

THE DANCE ARTS OF SOUTH-EAST ASIA

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About two thousand years ago or so, a batch of Hindu merchants and missionaries sailed across the seas and colonised two large islands in the south-east of India—the islands of Sumatra and Java. Subsequent centuries saw a continuous flow of colonists from Kalinga, the Coromandel Coast and Gujerat, who soon established powerful kingdoms all over the islands and introduced their faith and arts.

From the fourth to twelfth century A. D, great Hindu empires flourished and a line of wise and beneficent monarchs ruled over prosperous and peaceful people. They built great cities and erected beautiful temples to enshrine their gods. The Polynesian and Malayan races that originally inhabited the islands soon became Hinduised and the culture and civilisation of the people for over a thousand years remained Hindu. The word 'Hindu' being used here in its larger sense, to mean 'Indian'.

The earliest reference to Java and Sumatra is in the *Ramayana*, where they are described as "lands of rich corn and gold mines". Tradition and history aver of the arrival of a large number of colonists from Gujerat, under the leadership of one Aji Saka, a legendary figure familiar over South-East Asia, about the first century A.D. Fa Hien, the intrepid Chinese traveller who visited India about the beginning of the 4th century, records his meeting Brahmins there, and some even sailed with him in his ship, to China.

But over and above these fragmentary records, there are monumental remains of temples, pagodas and stupas, with elaborate carvings and inscriptions, which give a consecutive history of the islands for over ten

centuries. There is now available—thanks to the untiring efforts of the Dutch and Indian savants—a complete history of these islands for those periods. Recent researches in this direction by Indian scholars have thrown additional light on the subject of Greater India, not only of Java and Sumatra but also of Siam, Annam, Borneo, Combodia and Bali, all of which still bear the mark of Hindu culture.

Java lies in a south-easterly direction to India, roughly about 1,500 miles from the coast of Madras, and is one of the most beautiful countries in the world, not excepting Ceylon. The coast and north country scenery resembles that of Lanka, and in certain respects, even excels it. The whole island is one vast estate of plantations and the agricultural wealth is immense.

The people are a mixture of Polynesian, Mongolian and Aryan races. They had once seen a great and glorious civilisation, and are the inheritors of a wonderful culture. Though they largely profess Islam today, one can see in their life and arts, the Hindu origin of their culture. The Balinese, who took shelter in the little island of Bali, east of Java, represent the old stock of Hinduised Javanese. They are a picturesque race; their women-folk are exceedingly beautiful with graceful figures and a warm, sensuous, bronze complexion. Some of the names of the people, like their old cities, rivers and mountains, are still Hindu, though spelt and pronounced differently. They still retain some of the beautiful characteristics of the Polynesian races—simplicity, naturalness, fondness for flowers and love of laughter. Their handicrafts are well-known, especially, the 'batik' work on silk and cotton. The great saga in stone—Borobudur—is as widely known as an epic in architecture, as the Pyramids in Egypt or Ajanta in India.

No less great, and equally well-known, are the dance arts of Java, known as *Wayang-Koelit*, *Wayang-Goleck*, *Wayang-Wong*. The collective name for all these dance-dramas being *Wayang-Poorwan*. The origin of dance in Java, like the origin of dance in India, is lost in the mists of dim antiquity. The original inhabitants of these Indonesian islands were given to a primitive form of religious worship of dead ancestors and heroes; and this *pitri* worship took a ceremonial form, attended with songs and dances, and it is to this the origin of these Javanese dance-dramas is traced.

The priests, who officiated at these ceremonies, were considered to be saintly men who conversed with the spirits of the dead, and like modern spiritualistic media went into a kind of trance and brought messages from the dead ancestors or kings; and often, people consulted these priests—*Sjammaan*, as they were called—for auspicious omens and blessings from

the invisible world. The first attempt on the part of the priests—as the natural impulse in man is to dramatise into visible forms, the mysterious in nature—was to visualise these spirits (in visible gods, hero-kings and dead ancestors) as shadows and, in order to attract the popular fancy of the masses and hold them in fanciful and fantastic forms, to exhibit them as shadows on the screen on ceremonial occasions.

