

TRADITIONAL DANCE AS A POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF TARI KREASI BARU, NEW DANCE CREATIONS, IN BALI

by Nyoman Cerita

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I NYOMAN CERITA
(ISI Denpasar, Indonesia)

**TRADITIONAL DANCE AS A POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF
TARI KREASI BARU, NEW DANCE CREATIONS, IN BALI**

In this paper, I identify nine traditional characteristics retained in new dance choreography practices, and illustrate these characteristics as found in one new dance example, *Legong Trance*, that I choreographed in 2002. I propose that these nine characteristics must be present in new Balinese dance creations, or *tari kreasi baru*, in order to be appropriate or acceptable according to Balinese cultural practices and standards. From my experience as a dancer, choreographer, and teacher, I have identified these nine characteristics to be the pillars of traditional dance. These pillars make it possible to retain the distinct power or essence of traditional Balinese dance when creating *tari kreasi baru*.

Traditional dance in Bali has a very long history, and is an integral part of, and cannot be separated from cultural practices. Traditional dance has been passed down from generation to generation, from age to age, and has crystallized into and functions as a persistent source for the diverse contemporary performing arts of Bali. As an important aspect of Balinese cultural identity, traditional dance is practiced within daily, ritual, and ceremonial life, according to religious and communal values. Therefore, the nine pillars comprise practices found in the process of creation and performance preparation, in the relationships between the performers on stage in performance, and in aesthetic conventions.

Tari kreasi baru, or new dance creations, in contemporary Balinese performance contexts are new, creative, and unique choreographies that retain elements of traditional performance techniques and practices. I propose that there are nine pillars from traditional practices that must be retained in *tari kreasi baru* as taken together, they form the quantitative *roh*, or essential spirit, of traditional dance and remain present in *tari kreasi baru* performance practices. If these points are not retained, then it is difficult for the Balinese public to receive and understand these new works. If we leave these practices behind, Balinese dance, traditional or new, loses its power—the essential power that defines it. Before I discuss the nine characteristics or pillars of Balinese dance, I would like to first provide background information about *Legong Trance*, the sample choreography.



Platel.
(photo by Robert von Winning)

Tari Kreasi Baru Legong Trance

I choreographed *Tari Kreasi Baru Legong Trance* with Dewa Ketut Alit as music composer in 2002 for the music and dance ensemble, Panca Artha, Ubud, as part of their weekly tourist performance program at Puri Ubud, Ubud Palace. *Legong Trance*, powerfully reminiscent of traditional Balinese dance, is inspired by and based on one of Bali's sacred dances called *Sang Hyang Dedari*. *Sang Hyang Dedari* is a ritual practice from animistic or pre-Hindu magi co-religious beliefs and functions as a defense against the outbreak of disease. *Sang Hyang Dedari* is danced by two prepubescent girls who are accompanied by a chorus of women who sing sacred religious songs. In the staging of the dance, there are always three important atmospheric elements: smoke or fire, songs of worship, and holy water. *Legong Trance* evokes the patterns, mood, and structure of *Sang Hyang Dedari*. The structure of the ritual is retained and is the basis of the *Legong Trance* structure. The three successive stages of *Sang Hyang Dedari* are: 1) *Nusdus*, in which both dancers fall into a trance with the aid of smoke from burning incense; 2) *Mesolah*, dancing; and 3) *Ngeluhur*, the return of the divine *Sang Hyang Dedari* to *khayangan* (heaven).

While *Sang Hyang Dedari* is a ritually-efficacious sacred performance, *Legong Trance* functions, on the surface, as a performance of pure entertainment. This dance was originally created to be included as part of a regular tourist performance following the 2002 bombing, which took place in Kuta, Bali, that negatively affected the Balinese sense of safety and security, and resulted in a negative impact on tourism in Bali and the island's economy. Within this context, *Legong Trance* was created with the intent to: 1) increase attraction and tourism in the Ubud area; 2) present forms of dances that had existed previously; 3) "introduce" dance as a magical, mystical, and religious performance form; 4) heal and evoke a peaceful atmosphere after the trauma of the terrorist bombings in Kuta; and 5) increase the revenue of the music and dance ensemble, Panca Artha. *Legong Trance* continues to be performed today as part of the regular Thursday night performance for tourists at the Ubud Palace.

Nine Pillars of Traditional Balinese Dance: Fundamental Principles for the Creation of New Dances in Bali

I have formulated these nine pillars based on my own personal creative and artistic process as a choreographer.

