

Intangible Cultural Heritage Gambuh and Beyond

Imagine...

Imagine a place where the breeze is filled with the scents of incense and flowers. Where the air is filled with dove cries, roosters crowing, the buzz of insects, the rhythmic throb of frog calls.

Imagine a place where the forces of what you don't see, are valued equally to those you can see.

Imagine a place where your ancestors live in your family shrine, and are revered and prayed to daily.

Imagine a place where the messages from your dream life are valued and important.

... where dancers, musicians, actors and puppeteers are admired and revered as the keepers of the treasured stories of your people. This... is Bali.

Introduction from Sabbatical Report September 19, 2018

Purpose

The purpose of my research in Bali, Indonesia was to deepen my understanding of Legong dance by tracing it to its roots... to the dance drama - Gambuh. My objective was to embody the movement, vocals, and the story of the Gambuh with focus on two characters: the condong (attendant) and Putri Lanke Sari (princess); and understand the music, structure and narrative of the Gambuh. In addition, I traced the Legong dances to the sacred trance dances as a way of more fully understanding the scope of Legong dances.

The timing of my research project could not have been better. Master Gambuh dancers of Batuan were involved in a documentation project funded by the Indonesian Government. This documentation project allowed a variety of

opportunities for me to attend rehearsals to observe actors, musicians, dancers, technicians, and directors prepare for the final filming.

Gambuh is a 400-year-old total theatre experience that, through dance, music, opera, and acting, tells the story of the Malat, a series of poems about the fictional Javanese Prince, Panji, an incarnation of Wisnu. The gambuh tells the story of the Javanese Prince, Panji, as described in the Malat, the poems about Panji. These stories are all contained on the lontar, the sacred text scribes in sanskrit on palm leaf.

My opportune timing included aligning with the annual anniversary celebration of the temple in Batuan. Several versions of the Gambuh were performed over the course of two weeks. These live performances held in temple allowed me to see the characters I was studying, danced in context of the full story. In addition, I watched an unusual experimental version of the Gambuh with masks, which are traditionally not worn in Gambuh.

Methods/Process

The physical rigor of learning this 400 year old dance with my teacher Ni Sekarian of Batuan served both as an anchor and a thread to my research. Daily dance practice for up to two hours gave me a reference point to ask many questions about the narrative and storyline, structure, history, relationship of music to movement, the language and meaning of the text, etc.

The practices took place at the open air studios, the Sanggar, in Batuan. Because I was there so often, I wove my lessons with interviews with many of the musicians and dancers before and after my practices with Ni Sekarian.

I observed multiple rehearsals and performances of the Gambuh, providing me with deeper understanding of the characters and their roles in the overall drama. Photography and videography were taken of many rehearsals and performances. Many of these performances were in Hindu temples, and I participated in the ritual prayer with my teacher.

Formal and informal interviews were conducted throughout my time in Bali. For instance, the leader of the Gambuh Gamelan (orchestra) was also the gardener at the sanggar where I had my lessons with Ni Sekarian. After my practices, he and I were

able to have a long conversations about his role as gamelan leader, his concern about the younger generations lack of interest in the form, and his thoughts on how to keep the Gambuh alive.

More formal interviews occurred with Bapak Budi about the Lontar. Bapak Budi, one of the villagers in Batuan who works for the office of literature in the cultural office in Denpasar became my liason to the sacred lontar. It was during our interview that he shared that the Gambuh stories are scripted on the lontar. That following week, he arranged access for me to see the collection of sacred relics in the repository in the government office in the capitol city Denpasar.

I had two thrilling hours of time with the some 4000 lontar in the temperature controlled room. Labeled and indexed, yet not all translated from sanskrit and Kawi to Bahasa Bali, and Bahasa Indonesian. The lontar include everything from how to make offerings, to birth and death rituals, to specific mantras, to the stories of Panji in the Gambuh. Eventually, I was able to see the specific lontar for Panji, of the Gambuh, which are from the Malat, the Javanese poems about Panji.

Results/Outcomes

As mentioned in my Sabbatical presentation, learning the princess character of the Gambuh pushed me to the edge of my capacity as a dancer. The complex and subtle movement, singing and speaking Kawi and Bahasa Bali while moving, and understanding the complex and enigmatic music felt like more than I could do successfully. With patience from my teacher and personal perseverance, I was able to feel some measure of success. The movement for the condong character was easier for me, as the movement and character was closer to the more familiar Legong.

Daily lessons resulted in a kinesthetic and artistic understanding of two female characters. Also, I have a fuller understanding of the scope, elements, narrative, and history of the Gambuh. Linking the Gambuh story directly to the lontar was a beautiful discovery, and essentially paved the way for future research and collaborations with the Gambuh masters of Batuan. Photography and videography of both the Gambuh and lontar were critical elements in documenting my work.

The trance dances of Tista was the finale of this research. I had originally planned to research the Sanghyang Dedari, another trance dance that utilizes the Legong dancers. However, I discovered the nearby village that performs this dance does so only “when the gods request it.” After my initial disappointment, I was given an exclusive

invitation to see the trance dance of Tista.

Seeing this trance drama, a representation of the eternal battle of good and evil, gave me a direct experience of the energy that is explored through altered states of consciousness. This performance was the most powerful live community improvisational theatre I have ever seen. The following week, I attended a lecture on Trance Dance in Bali presented by longtime resident of Bali, Rucina Balingier. This lecture, along with conversation with both Ruchina and my teacher Ni Sekarian helped to better understand this ritual dance form.

My sabbatical inspired many questions, and spurred ideas for future research:

In what way do the sacred myths and stories that have been danced for centuries continue to inform contemporary life?

And what are the plans and processes for preservation and documentation of the literature and arts in Bali?

How are trance dances viewed and utilized in various communities in Bali.

Final Reflection

This research project resulted in a kind of intellectual and artistic confidence that comes from depth of knowing. Living in the home of Balinese Hindu's, practicing their rituals along side of them, and praying with them in their temples, fortified my commitment to understand and live among the various cultures that make up our community at Lane. Conducting well designed research that is based on curiosity and is fueled by passion; then sharing it with colleagues, students and the college is inspiring. I believe my research creates an incentive for others to follow and pursue their unique interests and passions. Additionally, sharing my research experiences with my students allows them to understand dance as a worldwide phenomena.

Lastly, the past couple of years have been unusually difficult. Having this time away to study and explore my passion for Balinese dance and culture, with little or no obligations to the college was a god send. I was able to deeply rejuvenate and restore. After this time away I returned to campus with fresh energy to focus on my students and college projects. I am a better colleague and a better employee as a result of this sabbatical. Thank you.

What you see and What you Don't

There is a certain something - a wild, spangled energy - that saturates Bali as tangibly as its own tropical humidity,

something that could catch you in its teeth anywhere

- on your way into Kuta from the airport, say, as you ride along a sandy track on the back of a motorbike

- and rattle your heart at the sight of children dancing with the slow dignity of gods,

or that could hit you in the face like a sluice of cold champagne

at the sight of clowns jostling in a graveyard reducing you to a jelly of laughter even though you don't understand a word they say;

or that could freeze your skin in a cloud of chattering cymbals and drums as a corpse is carried out to the street through a house gate.

Rio Helm, photographer.