DANCE—BALI

Dance is integral to Bali’s cultural life, and includes sacred temple dances that are indispensable to religious rituals, adaptations of old temple or court dances now chiefly performed for tourists, and social folk dances. Balinese dance is rooted in the Hindu-Javanese culture that predates the coming of Islam in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but the repertory has been continually augmented and developed. After Java’s conversion to Islam in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the dance repertory according to the division of the Balinese temple into three courtyards. The main dance repertory is thus divided between sacred dances traditionally performed in the jeroan (inner temple), less sacred dances performed in the jaba tengah (middle courtyard), and secular dances which belong in the jaba, or outer courtyard.

Jeroan Dances

The main jeroan dances are the pendet, rejang, and baris gede. The pendet is a dance of welcome for the gods, and is danced by a group of girls or women, each wearing ordinary traditional dress (as opposed to a special dance costume) and carrying an offering in her right hand. Pendet is widely taught to girls in Bali today, and has a more or less standardized form. The pendet is accompanied by a gamelan gong ensemble. The rejang is a stylized procession to entertain visiting spirits. Rejang is danced by a group of women and girls of all ages, wearing traditional temple dress along with a gold headdress decorated with flowers. Baris gede is a stylized warrior dance performed by a group of men, who form the personal guard of the visiting spirits. The dancers carry weapons—usually pikes, but sometimes kris (traditional daggers) or even firearms—and wear distinctive helmets decorated with pieces of shell. The dance represents military actions, including a mock battle. The sanghyang dance also belongs to the inner temple group, as does, by extension, the kecak. Sanghyang is a ritual trance dance accompanied by gamelan gong or chanting, performed to repel evil influences. The dancers are young girls of around eight to ten years old. Kecak is a modern offshoot of sanghyang developed in the 1930s, which uses the chanting of traditional sanghyang as an accompaniment to theatrical dance using stories from the Ramayana epic.

Jaba Tengah Dances

The jaba tengah dances are mostly narrative. The most important is the gambuh, which, like the jeroan dances, functions to welcome the spirits. The gambuh
has pre-Islamic Javanese court origins, and is generally held to be the source of all Balinese narrative dance forms in terms of movement vocabulary, character types, costume, plot development, dramatic conventions, and musical accompaniment. Gambuh performances originally lasted for several days, though today they rarely exceed an hour or two. Most gambuh performances tell stories from the early Javanese Panji romance cycle, often placing the central character in Bali rather than Java. Dialogue is in Kawi (Old Javanese), though the comic characters keep up a running commentary in Balinese.

The topeng pajegan and wayang wong—both masked dramatic forms—also take place in the jaba tengah. In topeng pajegan, a single dancer performs the entire story, changing masks and voices to represent the various characters, while in wayang wong a number of dancers present an episode from the Ramayana epic, again with dialogue in Kawi. There is also an outer courtyard masked dance known as topeng panca (masked dance of five), in which five dancers represent different characters.

Jaba Dances

Jaba (outer courtyard) dances can be performed outside the context of religious ceremony as purely secular, artistic events. Some of these are dramatic forms, while others, like the legong and baris dances, are choreographic character studies. Legong is performed by three young girls, and has a dramatic structure when performed in its entirety. Today, however, it is usually excerpted, the point being the grace and elegance of the choreography. Legong is normally the first dance taught to young girls when they start to study dance. Baris, in contrast, is a vigorous male dance style representing a warrior preparing for and engaging in combat. Baris is normally taught to all male dance students in Bali, as it contains all the fundamentals of Balinese male choreography. A modern development of the legong is the kebyar duduk, in which the dancer sits at an instrument of the gamelan gong kebyar (modern-style gamelan) ensemble, and the choreography, while based on legong style, incorporates playing the instrument.

Outside the temple are a number of genres of social dance, such as joged bungbung and janger. Joged bungbung is similar to the Javanese tayuhan, and features a number of young female dancers paid to dance flirtatiously with male guests, usually inviting the man to dance by placing a sash around his waist. Janger resembles a secular version of the sangbyang, and features a group of performers split evenly between the sexes. They sit facing each other in lines and sway rhythmically to their own chanting.

Balinese dance has been widely admired by foreign artists and scholars as a vibrant and vital strand of Balinese culture. Some of these, like German artist Walter Spies, contributed to the development of dance in Bali itself. The continued popularity of traditional dance with Balinese performers themselves should ensure the survival of the tradition even as Indonesian society changes around it.

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Further Reading


DANCE—BANGLADESH

Folk dancing in Bangladesh has to be viewed in the context of the history of the Indian subcontinent. Bangladesh is among the youngest nations of the world; it became a nation in 1971, following its independence from Pakistan, which itself became a nation in 1947. Bangladesh, as former East Pakistan, was far removed socially and culturally from West Pakistan and was closer in every respect to the neighboring Indian province of West Bengal. With its very strong emphasis on cultural preservation, Bangladesh has retained the majority of folk dances that were practiced in Bengal, drawing also from other Indian states such as Orissa and Bihar, with which there have been strong interactions for centuries. It is to be noted that even though a large number of folk dances have been inspired by Hindu rituals, they have been well preserved in Bangladesh, even though since 1947 that region has been predominantly Muslim. If some of the traditional folk dances have gone out fashion, then it is more due to the constraints of urbanized living than to any religious censure.

Mask Dances

The most prominent among the folk dances are mask dances, originally from the Mymensingh district but later performed in various other parts of Bangladesh as well. These dances, usually held after the harvest in March–April, are enactments of myths of the cult of the Hindu god Siva and the goddess Kali.