1) Traditional Balinese dance is magical and religious. In Bali, dance often accompanies religious ceremonies and always involves religious activity. Before each performance, all of the equipment used during the dance, including the costumes, stage, props, *gamelan*, and even the dancers themselves, are blessed by means of ritual offerings. These rituals serve two purposes: first, to cleanse or purify all the items that will be used in the performance of dirt and dust (both physically and metaphorically). This ceremony aims to appease negative ground spirits (*bhutakala*) so that they do not interfere with the execution of the performance, ensure protection and safety and that all aspects of the performance run smoothly. Secondly, the purpose of the preparatory ritual is to invoke the presence of the principal Balinese Hindu God, Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa, in his manifestation as the god of the arts. In this form, Widhi Wasa bestows blessings so that the performance can be carried out successfully, full of attractive charm. Balinese Hindus believe that Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa exists everywhere and always protects everyone who worships him sincerely with religious and artistic activities.

The process of creating new dances in Bali cannot be separated from traditional practices and beliefs. Ritual is an important part of the creative process. Beginning in the planning stages, traditional rituals are carried out in order to bless the creative process. One aspect of this involves selecting an auspicious day (*dewasa ayu*) according to the traditional Balinese calendar to begin the rehearsal process. The intent of this ceremony is to "humble" the participants, creators, and performers, and request guidance during the creative process, in which obstacles are inevitable and divine support is needed to overcome any obstacles that materialize. Further, this ritual enables the choreographer, composer, and all participants to mentally and spiritually prepare and build a spirit of unity among all the participants, coordinating their feelings and thoughts. Unity brings the artists together for a singular purpose and makes it possible to achieve success based on *siwam* (truth), *satyam* (honesty), and *sundaram* (beauty).

When *Legong Trance* was created, all traditional preparatory ritual practices were retained. For instance, before the formal rehearsal process began, an auspicious day was selected from the Balinese ritual calendar. The first day of rehearsal includes a ceremony referred to as *ngawit*, meaning "starting

to do the work" or the "beginning." Further, at the beginning of each rehearsal, a ceremony is held to request divine support to guide and help the company in the rehearsal process through to the premiere performance. As with all property used in performances, the headdresses of the *legong* dancers underwent a purification (*prayasita*) and "enlivening" ceremony (*pasupati*). This ceremony functions to bring the headdress to life, literally, to give the headdress a spirit. At the beginning of the performance, a *medudus* ceremony is carried out on stage which functions to cleanse and uplift the dancer from the everyday world to the world of the performance, and to help them assume the identity and the mental state of a performer onstage. The dancer is no longer in the identity of daily life, but instead has entered the context of the performance and is considered to have entered the world of the divine (*dewa-dewi*).

2) Balinese dances are expressive. This characteristic is evident in the detailed facial movements (*encah cerengu*) of the dancer corresponding to the character of the specific dance. Technical mastery of the face and body allows the dance to be full of spirit and be properly communicative. One of the trademark movements found in Balinese dance is the *seledet-a* rapid movement of the eyes and chin to the left or right, followed by a movement back to the middle, with a particular rhythmic focus according to the character of the dance. This "trademark" is unique to the Balinese performing arts and is not practiced in the performing arts elsewhere. In Balinese dance, the eyes are emphasized because it is believed that sight is one of the most acute senses and the eyes have the ability to radiate divine power. The spiritual power contained in the eyes is transformed through stylized movements, creating a beautiful and enchanting dance. Detailed eye movements are retained, and used clearly and explicitly in *tari kreasi bani* in order to strengthen the expression of each character the dancers portray.

Tari Kreasi Barn Legong Trance demonstrates a very clear conceptual basis for the use of the eyes. In this dance, the eyes are a prominent feature. The dance is divided into two main sections. In the first, the dancers perform in unison with their eyes closed; this enables them to be close to divine powers, as if in meditation. This part of the dance creates a calm and peaceful atmosphere. The dancers perform with closed eyes, thereby cutting off the external influences of the senses that we face in daily life. Here, they personally search for the pure and surrender to the divine. The use of closed eyes also gives the illusion of a trance state that would be present in the *Sang Hyang Dedari* performance; here, it is not truly trance, but rather the "impression of trance."



Plate 2.
(photo by Robert von Winning)

Then, in the second section, the eyes are suddenly opened wide, and they are the central feature of the *bapang* section: eyes open and suddenly become the predominant feature of the dance. The meaning of the eyes opening here is that the dancers have already succeeded in opening their own internal divine light and now, through the eyes, they transmit this light to the world, to the audience. The philosophical concept from *Sang Hyang Dedari* is retained in this secular entertainment; the performance

structure is based on the concept of performing arts as a means of overcoming difficulty and returning to a state of peace and balance, giving divine inspiration for prosperity.

