

SACRED DANCE & SECULAR LAW IN BALI:

How a dancing painter argued a landmark case in intellectual property rights, and why a fragment of sacred choreography was his most persuasive evidence.

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Synopsis and Background

In the 1930's Antonin Artaud referred to Balinese dancers as 'animated hieroglyphs' and foreign scholars have been trying to decode the meanings of the island's choreography ever since. During the spring and summer of 2007 in Bali's capitol city of Denpasar, a landmark court case was argued that offers revealing insights into the ways in which the Balinese themselves interpret the significance of their sacred dances. The trial was the first in Indonesian history to consider the protection of visual art under the nation's laws governing intellectual property rights. During the court proceedings, the internationally acclaimed painter, Nyoman Gunarsa, who alleged that several of his paintings of dancers had been counterfeited, attempted to demonstrate the illegitimacy of the forged paintings by dancing in the courtroom.

"I can capture the essence of the dances in my paintings, because I am a dancer," he said, bending his knees and lifting his elbows above his ears, in the classic position that is the foundation of Balinese sacred dance. "I dance when I paint, and the movement is alive in the shapes I put on canvas. But if you tried to dance the movement portrayed in the false paintings, you would fall down. They have no soul. They are dead." Gunarsa emphasized his last point by twisting his body into the shapes depicted by the counterfeit paintings. His elbows drooped below his ears and his legs assumed a position from which it was impossible to move. According to Gunarsa the logic of the body provided irrefutable proof of the paintings' falseness.

What was extraordinary about the court presentation was not the fact that a painter chose to express the essence of his art through dance, but the seriousness with which his evidence was accepted by the judges and the crowded gallery of spectators, who applauded Gunarsa's presentation as if it were a performance.

Subsequent witnesses, some of them professors of art history, also performed fragments of dance

choreography to distinguish the fake painting from Gunarsa's original, though none of them exhibited the remarkable physical agility of the sixty-three year old painter.

The classical movement vocabulary of sacred dance was clearly part of a common vernacular recognized by all the segments of Balinese society present in the courtroom, from the lawyers and judges, to the art historians, to the newspaper reporters and casual curiosity seekers who filled the spectators gallery. The paper I propose to present as the 2007 Selma Jeanne Cohen Lecture will analyze the sacred choreography performed by the painter in the courtroom in its cultural context and attempt to explain how the dance's acceptance as legal evidence reflects the Balinese respect for the cultural memories and spiritual values that are embedded in the sacred choreography of their Hindu temple rituals.

Primary research for this paper was conducted in the spring and early summer of 2007 when I was in Indonesia as a Senior Fulbright Scholar. I attended the courtroom sessions regularly and personally interviewed the trial's participants. I also drew on the works I have written about Asian dance and drama since 1976 when I spent a year in Indonesia with the support of a Watson Fellowship. (One of my articles on Asian Mask Performance was published in the International Encyclopedia of Dance initiated by Selma Jeanne Cohen.) Two of my subsequent trips to Bali were funded by the Asian Cultural Council of the Rockefeller Brothers' Fund. As a professor of theater at Wesleyan University I have hosted numerous Balinese dancers as guest teachers and performers. My experiences in international exchange programs like the Fulbright Fellowship and the Watson Fellowship have been essential to my teaching, scholarship, and artistic work. The interdisciplinary nature of dance in Bali, where it is inextricably linked to theater, music, religion, history and politics has shaped my approach to the study of all performance genres. For instance my research on the Italian actor, playwright and Nobel Laureate, Dario Fo (sponsored initially by a Sheldon traveling fellowship from Harvard and later by a Guggenheim Fellowship) was profoundly influenced by my experiences in Bali, which helped me to appreciate the links between gesture, language, and painting that are at the core of Fo's work. The book I wrote on Fo (Artful Laughter) won the 2001 Theater Library award for

outstanding scholarship, and I believe that the close analysis of physical movement I employed in that book was enhanced by my past experience analyzing Balinese dance.

The paper I propose to present will analyze Balinese dance in a context that removes it from its typically exotic setting in Hindu temple festivals, and in doing so I hope to encourage future dance scholars to look past the intoxicating surface spectacle of Balinese dance to its more mundane functions as a cultural point of reference that helps the Balinese make sense of their world in concrete ways. Even sophisticated scholars like Margaret Mead, whose classic film 'Dance and Trance in Bali' is a fascinating introduction to the world of Balinese temple performance, sometimes get so attached to the exotic trappings of the choreography (self-stabbing, horrific masks, trance possession) that they miss the fundamental elements that give dance meaning to ordinary people in less extreme situations. I propose to use Gunarsa's banal courtroom exhibition as a case study for examining the sacred and secular importance attributed to dance in Bali.

