

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN INDONESIAN DANCE

Sal Murgiyanto

Jakarta Institute for the Arts

Yunyu Wang, Dance, Colorado College, participated in the Beijing International Dance Festival/Conference. She invited Murgiyanto to submit his description of the current dance scene in Indonesia for publication in the *ASIANetwork Exchange*.

Rather than view their dance traditions as frozen, Indonesian dancers have preserved them by constantly recreating them. Thus in Indonesia, one finds traditional forms and styles in juxtaposition with new and often daring experiments.

Traditional Javanese and Balinese dances are the most widely known outside Indonesia. They are accompanied by a gamelan orchestra, comprised of predominantly percussion instruments (gongs and metallophones). Both have integrated the Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabarata*, into their repertoire, and both differentiate between refined and strong modes. Each has developed its own aesthetic ideals however, due at least in part to the fact that Bali retained its Hindu-Balinese religion while Java adopted Islam.

In Java, the court and village dance styles are clearly distinguished. The quality which the Javanese describe as *alus* (refined, graceful) is highly valued by the elites. The opposite quality or *kasar* (rough, coarse, ungainly) is least desired.

Javanese court dance

Javanese court dance is characterized by slow and steady movements; change is gradual, and facial expressions and eye movements are almost non-existent. Unlike Western dance, Javanese dance is not designed to excite, but to soothe. Dancers seldom jump off the ground or move suddenly, quickly, or strenuously. The beauty of Javanese court dance, which is described as delicate, tender, elegant, graceful, subtle, tranquil, and tenuous, lies in the small, detailed gestures of the different parts of the dancer's body.

Neither the female nor the male dances have definable plots, though they may have narrative themes. The female dancers, relatives of the king or chosen ladies-in-waiting, do not act out character roles or speak, and all wear identical costumes. Nine female dancers perform the *bedaya* and four, the *scrimpi*, each of which blend subtle and refined

female movements with ritualistic Javanese music and singing.

Male dance

Wireng, an example of the Javanese male dance, is a martial dance performed by one or more pairs of either refined or strong male dancers who depict combat using daggers, shields, clubs, lances, or spears. The *wireng*, as is true of the female dances, does not have a story theme. Aside from a formal entrance and exit, the composition consists of two main sections: the dance proper and climactic fighting accompanied by fast music. *Lawung ageng* (lance dance), *bandabaya* (sword dance), and *bandayuda* (club dance) are examples of *wireng*.

Balinese integrated dance

In Bali, unlike Java, the "great tradition" and the "little tradition" are more closely integrated so that court and village dance styles are difficult to differentiate. The same repertoire is performed in royal palaces, temple compounds, and villages, enjoyed by both nobility and commoners. Many Balinese dances are tightly bound to religious rituals.

The Balinese appreciate not only slow and refined movements, but also, and more importantly, fast and strong movements. Quick and abrupt motions predominate, and there is much facial expression and eye movement. If a Central Javanese court dance can be described as a deep, broad river, its water flowing continuously but hardly noticeable on the surface, then Balinese dance is like a rippling stream whose continuous flow is visually and audibly noticeable, joyous and full of surprises. In short, Javanese dance is restful, while Balinese dance is vibrant.

Like Javanese dance, Balinese dance is a composite of many cultural elements, indigenous as well as foreign. but in Balinese society, there is a high degree of participation in the arts, especially dance, which assumes a communal character. These qualities are well illustrated in two of

the best known Balinese dance types, the *kecak* and the *sang hyang dedari*, performed to drive away evil spirits that bring pestilence to a village.

Unlike the Javanese and the Balinese who inherited art traditions imbued with Hindu-Buddhist themes, the Sumatranese are known for their strong Islamic beliefs. If Javanese dances have been crystallized in the court, most Sumatranese dances are practiced and preserved by the common people in the villages. This is particularly true in Aceh and West Sumatra.