3) Balinese dance is an external expression of internal emotion. Balinese dance is open in its expression of emotion. Dancers sincerely and honestly express the characters in the dances, which they have incorporated into their own essence. Balinese dancers pour their feelings and inner power entirely into a dance. When the dance portrays an angry or impulsive atmosphere, the dancers must conjure their own inner power. Nothing is concealed in the dance. Using the open expression of the dancer, his or her power is transformed and portrayed within the character. This is a symbol that represents sincerity, honesty, and hospitality, and reflects the socio-cultural life of the Balinese. This is reflected in the aims of artistically interesting creations that strive to reinforce and strengthen the confidence of the dancers in the performances. A dance is performed in a supportive, open environment, free of burden, so that the performers will have confidence and every performance will succeed. It can also evoke inner beauty or an aesthetic feeling in the audience experiencing the dances performed on stage. The characters on stage express internal qualities through the use of facial expressions and movements, led by the expression of the music. In *Legong Trance*, a quality of beauty in a magical, mystical, and religious atmosphere is expressed. Part of what makes this possible is the key to understanding this point: the dancers' virtue, purity, and confidence within is expressed in the dance.

4) Balinese dance is rhythmic and dynamic in nature. In Balinese dance, rhythm is the most powerful and convincing technical characteristic. Balinese dance performances are strong and tight because of two kinds of rhythm found in Balinese dances. There is steady rhythm moving at a constant rate, which produces changes in a steady stream and consistent energy. There are also rhythm patterns that are not steady; the string of motions are composed as a combination of long and short intervals that form explosive patterns. Dynamics are always energetic and strong in Balinese dance, and always define the dramatic progression of the dance. The use of rhythmic dynamics by the choreographer is an absolute necessity. Each movement is conducted in harmonious coordination with the dynamics of the musical accompaniment. The various accents found in Balinese dance can be hard, soft, sweet, fast, or slow, but are always in coordination with the *gamelan* music.

There are three ways in which the musical accompaniment accentuates and corresponds to the dance. First, there are the dynamics dominated by the dance, that is, there is a swift and hard transitional motion (*angsel*) where the musicians' break is cued by the dancer. Secondly, there are dynamics dominated by the music accompaniment. Here, the music leads and is fully composed, leaving nothing to improvisation, yet giving commands to the dancers, such as in *legong keraton* or *gambuh*. Third, dynamics are created through the musicians and dancers both leading and following one another spontaneously, as is necessary for dramatic purposes. The dynamic element is very important in avoiding a static and monotonous character in the dance. Every movement, accent, transition, and sequence in the dance choreography is stylistically refined to be harmonious and in tune with the musical accompaniment. Therefore, the music functions not as mere accompaniment, but rather as a partner to the dance itself. All dynamics and rhythms found in *Legong Trance* fall into the second category above, regarding the relationship between the music and the dance. This dance choreography follows musical structures and practices from traditional forms in order to bring out the intended dramatic flow or development.

5) Balinese dances are balanced in both time and space. Conceptually, Balinese dance is based on the philosophy of balanced complementary opposites (*ruwa bhineda*); there are two distinct yet inseparable forces. This philosophy is reflected in the condensed time, space, and energy of the dance. In the aspect of time, Balinese dance could be very clearly analyzed through the development of movements that are carried out in a balanced manner over the duration of the piece: fast and slow, staccato and heavy, locomotive and non-locomotive, and so on. Balance in the use of space can be found on the Balinese dance floor in a pattern called *pedum karang*, a balanced division of imaginary space made systematically by a dance or dancer in accordance with traditional values.

Space is an important element in Balinese dance; the appropriate use of the stage must be visible in the dancer's body at every movement. Dancers must be able to work imaginatively with the space. They must know the characteristics in the designs of the movement. The relationship of the body, space, and gravity can be made to cause tension or relaxation, activity or calmness, or reflect a feeling of danger or safety. The space needs to become part of the dancer's body, so that the dancer can successfully feel it in his or her body. Power, in Balinese dance, is used to establish intensity and quality in the motions. The use of power systematically, precisely, and appropriately in Balinese dance is denoted by the term, *ngunda bayu*.

The concept of balance is of no less importance in the creation of new dance, whose purpose is to maintain the power and stamina of the dancer, on the one hand, and maintain the balance and powerful appearance of the dance itself, on the other. *Legong Trance* retains the concept of balance in terms of the dancers' body positions, in the choreography as it alternates between right and left, and in the use of the floor patterns. The balance illustrated in this dance is a symbol for life and expressing an ideal of balance that we want to bring to our daily lives, both physically and spiritually.