A Body of Evidence:

Gunarsa's Dance Models the Way Bali's History is Stored in the Bodies of its Dancers

The most revealing part of Gunarsa's courtroom dance was its ordinariness. He wore no special costume, just a pair of white trousers and a button down shirt. Initially he had sat in a chair facing the judge to give verbal testimony as to how he believed his intellectual property rights had been violated by the counterfeit paintings. It was only after a judge asked Gunarsa how he could differentiate between his own paintings and the alleged forgeries, that the painter felt compelled to stand up and dance. As soon as he lifted his bent elbows over his head and bent his knees an audible sigh of recognition erupted spontaneously from the spectators in the courtroom. Apparently the language of movement was clearer and more persuasive to the public than the legal intellectual language Gunarsa had been using up to that point. The basic 'agem' stance of a classical Balinese dancer is as easily recognizable in Bali as a baseball batter's stance would be in America. It is a common point of reference that transcends social barriers. In temple performances a low caste farmer often plays the role of a high caste Hindu priest simply by assuming a variation of that basic

dance position. In the courtroom the barrier between judge and witness was dissolved by that same dance position, which led the judge to ask Gunarsa to make his points with more specific references to the bodies of the dancers in the paintings. Gunarsa subsequently moved to the paintings, which were lined up on the wall behind the judge's bench. The three judges came down from their elevated perch to follow Gunarsa's walking tour of the various paintings, in which the dancing positions of the painted figures were occasionally brought to life by the artist's body as a kinetic accompaniment to his verbal explanation. A crowd of reporters and several lawyers from both sides of the case followed Gunarsa and the judges around the paintings as newspaper photographers and television cameramen recorded the event. Gunarsa's dance had transformed the formal courtroom setting into something that momentarily resembled the informal Balinese gatherings found in outdoor markets and temple festivals. At the same time his dance was at the center of an important legal debate about the moral rights of an individual and the meaning of authenticity. This use of dance to mediate moral problems is also common in Bali, as will be shown below.

Gunarsa's dance and the debate surrounding it spilled out of the courtroom in ways that reveal how the Balinese encode their history and values in the bodies of their dancers, and in the representations of those bodies in other media. The night before the trial began for instance, Gunarsa sponsored a shadow puppet play that used shadow projections of dancing bodies to metaphorically portray the legal issues that would be argued the next day in court. The shadow puppet play was drawn from the Hindu epic Ramayana story and involved a demon who tried to disguise himself as a monkey to sneak into the palace of Rama. At the core of the story was the scene where the false monkey is discovered. His shadow danced erratically on the screen to the cacophonous sound of phony monkey screeching. Hanuman the sacred monkey king who protects Rama discovers that the demon couldn't really speak monkey language. To the audience, the true and false monkey languages both sound like unintelligible gibberish, but as performed by one of Bali's most popular shadow puppet masters, Wayan Nardayana, there is a rhythmic integrity to the 'real' monkey language that the imitation monkey could not duplicate. The inchoate nature of the demon's fake monkey talk was echoed in the chaotic nature of the movements its shadow cast on the screen. The fake monkey couldn't dance.

The music of its language could not sustain the kind of smooth integrated movement that traditionally identifies performers (in live dance or in its shadow play equivalent) as sacred monkeys. The demon imposter was driven away from the palace.

The audience applauded the shadow play's occasional explicit references to Gunarsa and the ethical implications of counterfeiting. Over a thousand spectators crowded onto the lawn of Puputan Square in the heart of the capitol, a few blocks from where the trial would be held the next morning. There was no charge for the performance so a carnival atmosphere prevailed, with vendors selling soft drinks and peanuts. The characters of the Ramayana are familiar to everyone in Bali, much like cartoon superheroes would be in America, and the audiences at puppet plays are accustomed to looking for moral lessons in the plot that can be applied to their daily lives. The same stories danced by shadows on the screen are also danced regularly by live performers in temple ceremonies that dramatize the struggle between good and evil. The demons are always dancing in a state of imbalance, their lack of moral equilibrium reflected in the lumbering tilt of their steps. The heroes, on the other hand, have an extraordinary sense of balance that is both physical and spiritually metaphoric. Like all humans they are pulled between the forces of good that draw them upwards to heaven and the forces of evil that drag them down towards hell, and that metaphysical tug of war is made visible in the dynamic tensions encoded into Balinese choreography. These tensions are easily recognizable in the basic dance stances like the one Gunarsa demonstrated in court where the elbows are lifted up towards the heavens while the lower body is pulled down towards the underworld with a force manifested in the bending of the knees. One performer described the basic condition of a Balinese dancer as 'the constant search for equilibrium in a state of disequilibrium.' Many Balinese might not be able to define that condition so articulately, but almost all use the principle of balance to distinguish the demons from the heroes. In daily life, as well, loss of balance often takes on a metaphysical dimension, and a fall can be seen as a sign that some god, spirit or ancestor has been offended. A sure sense of equilibrium, on the other hand, as displayed by women on their way to temple ceremonies who effortlessly balance huge baskets of offerings on their heads, reflects a harmonious relationship to nature and the spirit world.

