Balinese Temple Dances and Ritual Transformations in the Process of Modernization

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In autumn 1999, the members of the Indonesian Society for the Performing Arts met for a five-day international conference on the occasion of their organization's tenth anniversary. The facilities of the former princely spa Tirta Gangga in East Bali provided a splendid backdrop. During the day there were theoretical discussions concerning the performing arts of Indonesia and their relationship to tradition, on the one hand, and the processes of modernization and globalization on the other. In the evening there were performances from Bali, Java, Sulawesi and Irian Jaya, which sometimes lasted well into the night.

On the final day an excursion was organized to two neighboring villages, Bungaya and Asak. These villages were chosen because they belong to the *bali aga* (the so called old or original Balinese) villages. According to the official image, the *bali aga* cultivate an original Balinese tradition, which still contains a trace of a Pre-Hinduistic tradition. Corresponding to the subject of the conference: "Milleniart: The Celebration of the Origins" the visitors were supposed to gain insight into authentic Balinese tradition. *Wisata Budaya* (Cultural Heritage) was the title of the event, and in three oversized touristbuses the 90 participants drove to the villages.

As a conference participant, I was very anxious to see what would happen in these villages. Fourteen years ago I started my research on the temple dance *rejang* during the big annual village rituals in Bungaya and Asak (see Rein 1994). Now I would have the opportunity to participate in an indigenous presentation by the villagers—while being a member of a group composed of mainly Indonesian conference-tourists. It was also announced that *rejang* would be danced. This was decisive for my participation in the tour—and I could hardly wait to see what would happen.

The three big buses, which nearly blocked the small village streets, stopped first in front of the *pura balé agung* (the village temple) of Bungaya.

Standing on a *balé*, a group of young girls welcomed the guests. Their traditional costumes identified them as members of the group of *daa* (the unmarried girls of a village). Groups of female and male elders were sitting or standing on another *balé*. Together they form the *kerama désa* (the council of elders of the village).

After the conference-tourists had taken their seats on *balé* (platforms) opposite the elders, a dance was performed to welcome the guests. After a short break a voice resounded through a megaphone, giving information about the social organization of the village, the different rituals of the year, and the varying performances within the rituals. At the same time, members of the tourist group walked around in the temple and climbed the *balé* in order to talk with the elders—and to take photos.

In the meantime the group of young unmarried women and men had lined up in the middle of the temple court. This provided another opportunity for the visitors to take photos. In spite of pleading by the tourists, the girls refused to dance the *rejang*. Using a megaphone someone announced that the dance would be performed during a ritual in another five days. A gift and a donation to the head of the village marked the end of this presentation already the next presentation in the neighboring village of Asak in view.

Here, the setting was different. The village had declined to invite the 90 guests into their village temple. There was no dance performed. The village elders were already sitting on the *balé masyarakat*, a secular meeting point for the villagers. The guests were invited to take a seat on the floor opposite the elders. Different traditional elements were chosen by the villagers to present aspects of the ritual life of the village like: a woman was sitting in the background at her loom (showing the production of a ritual cloth), a special orchestra, usually playing during temple rituals—*gamelan gambang*—and the elders sang a ritual melody as a welcome song. The guests were served with traditional cookies and beverages (aqua)—to the accompaniment of announcements over a megaphone about the organization of the village.

Two young couples were standing at the entrance of the *balé*, dressed in their splendid ritual costume. The presence of the very famous Indonesian poet Rendra gave the opportunity to take a photo featuring a modern Indonesian celebrity together with representatives of an Old Balinese community. Everybody played the game without any protest.

In the context of my topic the analysis of this confrontation between modern scientists and artists with traditional village life the following questions arose:

How can one explain or classify the events just described? Had I participated in a theater performance, in a ritual or in something else?

I will start with the question: Why did one group of girls refuse to dance whereas another group performed without any problems? The name of the dance with which the guests from home and abroad were greeted in Bungaya is *panyembrama*. However, the head of the dancing group announced the performance under the name of *péndét*. When I asked him if this was not a performance of the so-called *panyembrama*, he conceded this point. But, in his further comments he insisted on referring to the dance as *péndét*.

The dance *panyembrama* is derived from a sacred dance *péndét*, which is still an important part of many rituals in Bali. During a Hindu ritual, groups of men or woman dance in the temple courtyard. In their hands they carry offering bowls filled with flowers, rice, and burning joss sticks. Using relatively simple dance steps, they approach the shrines where they deposit their offerings.

