

Choreography and Cultural Transfer in Bali

Biliana VASSILEVA
University of Lille, France
bilidanse@gmail.com

Abstract: This study will approach some changes and cultural transfers in the local choreographic field of Bali, Indonesia, by the creative use of visual anthropology as research methodology and the animal figure: luwak, bumblebee, bird, etc. The latter is analyzed by the use of photography and video in the fields of research in aesthetics, cultural studies and research-creation. The author of the study supports the point of view that the preservation, as well as the possibility of subversion of long standing traditions, is a sign of their vitality and future viability.

Keywords: *dance transfer, Bali, choreography, research-creation, cultural Studies.*

Dancing in Southeast Asia: Cultural Transfers between Tradition and Modernity

Due to its strategic location, Southeast Asia has for a long time acquired the status of a privileged place of perpetual intersections of global cultural flows. On the international artistic scene, it is identified as a proud holder of artistic traditions – sometimes sheltered from international fashion, and sometimes fully integrating it into these processes of creation and visibility. Southeast Asia is now emerging as a cultural powerhouse, reshaping old traditions and adopting new forms and ideas, with global and local connections and transfers occurring rapidly.

This study will address certain cultural changes and transfers in the local choreographic field of Bali, Indonesia through the methodology of visual anthropology: in particular the use of photography and video in the fields of research in aesthetics, cultural studies and in research-creation. The author of the study supports the point of view that the preservation, as well as the possibility of subversion of tradition, is a sign of its vitality and future viability.

A new paradigm is emerging in which Southeast Asian theater and performance is not treated as the exotic “Other” of the West, or as a performance tool for edification of the nation. Southeast Asia has become a site drawing interested parties into conversation regarding local and global issues, through active bridges between tradition and modernity. The focus here is on the re-enactment of the choreographic heritage of the island of Bali, Indonesia, and the invention of new forms of expression in dance, aligned with the theories and practices of contemporary Western art.

The concept of cultural transfer is employed not as a comparison between East and West but as potential for connections and reinterpretations. Exploring a subjective process of research-creation allows to describe precisely the dynamics of these transfers with respect to local culture by naming clearly all learning and spectatorship sources (such as places, periods of time, names of teachers and dancers) of mutual inspiration.

Visual Anthropology as Constantly Evolving Methodology

The methods used in this study are visual anthropology and participatory observation, supplemented by practices of embodiment and creative research. Visual anthropology requires specific fieldwork which facilitates the experimentations and the interactions with academic (and artistic) research subjects. An immersion in the local choreographic culture of Bali, Indonesia, points out the animal figure as the one of these particular subjects. Hindou belief represents it and animates it in multiple ways: from the beneficent god Ganesh in sacred ceremonies to the entertainment shows, where mischievous monkeys, a golden deer and flirting bumblebees take the central place. The study is completed with fieldwork notes, in order to add a more subjective, vivid voice, aligned with the contemporary trends of empirical anthropological standing point, inclusive of poetics as valuable as academic writing. Those notes are placed in footnotes, and do not align with the dogma of scientific proof.

This postqualitative research approach has been initiated by movement anthropologists' major works such as Sondra Horton Fraleigh's *Dancing Identity* (2004), focused on exploring the relationship between dance, photography and cultural transfer:

Combining critical analysis with personal history and poetry, *Dancing Identity* presents a series of interconnected essays composed over a period of fifteen years. Taken as a whole, these meditative reflections on memory and on the ways we perceive and construct our lives represent Sondra Fraleigh's journey toward self-definition as informed by art, ritual, feminism, phenomenology, poetry, autobiography, and-always-dance. Fraleigh's brilliantly inventive fusions of philosophy and movement clarify often complex philosophical issues and apply them to dance history and aesthetics. She illustrates her discussions with photographs, dance descriptions, and stories from her own past in order to bridge dance with everyday movement. Seeking to recombine the fractured and bifurcated conceptions of the body and of the senses that dominate much Western discourse, she reveals how metaphysical concepts are embodied and presented in dance. (Fraleigh 2004: 304)

The Founders

The Western idea of imagining and experiencing Bali as a distinct and original culture comes from anthropologists Bateson and Mead (1942). Their work, following an immersive field experience in Bali, develops non-linguistic ways of studying culturally patterned behavior — in other words, they work with the concept of an “embodied” culture. According to scholar Sally Ann Ness, the use of film and photographic technology justified Mead and Bateson's previously unimaginable, perhaps romantic and academically unexplored “non-verbal” orientation (Ness 2008: 1251). This new orientation leads them towards the completion of two founding documents of visual anthropology.

The first document is their book *Balinese character, a photographic analysis* (Mead & Bateson 1942). The authors obtained their material in Bali between 1936 and 1938 and a 6-week period in 1939. In a 48-page introduction, Mead summarizes important considerations about Balinese character to guide the reader through the 100 plates, containing 759 photographs selected from 28,000 stills. The photographs were taken by Bateson while Mead took verbal notes about the photographed behavior. Each plate is accompanied by detailed legends¹. The figures of animals represented by gestures, postures, spirits and dangers express dramatized emotions, such as the appearance of a magical tiger under the bed, or the sacrifice of chickens in purification ceremonies².

The second document is *Trance and Dance in Bali*, a short documentary film shot during their research on Bali in the 1930s. It is a cinematic depiction of kris dance, a Balinese ceremonial dance that dramatizes the endless struggle between the witch and the dragon — the death and the protection of life — as presented in the village of Pagoetan in 1937-1939.

The dragon is omnipresent, to this day, on the sacred and profane scene in Bali. Under the name Barong, it takes the form of a combination of lion, tiger, cow and dragon. Its face is often a spectacular mask, inspired by traditional Balinese sculptures. With its picturesque aspects, the dragon creates a mystical atmosphere as it is a god and animal hybrid, full of spiritual aura.