The field on which the puppet show is staged is named after one of the most famous dances in Balinese history, 'the Puputan Badung.' 'Puputan is the Balinese word for 'the end' and in this case it refers to the end of the Badung dynasty of Balinese kings which was marked by a ceremonial procession in 1906 that ended in the mass slaughter of the Royal family and their attendants. The 'Puputan Badung' was essentially a suicide dance performed by the King of Badung and his court when they realized they could no longer defend Bali against the invasion of the Dutch army. Rather than surrender, the King decided to dramatize his resistance to the unjust subjugation of his people with a ceremonial battle march to the sea wearing the costumes of sacred dance rather than the uniforms of war. The women and children of the court also participated in the ceremonial procession, some of them waving sacred kris knives which they used to kill themselves and their families once the Dutch began firing muskets and cannons.

Whenever the puputan story is re-enacted in modern performance, the Balinese are portrayed dancing with grace and pride, while the Dutch are portrayed as awkward buffoons who win the battle, but lose their dignity. The spiritual war is won by the Balinese who, even after their deaths, dance on to heaven, executing the same basic dance movements performed by Gunarsa in the courtroom. In the case of the Puputan the dance defines the authenticity of spiritual victory as opposed to the hollowness of an unjust temporal military victory. The moral lines between good and evil are established by the dancers who embody the disequilibrium of injustice through one set of movements and the balanced equanimity of virtue through a second set of gestural patterns.

The contrasting sides of the 'puputan' were danced most recently on June 16, 2007 during a parade celebrating the opening of the Bali Arts Festival that was held in front of "The Monument to the Struggle of the Balinese People." Thousands of people lined the streets to watch the procession, but the crucial battle scene and massacre were performed in front of a platform erected for the Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his entourage. The President watched as another Puputan was danced, this time re-enacting the 1947 battle between the Dutch and the Independence war hero Ngurah Rai. The gangly Dutch soldiers wore army camouflage uniforms and emerged awkwardly from an army-camouflage-colored

tank (in this case a modified SUV) carrying toy rifles with red pom-poms. The ridiculously armed Dutch all wore clown masks with enormous noses that caricatured their Western features as completely out of balance with nature. The dancers portraying the revolutionary forces of Ngurah Rai were not wearing period battle uniforms, but were clothed instead in the kind of ceremonial dance costumes worn by the King's court in the 1906 'puputan.' The two wars were conflated in a dance that once again demarcated the line between good and evil through the choreography of the dancers. The bumbling Dutch soldiers embodied the counterfeit colonial government in opposition to the true Indonesian authority represented by Ngurah Rai's stately dancers, who displayed some of the graceful gestures demonstrated by Gunarsa in the courtroom a few weeks earlier. Like the fake monkey in the Ramayana puppet play, the buffoonish Dutch soldiers could not dance. Like the figures in the false paintings on trial, their positions were unsustainable, and they fell down. The illegitimacy of the Dutch interlopers was being danced for the legitimate President of Indonesia long after their untenable colonial regime had collapsed.

The association of balanced dance movements with the victory of good over evil, falseness over truth, is re-enacted every day in Bali under less dramatic circumstances. Each morning Bali's Hindu priests greet the sun by chanting mantras while performing a series of mudra hand gestures. According to one priest the mantras and gestures 'protect us from spiritual enemies.' This ritual creates holy water that is distributed to families associated with each priest, who in turn use the holy water to protect their homes and shrines through daily ritual offerings and simple ceremonies.

The mudras are miniature sacred dances of the hand that have their origins in the belief that Siva created the world while dancing ('siva natraja'). "When I am performing the mudras," said another priest, "I am recreating the world fresh each morning in a dance of my hands that honors the dance that Siva used to create the universe. If I performed the movements of the mudras with my entire body instead of just my hands, I would be doing the sacred dances that are performed in every temple ceremony. Those dances are an extension of the mudras."