After the independence of Indonesia in 1949 the central government in Jakarta instrumentalized the temple dance for their own purposes. Dance groups made up of young girls were ordered to welcome the guests at the airport, and later they danced at the Bali Beach Hotel during official banquets (see Picard 1996). It was still the temple dance *péndét*, which was now performed in a profane context. The reaction of religious leaders to this apparent equation of political leaders with gods was so outraged that the Balinese conservatory was ordered to create an official welcoming dance. This new dance was choreographed at the end of the 1960s under the name *panyembrama*.

Why did the leader of the dance group in Bungaya insist on calling this dance *péndét* and not *panyembrama*?

This has to be explained in the context of the event *Wisata Budaya*. The village had been directed to present something representative of their life, which could be used as a demonstration of the antiquity and the authenticity of their village culture. This directive, which seemed to be a straightforward one, created a dilemma, which the village resolved in a very creative way. When told to arrange for a tourist event, the villagers knew immediately what they were in for. But all of the 'typical activities' which, according to the official Indonesian cultural policy, provide evidence of authenticity and a special ethnic identity—for example, rituals, dances, music and songs—are usually connected with ritual times and are not allowed to be performed in a

profane context (see Rein 1996). Since the 1970s, in connection with the steadily growing tourist industry, exceptions to this rule have been allowed in some South Balinese villages specializing in regular performances, which are traditionally connected with temple rituals.

The East Balinese village of Bungaya is not yet (1999) part of the tourism industry. The lack of professionality on the part of the organizers became obvious at the moment when the leader of the dance group, insisted, against his better judgment, on calling the *panyembrama* dance *péndét*.

The environment, in which the dance was performed, was the village temple of Bungaya. This is a ritually important place, where secular performances—such as the *panyembrama* dance—had never been performed before. The dance was especially ordered for the tourist event. The need of the organizer to satisfy the search for originality was apparently fulfilled by giving the dance a new name. Through the use of the name of the ritual model for the secular dance, the secular dance could be used as an emblem of an authentic *bali-aga* tradition.

Ritual dances are part of all large-scale Balinese religious life. The spectrum ranges from danced processions to performances of different masked dances. Each village commands a fixed repertoire of ritual performances, which are also mentioned in the *awig-awig* (the village chronicles). This does not mean that the choreographies are described in detail. The names of the different dances are merely mentioned in the chronicles, and, in some cases, they are linked to the names of rituals. In the context of tourism and the standardized program of *Parisada Hindu Dharma* (the official religious organization) (see Bakker 1993, 2f.), many villages have extended their ritual program in the last years. The new dances are usually well-known ones, which are adapted to intra-village norms of aesthetics and choreography. Popular extension of this sort are *baris* (the war dance), *rejang* (the fertility dance) and *péndét* (the offering dance) danced by the members of a community.

Usually the dancers do not have any dance training. Correspondingly, the movements have to be simple. The dancers perform in rows one behind the other, so that they can imitate each other's movements. In comparison, the movements of the *péndét* of Bungaya are characterized by complicated dynamics and changes in direction. Amateurs carrying heavy offering bowls cannot dance these.

Likewise, the Balinese does not regard complicated, skillful movements as representative of spiritual forces. They cannot be used to establish contact with the alternate reality. Through the untrained, imitating movements the gods present themselves within a ritual. Only through raw, seemingly spon-

taneous movements can one come into contact with spiritual beings. Dance movements in the profane dances are regarded as being owned by human beings. They can be choreographed, trained and varied any time without restrictions. This is expressed by individual names of the movements performed. Unlike the profane movements, the sacred ones are characterized as *polos*. This word has several connotations. It is used for things as well as for human beings in order to signal special qualities such as 'being pure,' and 'being empty without any design.' In the context of the dance movements, *polos* means that the movement are not 'filled' with human intention or creativity but that they can be used by spiritual beings or filled with their energy. These dances are understood as activities for performing a ritual. Furthermore, it is not said that the participants in the ritual are actually dancing; rather the name of the performance is transformed by a prefix into a verb designating the action performed. In this manner, the word *rejang* denotes both a sacred girl's dance and the costumed girl herself. *Merejang* or *ngerejang* designates the execution of the ritual movements.

In Bali in the 1970s, in response to the growing tourism industry, profane and sacred dances were distinguished from one another and categorized. Balinese intellectuals said that if tourism were planned from the capital city in Java, Balinese culture would be sold out completely. A commercialization of all parts of Balinese life should not be uncritically accepted, they argued. In a seminar conducted in 1971 the categorization of the Balinese praxis of arts in sacred and profane was decided. Whereas the profane parts were released for the commercialization, it remained taboo to perform ritual acts upon request.