The witch has a complex pre-feminist story as a foreign woman from Java, married and betrayed in Bali. The dancers enter into violent fits of trance and turn their krisses (daggers) against their breasts without harming themselves. Consciousness is restored with incense and holy water. Balinese music is used as a background for Dr. Margaret Mead's narration.

The film was not released until 1951. It attracted praise from later anthropologists for its pioneering achievement and criticism for its emphasis on performance, omitting relevant details such as the dancers' discourse — which I do include in my fieldwork notes for better understanding of the Balinese choreographic environment.

This documentary arouses divergent reactions, even controversies. Anthropologist Hildred Geertz calls the film pioneering, writing that Bateson and

¹ The boards are presented in the following chapters: villages, agricultural practices, religious and Transcribe, industrialization; social organization, physical elevation, respect; learning (visual, kinesthetic, balance); trance behavior, body surface, hands; body orifices (oral attitudes, eating habits, sucking habits, body products); self-cosmic play (the baby, genital manipulation, toys, cockfights); the roles of parents and children, tantrums, borrowed babies, trance behavior, witches, fear, sleep; sibling rivalry and roles; developmental stages of boys and girls; and birthday rituals, teeth filing, marriage, death, funerals, exhumation practices. A 3-page selective bibliography is followed by a glossary and an index of native words and personal names.

² Fieldwork notes (Vassileva 2022): "It's summer 2022. I have undertaken an immersive choreographic trip to Bali, Indonesia. By chance I attend a funeral ceremony. With surprise I discover that the master of ceremonies, a shaman priest, had slaughtered a chicken. Fascinated by this macabre scene, I take out my camera to capture an image. The man carrying the dead chicken quickens his steps and disappears into the crowd. I understand that he (and probably everyone present) prefers to remain discreet in regard to the tension between the strict requirements of conducting an ancient ritual and the danger of a large fine by local animal rights defense organisations. I understand the dilemma, without judgment, and I put my camera away without any trace of these silhouettes."

Mead are more than pioneers: their films “remain in some ways exemplary achievements because they use film not as ethnographic illustration but as a powerful tool in systematic cultural research” (Geertz 1976: 725). While Indonesian American anthropologist Fatimah Tobing Rony considers that “the photogenic *Trance and Dance in Bali* is representative of a kind of anthropological imperialist blindness, ironic given that these scientists believed [in] and promoted the idea of their own superior vision” (Rony 2006: 5). I will address further in this study the potential resolution brought by research-creation in the field of visual anthropology, in response to this type of controversy.

Contemporary Evolution of the Animal Figure of in Balinese Performance

Visual anthropology and research-creation as methodology, adapted to the reality of Balinese performance, end up producing an ever-increasing quantity of visual data such as photos, footage, videos, etc. Artistic life in Bali, and more specifically in Ubud, is still very abundant and prolific. Frequent ceremonies also involve dance programming.

Furthermore, the tools of visual anthropology have been used by the inhabitants of Bali for the establishment of regular cultural transfers on their own. The presence of social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, etc., on the spiritual island, modifies the daily practices of the various arts — from the morning offering to the nightly dance show — as “increasingly faster Internet access, and constantly developing cell phone gadgetry only tighten the associations between electronic media and international values; these and other quickly developing technologies represent a string of global forces that easily links local users to each other and consumers around the world” (Appadurai 2015: 3).

For the island residents and artists, the use of photography and video has also become a reflexive process that allows them to “use external forces and influences to the advantage of the local community (...) rather than putting in place defenses to prevent external cultural influences” (Mcintosh 2010: 208).

In our view, the Hindu-Buddhist practices of the island are particularly beneficial to hybrid and creative approaches to research in aesthetics and cultural studies. For instance, they are intertwined with multiple spiritual and sensual imaginaries of the potential of the animal figure, such as the choreographies of *Birds in Paradise*, or Cendrawasih³. The Cendrawasih dance is created by Balinese choreographer I Gede Manik, precisely from Sawan Village, Buleleng District, Buleleng Regency. It was first staged in 1956. The latest adaptations are arranged by N.L.N. Swasti Wijaya Bandem in 1988. For a long time, Balinese dancers have used the figure of the dancing animal as a form of symbolic expression. In Cendrawasih dance, as more recent creation, the natural movements of birds that live in eastern Indonesia inspired Bandem to express the immortality of love. The bird of paradise is indeed considered a celestial bird which is a symbol of the journey of eternal love.

³ *Cendrawasih* is the Indonesian word for “bird of paradise”, a rare species in Papua, Eastern Australia, New Guinea and New Zealand.

It is an elegant choreography, often performed by two girls. One of the special features of the Cenderawasih dance costume is the headdress used by the dancers, made of gold with an open top and a front curved back, like a bird's head. The joyful rhythm of this dance, and the spectacular costumes which imitate the colors and the feathers of tropical birds make it a particularly popular subject of various media clips published on Balinese cultural social networks.

Cultural Choreographic Transfers via Visual Anthropology, Research-Creation and Movement Analysis

Visual anthropology, blended with research-creation approach, allows an academic artist to construct or re-construct a representation of Bali as a phenomenologically experienced place. Documenting or recreating processes of transmission and interpretation of dance practices in Ubud, a privileged multicultural hub for dancers, reflects the cosmopolitan dimension of the city. The series of aesthetic choices, made by an initial agency of perception, or by the final choreographic editing later on, inevitably leads to re/invention of the place. A detailed description of that kind of research-creation process can be consulted in *L'écriture rhizomatique de soi et la fiction : un projet de recherche création, construit par des rencontres interculturelles en danse* (Vassileva 2023).

