Islam, too, held sway especially in the coastal area;

its influence was reflected in the respect for religious learning and law.

Some groups, however, were generally left untouched by foreign powers, although they had at times become prey of Christian missionaries. They include the Toraja of Celebes; Dayak of interior Borneo; people of Halamahera and the hinterlands of most of the lesser Sunda Islands; and the Gayo, Rejang and Lampung of Sumatra. A number of small groups like the Batak, Minangkabau, Minahassans and Ambonese was also able to maintain its own identity.

Each ethnic group of Indonesia developed its own characteristics and arts. Dozens of styles and hundreds of forms of performing arts have survived and been inherited by generation after generation. Others are still being created. Probably to enrich the original, some have incorporated foreign cultural element that are compatible with the nature of Indonesians. Despite their different stages of development, these performing arts exist simultaneously in the country.

The Indonesian Performing Arts in Contemporary Society

Performing arts, that is music and dance drama, have been an important aspect of Indonesia's cultural life throughout its long history. Examples of performing art forms from the various period of

Indonesia's past still survive, kept alive by the vital Indonesian way of life.

Performing Arts: A Way to Implore the Gods

Based upon practices of ancestor worship, the performing arts are indigenous in origin and are entirely religious and magical in nature. They were, and the surviving forms still are, performed not for aesthetics or entertainment but for practical reasons such as to implore for rain, or to free the community from curse such as epidemic etc. These performing arts, mainly dances, have a communal nature and involve a high degree of audience participation. Performers are drawn entirely from the local community and, thus, efforts are on behalf of the community.

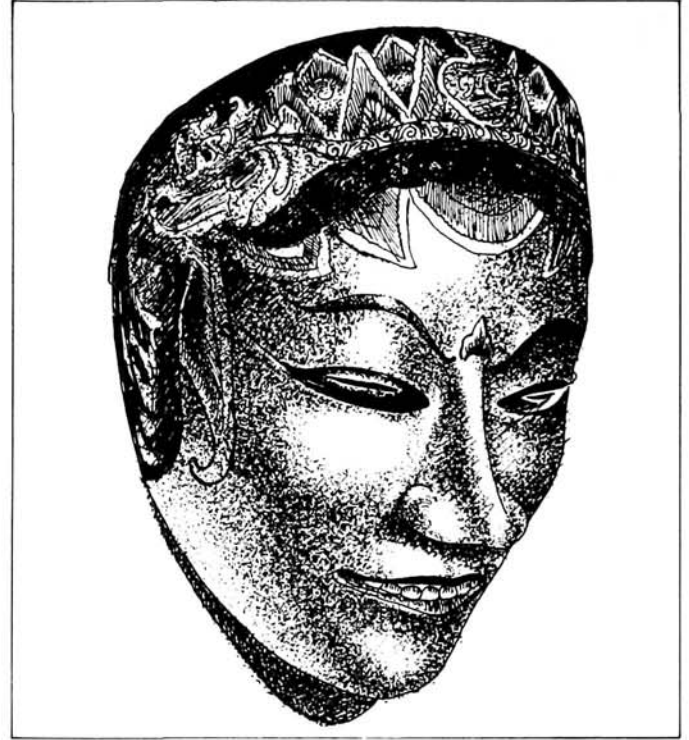
Costumes worn are made of leaves, plant fibres and animal skins. Masks of a type like Kuda Kepang and West Java Kuda Lumping are often donned. Accompaniment is provided by the Ketungan, a simple slit drum, whose interlocking rhythmic patterns became the source of the elaborate imbal of the Javanese and Balinese gamelan today. Vocal music by male chorus and chanting by female choral group also accompany the dances. Their high pitch is usually employed to create a mood of expectation.

The indigenous Indonesian dance does not seem to have any narrative

A portion of the country report given by the Indonesian delegates during the Workshop on Technological Development and Traditional Performing Arts held in Jakarta in December 1981.



*The wooden masks used in the presentation of the Wayang Topeng ...
... Radem Panji Inu Kenta*



...Dewa Galuk Candra Kirama

elements; in surviving examples, the elements of the plot and characterizations are absent. In general, dance in this context may be regarded entirely as an adjunct to worship.

An example is the Hudoq, a generic term for mask-dance of the Dayaks in East Kalimantan. The Kenyah group, also of Kalimantan, has four types of Hudoq dance: Hudoq Kibah, Hudoq Taing, Hudoq Kita and Hudoq Maok. It is a ritual of fertility related to the seasonal cultivation of rice. Hudoq is usually performed to comfort the Spirit of Each (Bali Tana) and to chase away evil spirits who might harm the rice during its planting, growing and harvesting seasons.