Although the leader of the group called the welcoming dance *péndét*, it was a performance of a profane dance, which could have occurred anytime and anywhere. The environment in which the dance was performed, was the village temple of Bungaya, a ritually important place. Even though the influence of the tourism industry has eroded the borderline between the sacred and the profane, the refusal of the *daa* makes it obvious that in Bungaya these boundaries still have value. This group of nine young women presented themselves in their traditional ritual dance dress. They welcomed the guests at the entrance of the temple and, by popular request, they agreed to line up in the middle of the temple in the burning sunshine, to give the tourist another chance to take their photos.

Their refusal to dance can be explained as follows: The dance *rejang* is connected to fixed times and places of performance. The *daa* dance during the important temple rituals to honor the rice goddess Dèwi Sri and the god of material wealth Rambut Sedana. Their participation in the dance is their

duty as members of a temple group. Because of their descent from the village's founding families, their sex, and their social status as virgins, the girls have a duty to dance. This serves to display the social position and power of leading dynasties in public.

The meeting of the conference-tourists, the religious as well as political office holders of Bungaya was, in the estimation the girls, not an acceptable ritual frame which would have made it possible for them to dance the *rejang*. As Humphrey and Laidlaw might say, the girls did not and could not have the right 'ritual commitment' needed for a ritual performance (see Humprhey and Laidlaw 1994, 88–110).

Their refusal to give a demonstration of the dance does not mean that there is no *rejang* outside of ritual contexts. In spite of the prohibition of commercializing ritual dances, and of taking ritual dances out of their context, a dance called *rejang* was performed as early as 1986 during the annual Art Festival in the capital city Denpasar. This dance was a *kreasi baru* (a new creation), which only had the name in common with the East Balinese dance. Announced as a temple dance, the Denpasar *rejang* could be distinguished by the costumes of the dancers and the complicated movements, which illustrated a whole story on the stage.

The costumes of *rejang* dancers are used as signs of tradition and cultural values within different context. In recent years, *rejang* dancers have participated in the parades at the beginning of the Art Festival as representatives of their villages. One consequence is that in the East Balinese village Tenganan, where at the same time the biggest annual ritual is celebrated, the groups of unmarried girls and boys are divided in two parts. One part of each group dances the ritual dance in Tenganan, whereas the other part participates in the parade as part of the opening ceremony for the Art Festival (see Français Simburger 1998, 312).

What concepts are behind these developments, and who are the decision-makers?

To answer this question, four different yet interrelated levels should be differentiated: (1) the international or global arena, including international tourism, (2) the national arena, including the production of national identity together with the corresponding cultural policies, (3) the local level, and (4) in the case of Bali, the regional level with its own cultural standards for a distinct Hindu identity with the statistically dominant Islamic culture.

Proponents of Balinese Hinduism struggled to have their form of Hinduism recognized by the government in Jakarta as an official religion. This

recognition came, finally in 1962. In order to escape the apparent stigma of the lack of a holy book and a high god, the organization *Parisada Hindu Dharma* was founded and went to work. The result was a fundamentalization and a standardization of Balinese religious life. Religion is now taught in school by authorized textbooks; ways of praying were adapted to an Islamic standard. There are new regulations for costumes and the colors associated with particular rituals have been standardized (for example, black costumes, not colorful costumes, for funerals). Old Balinese temples were rebuilt in the new Bali style following the South Balinese architectural style of the Gianyar area. That means that an open ritual space became surrounded with a high wall of concrete, and the former open place for many activities was closed for daily purposes.

In order to be able to present themselves to national audiences, especially the Old Balinese villages are required to participate in the annual festival with their ethnic specialties. However, the villages are free to decide to what degree they want to use ritual elements to promote their public image.

The local right of self-determination depends, among other things, on the categorization of religious activities. It is important to 'distinguish' between *agama* (the civil religion of Balinese Hinduism, the bureaucratic system of national and regional religious institutions) and the *adat* (the local area tradition or custom). For the latter the Balinese proverb is still valid: *Iain désa— Iain adat* (other villages—different customs). And this counts especially for the Old Balinese village with their own rituals.