The analysis of photographs and videos taken *in situ* and in the heat of the action questions both western and eastern conceptions, representations and cultural transfers of local dance practices. The real encounter with the latter during an immersive stay, mostly by embodiment practice in local environment, often challenges any western preconception.

The analytical potential of visual anthropology such as the use of photography and video is described by Susan Buck-Morss: "Within the enlargement, space is stretched out; within slow motion, movement expands, 'revealing entirely new structural formation of matter'... the world that opens unto the camera provides knowledge relevant to acting in it" (Buck-Morss 1991: 268). This testimony gives one clear example of the academic transfer of research methodology I make, on my behalf, between the accumulation of visual material in a local environment and the use of the analysis of dance movement, AFCMD⁴. As a dancer/researcher trained mostly in the West I apply the Functional Analysis of the Body in Dance Movement (AFCMD), which questions the intention of the gesture and the postural organization of the

⁴ Epistemology of the concept: The AFCMD has been established as a specific subject since the 1990s. Hubert Godard and Odile Rouquet are the founders of this method in France. It draws on the work of the great pioneers and theorists of the movement analysis such as E. J-Dalcroze, F. Delsarte and R. Laban and the designers of bodily practices with educational or therapeutic aims such as: F.M Alexander, G.Alexander, I. Bartenieff, B. Bainbridge Cohen, Dr. L. Ehrenfried, M. Feldenkrais, E. Gindler, F. Hellès, L. Sweigard, M. Todd... It is a continuation of the work of Bobath, L. Busquet, Kabat, F. Mézières, Piret and Bézières, GDS Godelieve Denys Struyf, and others who contributed to the emergence of the concept of muscular chains. In addition to this empirical corpus, there are the contributions of functional anatomy, biomechanics and neurophysiology, integrating the evolution of AFCMD most recent work. The results of various studies from chronophotography to synthetic images have made it possible to grasp and better understand the kinetics of movement in its complexity while also benefiting from the perspective of the ethnologist or other specialists in social sciences. See website: afcmd.fr.

person, in a defined context of action, by establishing an open dialogue with the imagination of movement, differing in each culture. This method is developed with an educational and artistic objective, and its quite unknown in the choreographic and academic fields of Bali, Indonesia⁵. Aligned with somatic techniques, AFCMD is distinguished on the one hand by the use of theoretical and practical observation data, but also by promoting a reorganization of the kinesthetic experience. It crosses sensitive experience with objective knowledge which governs movement. AFCMD takes into account the functional and expressive dimension of the “subjective” body to move towards the autonomy of an optimal organization of movement.

My Immersive Dance Fieldwork in Bali, Indonesia, since 2012 till Today

During my journeys in Ubud, Bali, Indonesia since 2012, I was able to work with few renowned local dance teachers for successive periods of longer time and regular daily training. All of them are both dancers and teachers since in this specific socio-cultural framework the two professional activities are inseparable⁶. Furthermore, the reputation of a dancer and/or teacher can attract students and/or a certain kind of audience. Balinese audience is very sensitive to their choreographic heritage and expect to see only perfect versions of it, especially those of the sacred and semi sacred traditional dances⁷.

One of the objectives of my immersive fieldwork is learning local repertory following a logic of progression towards more difficult variations. Moreover, those which describe the gestures of animals in a choreographic way are part of the latter. So I was able to learn first the choreographies of *Welcome Dance`Padang*, *Puspanjali*, *Legong*, *Tari Terek*; and later on some others about animals, embodied in dance such as *Oleg Tamulilingan (Bumblebee Dance)*, *Birds in Paradise*, the roles of Sita and the golden deer from *Ramayana/Kesak Dance*.

The educational proposals of the island teachers take into consideration the backgrounds of the foreign students. For instance, as western trained dancer I have always been allowed to keep my ‘contemporary dance’ extravagance, according to the local traditional values, and to freely develop and maintain intensive creative practice of improvisation and composition on my own, though rooted in Balinese culture⁸:

⁵ Most of the dance material is transferred to the student with the requirement to strictly follow and imitate closely the teacher’s interpretation as an expert movement model.

⁶ I would like to express my deep gratitude to Debix Lupta and Tut Nik (Denpasar style Balinese dance teachers), Au Atit (Peliatan style Balinese dance teacher) and Dewa Irawan (ISI Denpasar style Balinese dance teacher) for their generosity and kindness when teaching and supporting my research and dance activities during my many stays in Bali, Indonesia.

⁷ Fieldwork notes (Vassileva 2024): “A funny anecdote of a badly taught foreigner, performing *Legong* in a local festival, has turned into a viral video, accusing her of cultural appropriation, in March 2024. She was criticized of having turned the original choreography into a ‘creation’ as her interpretation had fallen beyond the score (*pakem* in Balinese dance language) to keep up to, with no respect to numerous details and style of the character.”

⁸ Fieldwork notes (Vassileva 2012): “By the end of my first Balinese dance class in 2012, my teacher Debix turned to me and suggested, “You are a dancer? We have a more detailed program for learning the variations, but it will last several days.” I gladly accepted the educational offer and it has

The constant changes in the social, cultural and political landscapes of Bali make an impact on the status of traditional performing arts by the invention of new strategies for the preservation and transmission of Balinese arts. The researcher Bethany J. Collier examines how teachers in today's Bali are altering traditional pedagogical models when working with new performers in the context of globalizing change (Collier 2014: 457). She explores some of the implications of these technology-based adaptations, the ideological motivations of teachers, and argues that training teenagers in the practice of this difficult genre is an efficient tactic for strengthening their sense of Balinese identity.