6) Balinese dance must have *taksu*. *Taksu* is the abstract or invisible power and vibration of the soul, spirit, and inner beauty of a person. It is something that focuses and highlights the charisma and artistry of a performer and causes amazement and awe in the spectators. It is something supernatural, mystical, magical, religious, intellectual, spiritual, and transcendental so that it is perceived to be a gift of grace from above, i.e., Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa, the primary god of Balinese Hinduism. It is a balanced and harmonious combination of *sekala* (seen) and *niskala* (unseen), aligned so that they produce a form and meaning according to *desa* (place), *kala* (time), and *patra* (situation). The most basic notion about *taksu* is that it is universal. *Taksu* can be defined in a variety of ways and can be embedded within all human activity and creativity in the visible universe. Anything can have *taksu* if it bears the elements described above. Because of its subtle nature, it is indeed very difficult to define *taksu* in words alone, and its meaning depends very much on the analysis of each person according to his specific perspectives about religion, science, and culture. I Wayan Dibia (2012, p. 31) comments on *taksu* from different perspectives. He says that the word is from the Balinese language and has both abstract and concrete meanings. *Taksu* is a holy power that enhances intellect, and provides a place for family worship which gives magical powers (I Wayan Warna, quoted in Dibia, 2012, p. 31).

The explanation above indicates that *taksu* exists in all areas of life. Here, I refer to *taksu* purely in the context of the function, form, and significance it takes in the performing arts. There, *taksu* holds a prestigious status. Each dance holds its own identifiable *taksu* as formed by the ethics, logic, and aesthetics of the specific performance elements of that dance. *Taksu* in the performing arts provides the privilege of portraying a character on stage in one's own unique charismatic way, so that all spectators as connoisseurs of the arts can be moved, fascinated, and amazed. Developing *taksu* through technical mastery requires strong discipline, consistent hard work, concentration, focus, and religious diligence on the part of the dancer. *Taksu* itself is a blend of technical mastery, and trust and confidence in the strength of the divine. The concept of *taksu* expressed in *Legong Trance* is very clear.

From the spiritual perspective, the spirit of *Legong Trance* gives the impression of peace, tranquility, and purity. This quality, which comes from a divine source, originates in the inner spirit and the dancer. This atmosphere is supported by the use of opening rituals performed on stage, and the *taksu* of the dance is apparent when the audience is mystified and captivated by the dance. The *taksu* of *Legong Trance* is also confirmed because this dance has been performed continuously at Ubud Palace since its creation.

7) Balinese dance is collaborative in nature. This point refers to the nature of artists working together in the process of creating a new dance. Further, there is an ongoing dialogue about artistic work and artistic choices, and artists are open to feedback, which may or may not be applied. Traditional dances in Bali are performed by artists and community members within the social environments structured through traditional organizations-permanent social structures based on a certain traditional ideology which emphasizes working together toward a common goal. Because traditional dances are done in synergetic cooperation by the collective community, the dance is considered to be owned by the community, rather than by the specific choreographer or composer. Everyone shares the responsibility of maintaining, preserving, and developing the performing arts in accordance with the specific standards and principles of the region. As a result of this approach, all traditional dances in Bali are considered to be of anonymous artistic origins.

This system is still strongly adhered to in Bali today. In recent years, many new artistic studios, foundations, and organizations concerned with the existence of traditional arts in Bali have developed within various communities. These organizations are set up proportionately and each has a professional vision, mission, legal basis, and ideology to achieve their particular goal. While the traditional dances remain anonymous today, it is now common that choreographer and composers of *tari kreasi baru* are named at every performance. However, the concept of ownership by the community and performing ensemble remains active at the same time.

The process of creating *Legong Trance* has been a collaborative one. The concept developed through collaborative work between myself, as choreographer, the composer, and the leaders and organizers of the music and dance group. We wanted a new dance that stood out as different from the

usual tourist performance, distinct but meaningful. As a choreographer, I felt a sense of freedom working within this context, but I was also limited and challenged to create a dance according to the expectations of the ensemble organizers. For a choreographer in Bali, it is not enough to create a dance that I alone like and which follows my own personal aesthetic tastes; it must also align with the tastes of the Balinese public so that this dance can come to live and develop. Therefore, it is important for the choreographer, musicians, dancers, and the organizers of the ensemble to develop a creative concept together, united in one goal, one mission, and one vision.