Let me take the temple dance *rejang* as an example to illustrate the heterogeneity and simultaneity of developments. Being part of a hybrid contemporary theater-dance scene, the new *rejang* has little in common with the traditional dance *rejang*, which happens during village rituals in East Bali. The use of the noun 'traditional' does not mean that this dance can be regarded as a timeless static phenomenon. In this context, tradition means that *rejang* belongs to the expressed concept of the identity of a single village. But there is no standard *rejang*. If a village has the ritual dance, the choreography will be different in many details from a *rejang* danced in other villages in Bali. *Rejang* is a dance genre that exists in many different forms. There are no two villages, which perform the same *rejang* in their ritual program. And each *rejang* is subject to a steady process of change. Changes can happen because of individual preferences, fashions or because of practical reasons, which are evident in details of the costumes (for example, plastic instead of natural material; the replacement of *bunga kamboja* for flowers made of woolen threads five years ago). The composition of the dancing group can be changed because of a village chief who decides that previously

exempt families from now on have to send their daughters to the dancing place. Such changes are closely connected with changes in the choreography. The daughter of one of the formerly exempt families insisted on dancing in the first position of a row—without knowing the dance movements. The replacement of biological criteria with school class levels as a criterion for participation in the dance, may be seen as an expression of modernization processes.

Within one village there are no generally valid criteria concerning the participation in the *rejang*. In many cases, non-local school education or vocational training lead to an individual lifestyle for girls and women of marriageable age. While some women refuse to participate in village rituals, village chiefs are often interested in the reconstruction of old priestly functions and old ritual forms.

These inventions of tradition, which I could observe in one East Balinese village, are welcomed by some parts of the village population. In their opinion, the village has become much more independent of Brahman high priests because they now have their own traditional priests with the same ritual power. Others regard these changes more or less critically. Because of the reconstruction of ritual schedules, the participation in the ritual is much more exhausting than some years ago for the *rejang* dancers. In former times they could go home after performance in the same night (see Rein 1998). In August 1999 they had to be in the temple area without interruption from 10 p.m. until 1 a.m. During that time the girls participated in a procession, conducted libation, sang ritual songs, and had to stand around a *balé* where other priests were offering and praying. After a short break of one hour, in which the girls went home and put on other costumes, their next dance performance started at 2 a.m. and lasted until 5 a.m. in the morning.

In the reconstructed old traditions, these time schedules are strictly followed compared to the past, when they were treated in an easy way. In 1997 there were still lengthy interruptions, and the dance *rejang* was already finished at 2 a.m.

The new rules are beyond the physical capacity of many dancers, who are not used to a strict, ascetic way of life. And furthermore, they are not committed to this lifestyle. Consequently, separately or in small groups, they disappeared in the darkness of the night to the background where several *warung* offered drinks, food and sweeties. Remaining seated, they could have refreshments while relaxing before their next ritual duty.

This reconstruction of ritual designs, the recovery of the roots of their own culture, has to be seen as a consequence of the process of modernization, globalization and the construction of a national culture. As Robertson proved, localism is not a reaction to the process of globalization but an inherent condition of it (see Robertson 1993). In the 1990s, on the motto 'diversity sells,' the Indonesian government started to accept ethnic differences in the context of catering to an international tourism market. Yet this was followed by "'inventions and tradition' and 'imagination' of tradition and locality (e.g., ethnic tourism), and partially politically motivated as minority groups assert their voices and claims within global and transnational arenas (e.g., various UN sponsored, international conferences)" (Français Simburger 1998, 253f.).

It is in this sense that the performances of the two East Balinese villages for the conference "Milleniart: The Celebration of the Origins" have to be understood. Although there are severe prescriptions for spheres of activities, people told me that the presentation of the ritual elements outside of a ritual time was possible in order to give guests insight into the cultural life of the villages. The villagers presented nationally accepted emblems of their special ethnic quality as a promotion session with the hope that, in the future, they will also receive the label of an official tourist village: Desa Wisata connected with an economic development.

In conclusion, I would like to state that I did not systematically interview all the participants in the events described above. During that day of travel through the villages, I documented the events and recorded the comments of several participants. Following my initial question as to whether I had participated in a theater performance, a ritual, or something else, the girls' spontaneous refusal in Bungaya to dance gave the answer. My initial question as to whether I had participated in a theater performance, a ritual, or something else, was answered by the girls' refusal to dance in Bungaya. This was not a theater performance, but an event somewhere between modernity (read: economic interests) and traditional religious village life, whose religious practice was in part still imbued with vivid mysteries. Although the official tourist industry is fond of slogans such as "Religion sells," village officials still respect the right of individual members of the community to refuse to participate in such events in order to maintain their religious identity.

However, in the aftermath of the terror attack in 2002 in the main tourist center in Bali (Kuta), which had disastrous consequences not only for tourism on Bali, the whole discussion about modernity and tradition must be reframed.

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