Therefore the stories from this kind of fieldwork experiences are an essential part of my study. The use of the tools of visual anthropology — through demonstration in photos and videos, — is focused on the analysis of the Balinese style movement and its somatic experience. In order to give a further understanding of this approach, I will compare Sally Ann Ness's testimonies (Ness 2008: 1251) to my own. The researcher describes her experience learning Balinese dance:

Balinese dancing, in this respect, can be experienced (although this is more likely to be a novice's or observer's experience) as the systematic hierarchic management of relationships: It entails «pushing *this* (arm segment) up,» while «pressing *that* (wrist area) down,» while at the same time «lifting *this* (shoulder area) up,» while flexing *that* (knee area),» while «bending *that* (ankle area),» while «spreading *this* (fingers area),» while «tilting *that* (head area),» while «holding *this* (chest area),» and so on. This dance of «whiling» enables an intensification of energies sent simultaneously into different areas of the performer and necessitates a continuous reassessment of the exertions themselves relative to one another. (Ness 2008: 1251)

This kind of description underlines the subjectivity and non-universality of many elements operating during the process of an embodied choreographic cultural transfer. Her way of experiencing the process of learning and interpretation of the codified gestures of Balinese dance is indeed conceived in a phenomenological approach, rather than the movement analysis developed in French academia, which I have learnt during my studies and tenure position-based activities, specialized in dance studies.

Dancer's Practice within the Choreographic Cultural Transfers of Balinese Repertory

This part of the study is based on personal empirical experience. It questions how the cultural transfers between different dance styles are embodied and carried out into final creative endeavour. It is written from a first person perspective in order to underline the subjective experience of crossing various trainings, which further can be explored as a matrix for enhanced comprehension of their inner mechanics and subtle multi-layering.

Therefore, I offer fieldwork stories which are inspired both by the discovery of a “disturbing strangeness” («*étrangeté inquiétante*») but also by

been the beginning of a great adventure. The dances which embody animal spirits turned out to be very refined, and were offered to me to learn later, in their full length, since 2022.”

keys acquired from my previous training as a dancer and my empirical studies in the choreographic field as a researcher. Here are some ideas which give a deeper understanding of how this kind of research-creation processes may function.

Ballet and Modern Dance for the Concepts of Code and Effort

My classical dance practice (beginning at age 14, till today⁹) allowed me to quickly become aware of what a dance code is and what type of dance training can facilitate (or disrupt, or even prevent) its construction both corporeal and imaginary¹⁰. If Eugenio Barba has already proposed a perspective of comparison between the basic positions in Western ballet and those, called “agem” (Fig 1), in traditional Balinese dance (Barba 2008: 17), my own empirical experience led me towards a broader vision of the similarities and differences between several classical dance styles in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, so on).

Four years of modern dance practice (Graham¹¹) prepared me for some muscular density and tonicity. The term “preparation” is used to emphasize the unpredictability of the immersive fieldwork in Bali. One example is the climate change between two continents which requires to emphasize the muscle density for any contraction needed for certain gestures of Balinese traditional dance vocabulary.

The high temperatures and humidity of the tropical air in Ubud (my habitual homestay) demand special effort, in the complex sens of it, given by Laban (1994), in order to keep up this kind of stamina during training. It is preferable to acquire it before the trip in order to avoid discomfort or reduction in the quality of attention since dance classes in Bali take place in the open air - temple scenes for ceremonies, garden classes in teachers houses, etc. Training takes place in full exposure to natural elements since air-conditioned or sanitized dance studios, conceived according to the requirements of contemporary Western urban architecture, are not part of the local landscape.

Contemporary Dance and Dance Studies for the Concepts of Liberty and Research-Creation

My specialization in contemporary dance¹² gave me the freedom to transform these codes into, improvisation sessions, and consequently reconstruct them into personal compositions. The creative and analytical use of dance video and cinematographic performance helped me grasp the contemporary evolution of these ancient dance styles.

⁹ Krassimira Koldamova School, Sofia, Bulgaria and subsequently — advanced dance courses in Paris: National Dance Center, Studio Harmonic, Marais Center, Stanlowa School.

¹⁰ And of course, the discipline necessary to continue working sometimes in a state of fatigue or with demanding requirement, especially in tropical climate challenging conditions later on.

¹¹ Dance group school of Albena Atanassova, Sofia, Bulgaria (from 14 to 19 years old).

¹² Paris, training since 1999, till today: ERD programs (regular dancer training) offered by the Center National de la Danse, Studio Harmonic, Menagerie de verre, Ecole Peter Goss, Micadanses, CanalDanse, R.I.D.C., and several courses on international level (Italy, Germany ...).

As a tenured university teacher and researcher since 2009¹³, I have been able to combine my immersive fieldworks with questions and experiments in creative research. This is a broad field that includes, among others, the approaches of “practice as research” and dance culture embodiment. For instance my research on the spiral in multiple dance styles (Vassileva & Laureillard 2015) was particularly useful to me to understand the of posture-in-motion in traditional Balinese dance, and how to create bridges with its potential in contemporary dance creation¹⁴.

As a researcher, I have been observing and reflecting for a long time, during many stays in Asia, on the objectives of studying and embodying local choreographic cultures. A common sensitive topic at stake is the danger of their cultural appropriation during any transfer process. One response (at least mine) to the problem of cultural appropriation, and the political issues it implies, is the resolution of their reenactement only by:

1. improvisation in resonances, which, as an essential part of my creative research project, takes place after the accumulation of *in situ* experiences;
2. and composition by echoes - another important collaborative phase of my research creation project, which is done via choreographic editing, upon returns in France.

None of my personal creations contains original scores, phrasing, music and costumes, nor original titles and labels as traditional dance. The source place is always clearly identified, and the definition of the work presented is announced only as research-creation non profit outcome of the fieldwork done. The visual creative research documents do not contain any identical repetitions of entire “sentences”, or scenes from the local repertoire studied, out of respect and consideration for all these cultures and their heritage rights.

¹³ MCF HDR which stands for « Maîtresse de conférences, habilitée à diriger des recherche », according to the French academic system.