Veranda of Mecca

Islam came to Indonesia in the thirteenth century through Aceh, and since then the inhabitants have proudly called their land on the northern tip of Sumatra, the "Veranda of Mecca." Islam finds fertile ground in Sumatra where it blends with local traditions and finds expression in the performing arts of Aceh (*saman, seudati*) and West Sumatra (*tari, piring, randai*).

Traditional Balinese, Javanese, Sumatranese, and other local dances are still practiced and preserved with great enthusiasm by their respected supporters, but their religious and ritual functions have changed into secular and theatrical ones.

Martha Graham

Interaction with Western culture has given birth to Indonesian contemporary dance. In 1955, Martha Graham performed in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia. Two years later, three Indonesian dancers, Bagong Kussudiardja, Wishnu Wardana, and Setiarti Kailola studied with Graham in New York. Upon returning to Indonesia in 1958, Bagong and Wishnu established dance schools in Yogyakarta and began experiments with the "new" dance.

They combined traditional Javanese dance movements with modern dance techniques learned in the United States. Bagong (dancer, choreographer, and painter), now 65 years old, still creates new dances. His last two works, *Lampor* and *Khusuk*, performed at the Jakarta Arts Center, Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM) in November 1993, were stark and impressive. But in some other works, Bagong eclectically combines traditional movements from Indonesian dances reflecting the unity of the Indonesian nation. *Echo of Nusantara* and *Village Festival*, performed at the Seoul Olympic Games in 1984 are examples of such work. Although this choreographic approach has been praised by Indonesian audiences, it has also raised severe criticism.

In 1968, the governor of Jakarta founded the TIM Arts Center which has since encouraged the

creation and performance of new dance works. Sardono W. Kusume, who had just returned, also in 1968, from a year of study in New York with Jean Erdman, initiated a dance workshop at TIM. Participants were mature dancers from different backgrounds: Javanese, Balinese, Sumatranese, and from the tradition of ballet. Sardono did not teach a particular dance technique, but encouraged movement exploration and improvisation to sharpen the artistic intuition of the dancers.

Sardono Kusume

Sardono, 48 years old, is now a leading figure in contemporary Indonesian dance. His work combines traditional techniques with his vision and perception of the modern world, but has a different color than that of Bagong. Sardono's work is plain, stark, and avant garde.

In *Metaecology* (1979) and *Mahabhuta* (1988), the dancers dance in mud. In *Lamenting Forest* (1987), Sardono invited Dayak dancers from the interior of Kalimantan (Borneo) to dance, sing, and lament. In *Plastic Jungle* (1983), huge pieces of plastic waste were piled on the stage. Recently, Sardono was commissioned to create *Passage Through the Gong* by the Next Wave Festival in New York. He incorporated a traditional *scrimpi* dance performed by the daughters of Susuhunan Paku Ruwono XII of Surakarta. Critic Deborah Jowitt wrote of the piece, "Sardono's enigmatic, strangely fascinating, if structurally unbalanced, blend of Indonesian dance-theater with personal vision and contemporary theatrical devices aligns him more with radical directors like Peter Brooks" ("Through a Glass," *Village Voice*, November 16, 1993).

Huriah Adam

One of the participants in Sardono's 1968 dance workshop was Huriah Adam, a creative and restless choreographer from West Sumatra. Adam died in an airplane accident in 1971, but her short encounter with Sardono gave her a chance to form her own Minangkabau dance technique. Both Sardono and Huriah Adam joined the dance faculty of the Jakarta Institute for the Arts (IKJ) when it was dedicated in 1970. Adam also taught her "new" Minangkabau dance technique to students of the Indonesian Academy of Performing Arts (ASKI), established in 1966 in her native Pandangpanjang, West Sumatra.

Two additional arts institutions were founded in the 1960s: the Indonesian Institute of Arts (ISI) and the Indonesian State College of Arts (STSI). Each of these arts institutes continue to foster the creative exploration of the traditional and the new in Indonesian dance forms.