

Dance and Music in Village Temples

Tradition and change in Bali

Swasthi Widjaja Bandem DANCING FOR THE BANJAR

To be a woman in Bali means to be a wife and a mother. There is no time for any other activity, no time for expressing oneself creatively, only perhaps during the religious ceremonies where dance and music are the essential elements used to welcome the gods.

I started to dance when I was five years old, together with other children. Balinese dance is connected to the religious ceremonies in the villages and for me it is important to participate in these ceremonies, it is something particular to the culture of Bali. I started teaching when I was still studying, at seventeen. My teacher would ask me to go with him to the villages to teach. Now I am a dance teacher at the university, but also in Singapado, a village about ten kilometres from Denpasar, where my husband's family comes from. I teach for the *banjar*, the community's association, and I have my own group which is my contribution to the village. I am not paid anything. I teach the children so that when there is a village temple festival they can perform, which is something all children are expected to do. There can be many *banjars* for one village, so, as a festival can last for three days, we take turns in performing.

In the *banjar* there are different art activities, for example the young can learn to play the gamelan or to dance. The rich costumes and instruments belong to the *banjars*. Each member of the *banjar* will donate some money. If we do not have enough money, we buy what we need little by little.

We perform for the temple as part of our devotion, for our ancestors and gods. When we perform outside the temple it is because we like the arts and, as a temple festival only happens every six months, we need to find other opportunities. We also perform for the temple festivals of other villages.

I have started making new choreographies. Keeping the tradition alive does not mean that you always have to repeat the same thing. My base is still in the Balinese dance, but I try to do something which is important to me, to choreograph something new. I try to preserve the dance by doing something new. In the village the children want to learn these new choreographies. I always ask them to learn the traditional dances first, so when we have a performance in

the village we have a traditional dance for the ceremony and then the new choreographies for entertainment.

The rules of the tradition are determined by the master, because it is an oral tradition passed down from one generation to the next. Nothing was written down in the past, only now we are beginning to make notes. Many dances are already lost and we are trying to revive them. I can ask an old master and an old musician to help. Sometimes the dancer has forgotten the movements, but when they hear the music they start remembering again. Each village has its own traditions, for example in Batuan they have Gambuh, in Keratan they have Legong ...

I travel a lot abroad, so I meet other people and artists, I learn about other cultures. It is important for me to take Balinese culture outside, to show the world my culture and so that I can see other cultures and learn something about them. In that way you learn to respect other cultures as you respect your own.

Extracts from an interview by Julia Varley

Desak Nyoman Suarti A WOMEN'S GAMELAN

In the island of Bali music has been passed down from generation to generation only by men. Why did I want to create a women's gamelan in my own village, in an island where for generations it has been only the heritage of men?

After having been away for twenty years, in 1990 I returned home to Pengosekan Ubud, my native village. I suddenly realised that I was no longer the same woman who left such a long time ago. The way I walk, the way I dress, my way of thinking was very different from any other woman in the village. I felt that all the years spent abroad had created a distance between myself and my old friends. I felt them to be distant and this separation created pain and confusion in my mind. For one long year I was puzzled, trying to figure out how to get close to them again, how to share common experience together as we used to.

I just wanted them to be my friends again like in the old days. For a year I felt miserable, I knew I could not bear this bur-



The Women's Gamelan directed by Desak Nyoman Suarti

den for too long. I had to find a way out.

I started to look carefully at my old friends' lifestyle and I understood things that before my departure I would have accepted as normal and that now I strongly resist. To be a woman in Bali means to be a wife and a mother. There is no time for any other activity, no time for expressing oneself creatively, only perhaps during the religious ceremonies where dance and music are the essential elements used to welcome the gods.

In Bali different ceremonies demand different dances: a sacred dance - a purely abstract form in which the dancer becomes an offering to the gods - and many different kinds of dance-drama. The theatre parts narrate the ancient epics, the history of the different kingdoms of Bali and Java, and the Balinese magic metaphysical world represented by the eternal fight between the Barong, the wild dragon, and Rangda, the black witch, manifestation of good and evil. Our religion is a form of Hinduism based on *bakty yoga* or yoga of devotion which is expressed through the many offerings dedicated to the gods.