¹⁴ Several internationally renowned choreographers draw inspiration from traditional Balinese culture for contemporary creations. One example is Lin Hwai Min, the founder of Cloud Gate Dance Theater of Taiwan, the first contemporary dance company in all Chinese-speaking communities. He has been doing extended stays and collaborative workshops in Ubud for years, and considers the city his spiritual and artistic second home.

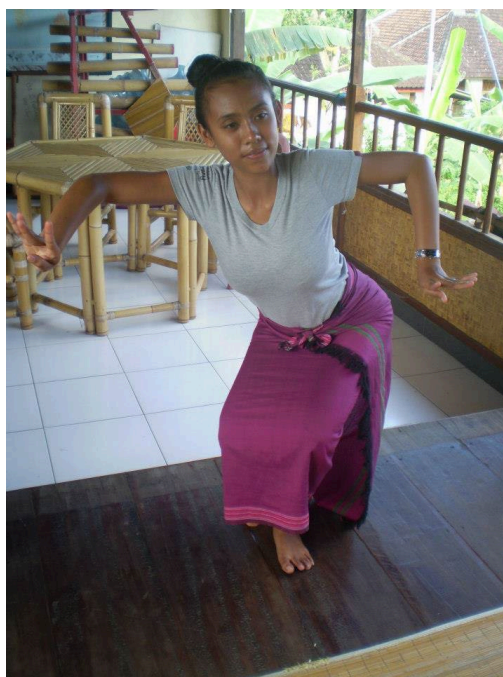


Fig 1 Debix demonstrates agem kanan (basic position on the right)
Dance training with Debix Lupta, Sanggar Pondok Pekak, Ubud, Bali, 2012
© Biliana VASSILEVA, 2012

Choreographic Analysis of Photos and Videos:

According to the observations of several researchers quoted above, Bali is a place of ritual practice, and therefore a place of technically articulated behavior. The choreographic practices of Balinese performance present a style of bodily movement that is coherent, systematic and rich in codifications. It is made up of a relatively wide range of principles of posture and movements recognized by artists and the local public. Traditional Balinese dance technique is based on the mastery of body coordination, dynamic phrasing, and spatial orientation. It has many applications in a wide spectrum of performance and event genres — ceremonies, parties, etc.

Traditional Balinese dance styles are significantly less invested in iconic gestures than other comparable performance traditions based in Hinduism. For example, the figurative gestures of Indian classical dance bear a strong resemblance to environmental referents such as flutes, swords, lotus flowers, the sun and the moon, mountains and rivers. However, certain gestures in traditional Balinese dance are also close to the original movement, a source of inspiration such as the bumblebee dancer *Oleg Tamulilingan* (*The Bumblebees Dance*) who flings her wings to illustrate flight¹⁵. (Fig 4)

¹⁵ Fieldwork notes (Vassileva, 2024): “In my experience of learning and observing dance performances in Bali, Indonesia, many performers can play with potential meanings of finger placements, jumping bodies, and vibrations to establish a metalanguage on stage. These are often “private joke” dialogues for participants and spectators who are more accustomed and aware of this type of performative elements in the show.”

The analysis of the kinesthetic language of traditional Balinese dance effectively allows us to go beyond the iconic theories of choreographic symbolism. To begin with, one of the main characteristics of traditional Balinese dance is the clarity of articulation of each posture and transition, specific to all so-called “classical” arts. For example, Western ballet is also built on similar principles which require such a degree of articulation.

The Balinese ritual considered one of the most complex dance traditions in the world regarding isolation and active use of body segmentation or “body parts”. From the tips of the fingers to the tips of the toes, the dance postures are arranged and maintained without much freedom of interpretation. (Fig 1 and 2) According to Sally Ann Ness, the classical Balinese style can mobilize and coordinate in simultaneous isolation more than twenty different segmentations of the dancer’s body in a single phase of momentary action (Ness 2008: 1251). It generally requires at least five degrees of isolation in each arm alone, as in Western classical dance — but the orientations of the segments are different. This spiral plunges the upper limbs into the spine and the lower limbs, down to the feet, interacting harmoniously. (Fig 2)

In order to find the resonances of this gesture aesthetic of gesture, and its potential for transformation and more like contemporary dance interplay, I have extracted photos of individual improvisation sessions carried out after morning training in traditional Balinese dance in Ubud.



Fig 2 Debix demonstrates agem kiri (basic position on the left)
Dance training with Debix Lupta at Sanggar Pondok Pekak, Ubud, Bali
© Biliana VASSILEVA, 2012

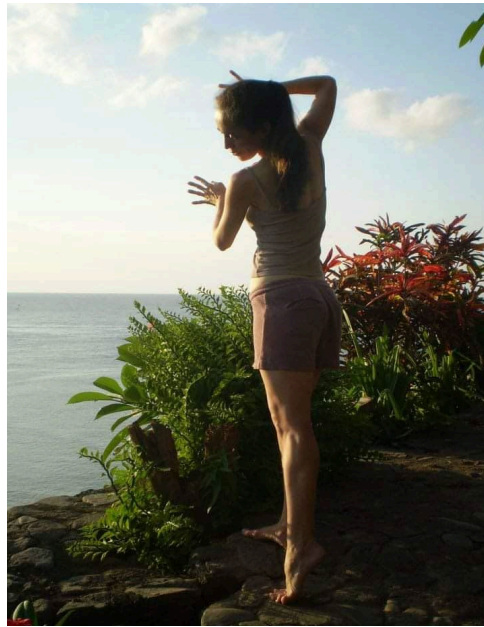


Fig 3 Improvisations inspired by contemporary dance (agem being transformed)
Amed, Bali, Indonesia
© Biliana VASSILEVA, 2012



Fig 4 Improvisations played around the figure of *Oleg Tumililingan* (I Ketut Maryo, 1952) inspired by contemporary dance (agem being transformed)
Amed, Bali, Indonesia
© Biliana VASSILEVA, 2012

Photographic activity stimulates reflection and allows us to better grasp the “shadows”-of-memory gestures conceptualized by Rudolf von Laban during the structured improvisations he directed at Monte Verita at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to his conception of the emergence of a “shadow” gesture through improvised dance practice, the body as a reservoir can contain vast quantities of experience that had sunk beneath consciousness (Laban 1994).