So according to these priests, the mudras that create the world anew each morning and protect it from spiritual enemies, are the sources of the sacred dances that are such an integral part of Balinese life. Embedded in the sacred choreography that everyone in Bali recognizes, are the sacred gestures that once created and still protect the world. Paintings of these sacred gestures and dances were used to determine the difference between truth and falseness in the intellectual property rights trial in Denpasar. One of the reasons Gunarsa's dance was so easily accepted as evidence was that its choreography is encoded with the authority of Balinese history and religion, an authority that is reconfirmed regularly in thousands of daily rituals held throughout the island. Gunarsa's awareness of the sacred origins of the dances he paints is demonstrated in the verbal, kinetic and visual languages he uses to describe them.

The Artist's Summation: Decoding the Dancing Alphabet

"Each painting contains aksara," explains Gunarsa at home in his studio, using the Balinese term for a sacred written symbol corresponding to a syllable. "The aksara are the source of all art. They are a source of 'taksu' ('divine inspiration') for dancers and musicians and painters. The aksara that inspires the sacred music and dances in a temple ceremony also gives fire to my paintings. Without that inspiration of dance, my paintings would be dead, like the false copies. They do not dance." As he speaks Gunarsa dances with his fingers, imitating the flames of dance that inspire his paintings. He then begins to paint the complex concept he is having difficulty expressing in words, using a sharpened bamboo stick dipped in ink. He sings the musical dance accompaniment of a gamelan orchestra as he paints. The singing animates the movement of his arms and before each stroke of his bamboo stick he executes a preparatory movement of his hand as if he were physically rehearsing the prelude to a choreographic idea. Only then does he dance the line onto the paper with the bamboo drawing implement. He begins the drawing with the aksara representing the sacred syllable 'om' which is a conflation of the three syllables representing Bhrama, Vishnu and Shiva.

"The fundamental shape of the aksara is a triangle," Gunarsa says as he sketches three triangles radiating outwards from the 'om' aksara. Below each triangle he draws the first three letters of the aksara alphabet.

“Each letter has the elements of a dance,” he says as he transforms the curves of the three letters into the limbs of three dancers, preserving the triangular core of each moving figure. Without reference to or knowledge of Artaud, Gunarsa is proving the French critic’s observation that Balinese dancers actually are animated hieroglyphs. Gunarsa is using the dance of a bamboo stick on paper to animate the Balinese alphabet in a sketch that captures the essence of his approach to painting Balinese dance. The complex conceptual framework of this drawing is what Gunarsa attempted to communicate through his demonstrative dance in the courtroom. The sacred dances, mantras, aksara, music and mudra gestures of the priests are all inextricably linked to one another, and a true representation of the dances has to take into account that unity. Over and over again the witnesses in court used the Indonesian word ‘jiwa’ or ‘soul’ to indicate the difference between Gunarsa’s original paintings of the dances and the copies. Gunarsa’s dance illustrated that ‘jiwa’ in action. His sketch illustrated it on paper by depicting the bodies of dancers as animated embodiments of a sacred alphabet.

To complete the concept he was trying to illustrate in his studio, Gunarsa framed the ‘om’ aksara and the three dancing letters with drawings of the two most sacred figures in Balinese dance, Barong and Rangda. Barong is a dragon-like creature who represents positive protective forces, and Rangda is a fanged demonic female who represents negative destructive forces. They are traditionally pitted against one another in temple dances, and Gunarsa draws them on opposite sides of his dancing alphabet, singing in the low demonic growl associated with Rangda as he sketches her wildly flailing limbs. The painter sings the music associated with Barong as he draws the calmer but still vibrant form of the dragon. Like the dancers in his paintings, these figures are clearly alive with movement, as is Gunarsa’s entire body when he draws them. Part of the flow of movement from arm to hand to bamboo implement to paper includes the flicking of Gunarsa’s wrist as he sketches tiny aksara between the lines that depict the dancing emblems of good and evil. In the end his sketch encompasses a microcosm of the Balinese world-view, alive with swirling movements of sacred dance generated by an intricate alphabet that contains the seeds of divine choreography in the curves and angles of each letter. It is a visualization of the meaning of dance in Bali that Gunarsa

might never have put to paper if the secular courts had not forced him to define how his art captures the essence of Balinese dance. Like the fragments of choreography Gunarsa presented as evidence in the courtroom, his diagrammatic sketch offers valuable clues towards decoding the ethical, historical, and religious meanings embodied in the animated hieroglyphs of the island's sacred dances.

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