8) In performance, Balinese dance is interactive; this refers to artists working together artistically on stage in the performance. This is the interaction between musicians and dancers, and also the relationship between performers and spectators. The intent here is that traditional dances in Bali are interwoven or interconnected in action both internally and externally. The internal interaction occurs in the interlaced and mutual response between the dancers and musicians. The existence of mutual support and correspondence between the dancers and musicians in all elements of the dance is always present on stage. There is a mutual understanding of the character of the dance, and interaction occurs between the dance and the accompaniment in the rhythmic motions, intensity, expression, and dynamics. For example, if there is a sad scene in the dance, the musical accompaniment will respond with an air of sadness. There are also external interactions between the dancers or musicians and outside influences, such as interaction between the audience and the artists, and the artists' relationships within the communal societal context. In traditional Balinese dance performances, audience interaction with the dance is very important. The success of a performance depends largely on the response of the audience. When the audience consciously participates, it means that the performance has been communicative, appreciative, and well-managed. While audience participation is especially important in traditional dance performances, such as *Joged* where members of the audience join the dancer on stage, in other performances, the audience's participation as spectator is just as integral to the performance, as the performers and audience feed energy between one another.

In *Legong Trance*, there are many interactions taking place simultaneously. There is the interaction between the musicians and dancers as well as the other performers on stage who support the impression of the ritual setting. The use of song also works together with the dance to support the atmosphere, in that the vocal melody is taken from the *Sang Hyang* tradition. All performance elements in *Legong Trance* create a united dance performance.

9) Balinese dance forms are supple and flexible according to time, place, and situation; this is an important Balinese philosophy referred to as *desa-kala-patra*. Balinese dancers are adaptable during performance according to the needs of the audience, the performers, or the performance context. They are flexible and may change in relation to outside influences and cultural conditions. These changes may then be adopted by other performers, and as a result the tradition continues to develop. In Bali, artists have the freedom to make an individual rendition of a dance according to their personal preferences. Artists can develop their own dramatic power, and interpret the dance based on their own ideas of inner beauty, which becomes apparent in the structure and visual appearance of the dance character. Each artist makes his or her own style. For example, the *Jauk* dance performed by Ida Bagus Raka from the village of Bongkasa is different from the dance in the Badung Regency style, and different again from the *Jauk* of Made Djimat from the village of Batuan, Gianyar. Since the 1990s, it has become a common practice for young dancers to discuss the authorship of different styles. This is because the first and second place winners of all dance competitions in Bali are published and discussed publicly.

The situation for *tari kreasi baru* is quite similar in terms of flexibility and accommodation to context. Changes are clearly visible when one compares a dance as it was first created and its performance after five or ten years. It cannot be denied that a choreographer's aesthetic feeling will have an effect on any dance that he or she creates. Changes in the execution of a certain piece are not inherent in principle, but arise from performers who must be flexible with the conditions of a specific performance site and situation. This is not questioned by the creator of the dance. On the contrary, artists and choreographers in Bali feel proud when their work is copied and replicated for the benefit and purpose of religious ceremonies. Even when major changes are made to the original choreography, the dance will still be referred to by the same title, since it continues to carry the same intent.

In conclusion, the nine pillars, above, are principles for choreographers to abide by in the creation of new dance works, in order to maintain the cultural roots found in traditional performance practices. The Balinese culture is one based on traditions that remain strong to the present day. Choreographers must consider their cultural environment, and so when working, we must take this into account, and proceed according to the standard practices of the Balinese context—we must work within

the structures contained within the tradition. When creating new dances, we must bear in mind the traditional, religious, and mystical value/worth of the arts. We must consider the public when creating a new work, in order that they will receive it well; in the same way, choreographers must be open to the opinions and suggestions offered by others within the artistic circles. If a new dance is adopted by other ensembles and added to their repertory, we as choreographers are proud that the work will continue to be performed, be enjoyed by the public, take on a life of its own, and, in the best-case scenario, be passed on to future generations. This does not imply that our creative energy or power fades, dulls, or loses its luster. Rather, as choreographers, we must take this as a challenge so that our creative power or energy is enhanced. It also does not mean that we are dominated by tradition; rather, we as choreographers must adapt our aesthetic sensibility to that of the public's and slowly invite them to adapt their aesthetic sensibilities to our own; this skill requires true creative power on the part of the choreographer. From that challenge, a truly strong creative force emerges. In order for choreographers to flourish in their artistic endeavors, it is crucial that we, no matter which culture we are from, take that cultural environment into consideration when creating a new work. With this key, we as artists will meet a bright, open, and inspired path of artistic creativity.

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