In regard to that in Fig 3 we can observe transformed arms of the **agem**, but which retains the well-balanced asymmetry of the original posture, the good direction of the gaze, and by contrast – a verticality clearly resulting from European training in classical dance.

Fig 4 brings out one of the emblematic figures of flight from the piece *Oleg Tamulilingan*, created by I Ketut Marya in 1952. There is a rare slender posture, going upwards, with the sensation of expanded spatiality, as the arms embody the moment of suspension and flight, and the legs keep the trace of a kick, essential to manage the long sarong¹⁶.

The precise coordinations in traditional Balinese dance define the performer's manner of investing energy through various proprioceptive meridians with extremely sudden variations to produce the vibrational fluctuations of gesture that are perhaps the most distinctive dynamic feature of the Balinese choreographic style. In order to study these principles of dynamic organization of dance gesture, cinematographic analysis becomes a precious and essential tool.

The technical principles of traditional Balinese dance are very numerous and complex. How can I approach them with my expertise as a dancer and diligent practitioner of local somatic practices? The video recordings as part of the creation research project *Drifting/à la dérive* have proven particularly beneficial: *BiliBali* 2012¹⁷; *Bali Luwak* 2019¹⁸; *Bali Rain* 2020¹⁹ ; *Bali Spring* 2022²⁰ ; *Bali Summer* 2022²¹.

The figure of Luwak appears in clear or shadowy way in the sequences of *Bali Spring* 2023²² , *Bali Summer* 2023²³ , *Bali August* 2023²⁴, *Gamelan, Bali* 2023²⁵ , *Bali March* 2024²⁶ and *Gamelan Jam* 2024²⁷ .

¹⁶ Or « donner un coup de pied à un connard » (to kick out a jerk), anonymous source, ONP.

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UElq-pup2uY>

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTqoQ2nDCXk&t=176s>.

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLUyKQoYupA&t=128s>.

²⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_EP1nX1xgE&t=16s.

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XCWcIR6pkc&t=14s>.

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjVLfGUveWU&t=8s>.

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaU52MULaSw&t=198s>.

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcowOCEND6Q&t=28s>.

²⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPJ3K6u2X_s&t=6s.

²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTPMNl2b5L4&t=169s>.

²⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6P_lrkXlINo.

A Solo Research-Creation and Dance Video: Bali Luwak, 2019. Ubud, Bali²⁸

Live performances: This creation was performed twice on stage by the author, accompanied by the musician and composer Guillaume Tiger who broadcast live music, co-created with the dance gestures: in the *Festival Pile ou Frasque*, organized by the theater *Le Regard du Cygne* and *Le Générateur*, in March 2019 in Paris; and in the shared evening of performances in *Tiasci Transdisciplinary Arts Center*, World Music, in May 2019 in Paris²⁹.

Concept: In *Bali Luwak* fantastical creatures and ghosts lead the storyline. I followed training in traditional Balinese dance in the spring of 2019 which is the source of inspiration for the snippets of movement, chosen during collaborative editing with videographer Victoria Donnet. The narration is made up of fragments of characters and fables. Few imaginary figures from Apollinaire's poem are embodied through short dance improvisation sequences:

Gods of living water
Let down their hair
And now you must follow
A craving for shadows. (Apollinaire 1995)

Another quote, both academic and poetic, describes how the combination of these sources of creativity, traditional or contemporary, operates to induce a complex somatic process of reflective awakening:

a silent tongue sounding/
an eye scanning/
polyphonic skin of event/
through gesture and posture. (Cobbing 1999)

The editing, done in collaboration with Victoria Donnet, is based on *Ondée*, an original musical creation by Guillaume Tiger, researcher and composer.

Choreographic Analysis: Flexions and hyperextensions of the joints are particularly valued in order to create the curvilinear forms considered beautiful across the spectrum of Balinese performance events. The recording of dance improvisations in the rice fields of Ubud keeps the trace of these “shadow” gestures of **agem**s in perpetual transformation, especially through the sudden zooms which both decompose and restore the strong flexions and hyperextensions which create particular kinetic signature.

The animal figure of an essential part of the Balinese repertoire: monkeys, a deer, bees, birds, so on, as explained above. Thus (partially) my idea was born to dance/embody the spirit of the luwak, an emblematic animal of Bali, which subsequently appears in other dance video creations (2019-2024). The ecosomatic issues for the choice of embodying this character are closely linked with the vision of an alter ego. The latter represents the tragic destiny of

²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTqoQ2nDCXk&t=12s>.

²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJBcEQiMIKw&t=1s>.

a researcher, subject to contemporary devices of captivity through repetitive cybersurveillances and illegal intrusions into her private life.

This exploitation is carried out through data theft — which to say an illegal and non-consensual access to loads of work done — through copy catting of creative processes: phases, material, etc. (in other words, its selection of coffee beans and their processing). In addition there are attempts to maintain this type of profit through distorted arguments for « care » - in reality, micro and macro aggressions, attempts of control and censorship, performed on the social scene, and with infraction of the intimate sphere.

What is Luwak? *National Geographic*³⁰

It is the most expensive coffee in the world, and it is prepared from coffee beans that are partially digested and then expelled by the civet, a small creature about the size of a cat. A cup of kopi luwak, as it is called, can reach the price of 80 dollars (71.50 euros) in the United States.