Another example is the Kuda Kepang, it may be the most recent among the indigenous dance in Central Java. The genre is also found in West Java where it is known as Kuda Lumping and in Bali where it is called Sang Hyang Jaran. It is performed by two to six people, each riding a hobby horse of woven bamboo.

All of these dances involve

putting one or more dancers into a trance to receive possessing divinities by means of incense, chanting and prayers. Then, inhabited by animal god spirits, the performers interact with the audience and occasionally with each other, dance and mimic animal movements. In some localities, they speak as oracles. The performance invariably involves improvisation by the visiting spirits and they often step on hot coal fire. An element of ritual purification, even of exorcism, is present in all varieties of this dance. The Balinese Sang Hyang Jaran is accompanied by a Cak chorus, a group of men drawn from the audience who chant, sing and make distinctive vocal percussive patterns.



A scene in a traditional dance narrating the Ramayana

Ceremonial Dances

Another function of the Indonesian performing arts is to serve as a supplementary item in ceremonial activities to enlighten and to accomplish a certain atmosphere. Dances of this type were introduced during the Hindu period in Indonesia.



The Barong, an animal which represents goodness and readiness to come to the aid of people in need

Little is known of the characteristics of the early Hindu Javanese court dance before approximately the 12th century AD when the oldest of the presently surviving dance forms, the Wayang Topeng, was developed in Java during the Singasari era. But Gambuh, the Balinese dance drama performed for ceremonial purpose, was probably brought from Java to Bali following the reconquest of the island by Gajah Mada in 1343 AD. It is the oldest and most formal of the many varieties of dance-drama on the island. Archaic, formal and very stately, Gambuh has much to be appreciated for — its classic beauty and its importance as an archetypal form of Balinese dance. Dancer-actors chant and intone their speeches accompanied by an orchestra with a unique sound of wailing flutes.

Wayang Topeng, a masked dance-drama, may be the oldest form of Javanese dance drama. It first appeared at the Kediri kingdom in East Java in the 12th century AD. It takes its story from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the two great epics from India. In the 14th cen-

tury, it started telling the story of Panji, the hero of the Wayang.

After the fall of the Majapahit kingdom, the centre of Hinduism, and the rise of the Islamic kingdom in Central Java, the cultural activities shifted from the East to Central Java. The Wayang Topeng, very much alive, became the inspiration of the present Javanese Wayang Wong.

The latter, also a dance drama, is an harmonious combination of dance, music and drama. The story becomes an integral part of Wayang Wong. It has provided the structure and characterization for later plays and dances in Java. The principal characters speak in Javanese and a *dhalang*, a story teller, sits in front of the orchestra to comment on the action of the play. The presentation is accompanied by the Javanese gamelan, both *Slendro* and *Pelog* which consist of percussive instruments.

The Islamic influence in the Indonesian performing arts is also prominent. Many dance forms from Sumatra have strong Islamic features. An example is the Rangguk which was created during the early

Islam period in Sumatra. The Rangguk is performed by girls. They sing and dance to the accompaniment of *rebana*, an Indonesian single-headed drum. The dance is performed during harvest time, wedding ceremony and the commemoration of the Prophet Mohammad's birth.

In the dance literature about Indonesia, stress has been placed on the Hindu and Islamic influences; less on that of the Chinese. One dance, Barong, however seems to have a strong Chinese character. Its ancestor is surely the Chinese lion dance which appeared during the Tang dynasty, seventh to 10th centuries, and spread to many parts of Eastern Asia. Originally, it could have been a showman's substitute for the real "lion acts" performed by itinerant professional entertainers who followed seasonal fairs and festivals. Associated with Buddha, the Chinese lion dance acquired an exorcist connotation which is still believed today. When the Barong dance first appeared is unknown, but it has existed in many places in Java and Bali for a long time now.

Dances for Entertainment

The Indonesian performing arts are also used to entertain. Dances are usually performed for recreation and on occasions connected with religious observances. Gandrung (meaning infatuation) dance of Bali best illustrates this form of performing arts. It is a social dance performed by two girls which includes an *ibing-ibingan* — two girls tap the shoulders of the spectators and invite them to dance on the stage.

At present, Indonesians are creating many modern dances. A few of the choreographers of the new genres include Bangong Kusudihardjo, Wisnu Wardana, Sardono, Sal Murgiyanto, Made Netra, and Wayan Dibia. Sardono has been very successful in establishing the status of modern dance in Indonesia with his works such as *Cak Rina*, *Rama Samgita* and *Wanita dari Dirah*. This activity is in line with Indonesia's belief that the performing arts should follow the development of the nation.