The whole day is absorbed by housekeeping work, cooking food for the family, washing clothes, cleaning, sweeping the floor, taking care of the children and besides all this, making the many offerings for the house, for the family temple and for the many ceremonies held in the different temples of the village and of Bali. A woman spends fifty percent of her day making offerings. This is the traditional life style for a married woman in Bali.

Balinese women are beautiful, strong and loyal but they are heavily charged with responsibilities. Religious and social codes rule their lives. Very little time is left to take care of themselves on a personal level. I could see their situation from a different angle based on my experience of being a

Balinese as well as a westernised woman. Their situation made me weep, and I swore to myself that I would find a way to allow us to connect and express our power and our creativity together in a subtle revolutionary way, with the hope that this would oblige them finally to take more care of themselves and how they are in everyday life. The faces of these women in their forties should no longer be full of worried lines as if they were seventy years old, but should be shining with happiness.

In Bali, music is an act of devotion to the gods of the Hindu pantheon and it has always been the privilege of men. My rebellious spirit induced me to try to change the rules and to create a women's gamelan group. The gamelan is the orchestra ensemble that accompanies any religious celebration. I decided then to create a new orchestra that would play in the ceremonies of our village temples. I gathered together all the women and one by one we asked for the husband's permission for this to happen. Sixty percent of the husbands agreed.

We were now united by a common goal and when we started the first rehearsal we felt that we were breaking a taboo that had been the seal of our society for centuries. Music was the magical spell that broke the distance between me and my old friends and that hopefully would weave many other possibilities for other taboos to be broken.

In Bali, there are taboos which do not allow women to participate in the social and religious life. Many activities are not allowed and men have always been an obstacle to the development of women's self-consciousness and freedom. The social rules are governed by men and it is enough to know that the society is still polygamous. Only in the last decade can the wife by law deny her husband a second or a third wife, but still this does not mean that it always happens. This makes us think about a

woman's values and her role within our society.

By creating a women's gamelan I was making a provocative act. I wanted people to look at us, at our courage to compete in a field that has always been the exclusive field of men. We too wanted to be free to play music for our gods. We rehearsed for two years in the *wantilan* of the *banjar* of the village, the heart of the village in which any official religious and social event happens. The men not only accepted us but they became supportive of our difficult task and many musicians spent hours and hours teaching us how to play music. Every rehearsal was a challenge not only to meet our own capabilities but also our souls. Music became the common ground in which we women could prove ourselves, our skills and our strength. We tried hard, we tried even harder and in the end we succeeded. We were finally able to play the intricate patterns of many of the melodies of the classical repertoire of Balinese music.

Other women's gamelans started to grow all around the island like a tam-tam echoing buried needs. Yearly competitions started to be held. It is a tradition in Bali to have competitions for music and dance. Winning the first prize this year did not mean we are better than other women, it did not bring recognition by everybody in our village and by all the pampered officials

of our island. We just felt proud of our womanhood, proud of being women who, for a small instant, had the chance to fly on the wings of freedom.

When we gather together before leaving for a performance in the temple of our village or in some other temple in Bali, the air is full of our laughter, shining with the bright colours of our dresses and the glimmering gold in our hair enhances the beauty of all of us. When the first notes vibrate high in the air in an expanding powerful sound, we know that the gods from above look at us with a silent smile.

SWASTI WIDJAJA BANDEM (Bali) has been dancing since the age of five and has specialised in Legong and Topeng. She has performed and studied abroad predominantly in the USA. She is a teacher and choreographer at the S.T.S.I. (Higher School of Arts) in Denpasar.

DESAK NYOMAN SUARTI (Bali) was born in Bali, but spent twenty years in New York continuing to practice the Balinese cultural traditions, before returning, in 1990, to her roots and native village where she founded the first women's gamelan. The translation of her name is "Third born warrior daughter and goddess of the arts and music".