The civet, found in Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, has a long tail like monkeys, facial markings like raccoons, and spots on its body. It plays an important role in the food chain, feeding on insects and small reptiles in addition to fruits such as coffee cherries and mangoes, and is eaten by leopards, large snakes and crocodiles.

At first, the civet coffee trade suggested a bright future for the animal. In Indonesia, the palm civet, which raids fruit farms, is often considered a pest. The growth of the kopi luwak industry has therefore encouraged its protection by local farmers for the value of its excrement. Its digestive enzymes change the structure of the proteins present in the coffee bean, removing a certain acidity for a smoother final result in the cup.

But civet coffee has grown in popularity. As Indonesia becomes a tourist destination where more travelers want to observe nature and interact with animals, a growing number of wild civets are kept in cages on coffee plantations partly for coffee production, but charge the tourists who want to observe the animal.

Civet feces, sprinkled with partially digested coffee seeds, were previously sought after in the wild. More and more civets are now locked in unsanitary cages on coffee plantations.

The luwak — its expressions, postures and locomotion were observed, studied, visually documented and subsequently analyzed by the author of this study — during eight trips to Bali since 2012. It also appears in the *Bali Spring 2022*³¹ video (Fig 5), because of an interaction — a bite to the wrist — a minor incident, but which highlights the impossibility of domesticating this animal whose natural habitat is the tropical forest; and in *Bali Summer 2022*³² (Fig 6), following a long summer stay, and consequently, cohabitation and reflections on vulnerabilities and strategies of violence on a global scale.

³⁰ nationalgeographic.fr, consulted on 04/05/2023.

³¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_EP1nX1xgE&t=16s.

³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XCWcIR6pkc&t=14s>.

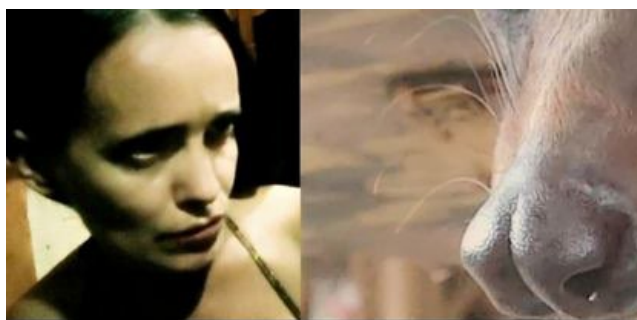


Fig 5 Screenshot *Bali Spring 2022*
© Biliana VASSILEVA, 2022

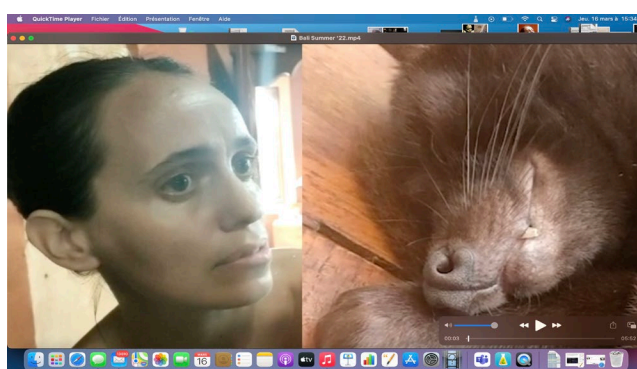


Fig 6 Screenshot *Bali Summer 2022*
© Biliana VASSILEVA, 2012

Traditional Balinese dance repertoire contain varied steps and characters that define how a performer learns to work with gravity. Transitions between postures and movements on stage are made in a grounded but elegantly undulating sense³³.

Traces of this experience, but also of the presence of animals (some considered sacred)³⁴ as well as the influence of Hindu architectural and decorative

³³ Fieldwork notes about dance training (Vassileva 2024): “In the series Bali 2022-24 (the web links added above) a hybrid walk emerges as a blend of those practiced in Bali and in other regions of Indonesia. The status of this walk is special because it is the result of my habits, and therefore, of my warm-up needs as being trained in different dance style classes, lead in Western studios: ballet, contemporary , jazz, etc. Traditional Balinese dance classes begin directly with the performance of repertoire variations. After discussion with my dance teacher in 2022, when I was learning the refined and highly demanding choreography of Oleg, we “co-invented” a brief transition between street walking and one that introduces a repertoire variation at the start of each session. Based on her expertise, she came up with several different types of steps for slow and quick crossings of the stage. Some are meditative, others — quite complex. Their repetition resulted in the merging and shifting of the originals moves, for the walk in Bali Summer 2022/2023. It combines both real, fixed principles of choreographed locomotion in Indonesia, and more free, contemporary interpretation of these.”

³⁴ Fieldwork notes about monkeys, human and more-than-human transfers (Vassileva 2024): “The owners of the shops near Monkey Forest, Ubud, know best the successful principles of a life shared with monkeys. The (occasional) fight with an aggressive monkey requires skills worthy of martial arts expertise and quickly becomes a street show. It’s a real escalation of strength and

urban culture of extraordinary beauty and richness appear in all the footage of *BiliBali* 2012³⁵; *Bali Luwak* 2019³⁶; *Bali Rain* 2020³⁷; *Bali Spring* 2022³⁸; *Bali Summer* 2022³⁹; *Bali Spring* 2023⁴⁰; *Bali Summer* 2023⁴¹; *Bali August* 2023⁴²; *Gamelan, Bali* 2023⁴³; *Bali March* 2024⁴⁴ and *Gamelan Jam* 2024⁴⁵.

Conclusion and Perspectives

Balinese ritual performance is among the most complex and technically advanced choreographic traditions in Southeast Asia, categorized under the overall category of “classical” performance. If the phenomenological approach allows us to grasp some elements, mine is strongly informed by my dance experience – both in the Western context and that of so-called “extra-Western” immersive trips/fields. In this sense I was able to make comparisons and differentiation at the level of the technical complexity and institutionalization of training processes in the traditions of India, Thailand, and Cambodia.

The methods of visual anthropology – photography and video, but also sketching, drawing, etc. – make it possible to experiment with an original and visual approach to the study of local repertoire and its cultural transfers. It is a complex interrelation between method, theory and anthropological practice. In the field of creative research, anthropological practice is also intertwined with artistic practices, which requires a clear distinction between the different elements involved.

An example is the documentation of the local choreographic repertoire and subsequently the creation of archives of a series of improvisations on this basis, in particular the creative research project *Drifting/à la dérive* presented in this study. The logic of this series and its explanation in another stage can both account for new kinesthetic awareness, and even – using a looping movement towards the original sources – improve the understanding of the local repertoire as a starting point.

Furthermore, the hypothesis of this study, which is that traditional Balinese choreographic culture is simultaneously constructed via cultural

speed that has infiltrated the local dance repertoire for a very, very long time. Tourists strolling with their food purchases on Monkey Forest Road are quickly warned to turn back. All Balinese women on the island have had the experience of things being stolen by monkeys, and (long) hair being pulled by animals when they become “sensitive and nervous” for various reasons (interview with local inhabitants lead by the author of this study). On their hand, the monkeys know how to wait for the laps of prayer which accompanies the small daily offerings of rice, flowers and fruit, before stealing them. They are capable of recognizing plastic objects from several meters away and opening water bottles, cans and all kinds of airtight packaging.”

³⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UElq-pup2uY>.

³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTqoQ2nDCXk&t=176s>.

³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLUyKQoYupA&t=128s>.

³⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_EP1nX1xgE&t=16s.

³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XCWcIR6pkc&t=14s>.

⁴⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjVLfGUveWU&t=8s>.

⁴¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaU52MULaSw&t=198s>.

⁴² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcowOCEND6Q&t=28s>.

⁴³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPJ3K6u2X_s&t=6s.

⁴⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTPMNl2b5L4&t=169s>.

⁴⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6P_lrkXlINo.

transfers on global scale which makes it possible to build a particular intelligence of the body in movement, finds its proof in the multiple examples of various visual documents and their sensitive and reflexive treatment.

REFERENCES

- Appadurai 2015 : Arjun Appadurai, « Après le colonialisme. Les conséquences culturelles de la globalisation », in *Payot*, coll. « Petite Bibliothèque Payot », pp. 3-4.
- Barba 2008 : Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savrese, *L'Énergie qui danse*, *Dictionnaire d'anthropologie théâtrale*, éditions L'Entretemps.
- Bateson 1942 : Gregory Bateson & Margaret Mead, *Balinese Character, a Photographic Analysis*, New York, The New York Academy of Sciences.
- Buck Morss 1991 : Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Collier 2014 : Bethany J. Collier, « Looking to the future: training a new generation for Balinese Arja », in *Asian Theatre Journal* N 31/2, University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 457-480.
- Fraleigh 2004 : Sondra Horton Fraleigh, *Dancing Identity: Metaphysics In Motion*, University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Geertz 1976 : Hildred Geertz, "Trance and Dance in Bali – Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead; Bathing Babies in Three Cultures – Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead; Karba's First Years – Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead", in *American Anthropologist*, 78 (3), pp. 725-726.
- Laban 1994 : Rudolf Laban, *La maîtrise du mouvement*, Traduit par Jacqueline Challet-Haas, Éditeur Actes Sud.
- Mcintosh 2010 : Paul McIntosh, *Action Research and Reflective Practice. Creative and Visual Methods to Facilitate Reflection and Learning*, London, Routledge.
- Ness 2008 : Sally Ann Ness, "Bali, the Camera, and Dance: Performance Studies and the Lost Legacy of the Mead/Bateson Collaboration", in *Journal of Asian Studies* N 67/4, Cambridge University Press, pp. 1251-1276.
- Roni 2006: Fatimah Tobing Rony, "The Photogenic Cannot Be Tamed: Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's *Trance and Dance in Bali*", in *Discourse*, 28 (1), pp. 5-27.
- Vassileva 2015 : Biliana Vassileva & Marie Laureillard, « L'écriture chorégraphique spiralee du Cloud Gate Dance Theater », dans *La scène mondiale aujourd'hui : des formes en mouvement*, CIRRAS (Centre International de Réflexion et de Recherche sur les Arts du Spectacle), ouvrage collectif dir. F. Quillet, coll. L'Univers théâtral, Paris, L'Harmattan, pp. 419-429.
- Vassileva 2012-2014 : Biliana Vassileva, *Fieldwork Notes*, Unpublished, Bali (Indonesia), Ubud.
- Vassileva 2012-2014 : Biliana Vassileva, *Drifting/à la dérive*, Research-Creation Project: dance video works:
BiliBali, 2012: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UElq-pup2uY>
Bali Luwak 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTqoQ2nDCXk&t=176s>.
Bali Rain 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLUyKQ9YupA&t=128s>.
Bali Spring 2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9_EP1nX1xgE&t=16s.
Bali Summer 2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XCWcIR6pkc&t=14s>.
Bali Spring 2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjVlfgUveWU&t=8s>.
Bali Summer 2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaU52MULaSw&t=198s>.
Bali August 2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcowOCEND6Q&t=28s>.
Gamelan, Bali 2023: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPJ3K6u2X_s&t=6s.
Bali March 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTPMNl2b5L4&t=169s>.
Gamelan Jam 2024 : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6P_lrkXlINo.
What is Luwak?, disponible en ligne: nationalgeographic.fr, consulted on 04/05/2023.