Thus came to be born the Shadow Play—*Wayang*, the oldest of Javanese dance-drama representations. When Hindu culture and civilisation reached the shores of Java and completely Hinduised the native civilisation in the early years of the first century A.D., the two great epics of the colonisers—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*—were rendered into shadow plays by the people of the island, and from that time, the two popular themes for dance and dramatic representations in Java have been these two Hindu epics. They still hold the imagination of the islanders and though nominally Islam is the faith, their culture and arts are still Hindu. Round the *Wayang* the Javanese have concentrated the most considerable part of their aesthetics and given it expression in painting, sculpture, literature and music. They have put their whole soul into their *Wayang*.

There are several kinds of *Wayang*—at least four major ones. The earliest was known as *Wayang-Bebar* in which one saw a long roll of paper with painted pictures of legends of gods and hero-kings, unfolded before the public by the story-teller, known as *balang*, who, in a sing-song tone, narrated the story with no music accompaniment. Since paper is easily perishable and painting scenes and figures repeatedly for each incident and character is a wearisome task, a new technique was invented in which the figures were cut out of leather and painted and gilded.

These figures were long-armed, thin-bodied, with funny shaped eyes and long-drawn noses, representing characters of the play, and are supposed to have been designed by the ancient seers of Java, and are made to exact measurements, sizes, shapes and colours even today. There are, for instance, several different figures of Arjuna or Krishna, each a little distinct from the other, and denoting some different mood or age, and it is extremely difficult for a layman to find out the difference at first sight. There is a striking figure of Arjuna in a wavering mood, which is very skilfully cut and painted, and which, I was told, was a contribution to the *Wayang* figures by a Sultan, who reigned in Java about the sixteenth century. This is known as *Mangoe-Arjun* or the 'not-knowing-what-to-do-Arjuna'. Very clever indeed as a 'type' of dramatic character; it may well have represented the character of Hamlet.

Some of the figures are grotesque and terrible-looking, and they represent the *asuras* and evil spirits. The manipulators of these figures sit behind the screen and cleverly pull the strings which are filed to bone-sticks attached to the arms and limbs of the figures, and thus produce all the required movements, poses, postures, and gestures, which are extremely suggestive and significant. The whole drama is enacted in this fashion with a series of figures accompanied by music and song, by the *dalang*. A whole night is often not enough to finish the story.

The profession of *dalang* is a complex science in itself. He must learn many technical manipulations which are strictly traditional and which it would be a crime to alter. He must have a different voice for each different figure whose rôle he recites and the individual figures must have characteristic gestures even during rapid movements. He must be able to use all the various dialects which are used among the different social classes, priests, princes, chiefs, servants, and lower classes. He must be a singer in order to render adequately the songs that occur in the story.

The next big step in the evolution of *Wayang* was the introduction of human characters instead of shadow figures. It is recorded that a Sultan of Solo was the first to present human dancers in *Wayang* shows by combining both dance and drama. Dance was practised by the Javanese from the very ancient times and was considered by them not only as an accomplishment of a cultured person but was held in great veneration. The priests were often gifted dancers, and a caste of dancers existed in the island from time immemorial, who enjoyed certain privileges. This art reached its peak when the Royal house took to it, and till recently, princes, sultans and nobles were some of the best exponents of this art. The Sultans of Djogja and Soerakrata had, for centuries, maintained court-dancers, among whom were princes of the royal blood. Though Islam forbids women showing themselves in public places, there have been several attempts, especially in Djogkarta, to train and present women dancers.

In the early days of *Wayang-Wong* shows, the dancers wore masks, like the dancers of Seraikela in Orissa, and moved slowly and angularly as the shadow figures in *Wayang-Koelit*. The mask dancers were popular among the masses, as they were allowed a certain amount of licence to be humorous, to cut jokes and even indulge in some kind of ribaldry, as in our Holi festival; even the gods and the heroes of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* did not escape their caricatures. It was all, of course, in healthy fun. It was only when this art became

secular and courtly, gorgeous costumes, after the manner of leather-cut shadow figures were introduced ; and, in the courts of Djoga and Solo, one can still see the most beautiful costumes, the resplendent jewels worn by the younger nobility who were as good as the most gifted professional dancers. A *Wayang-Wong* recital in the large open hall of the palace of the Sultan of Solo is an experience of a life-time, where even a six-hour show does not tire one and where one is transported to a fairy land of soft colours, rippling music and enchanting surroundings.

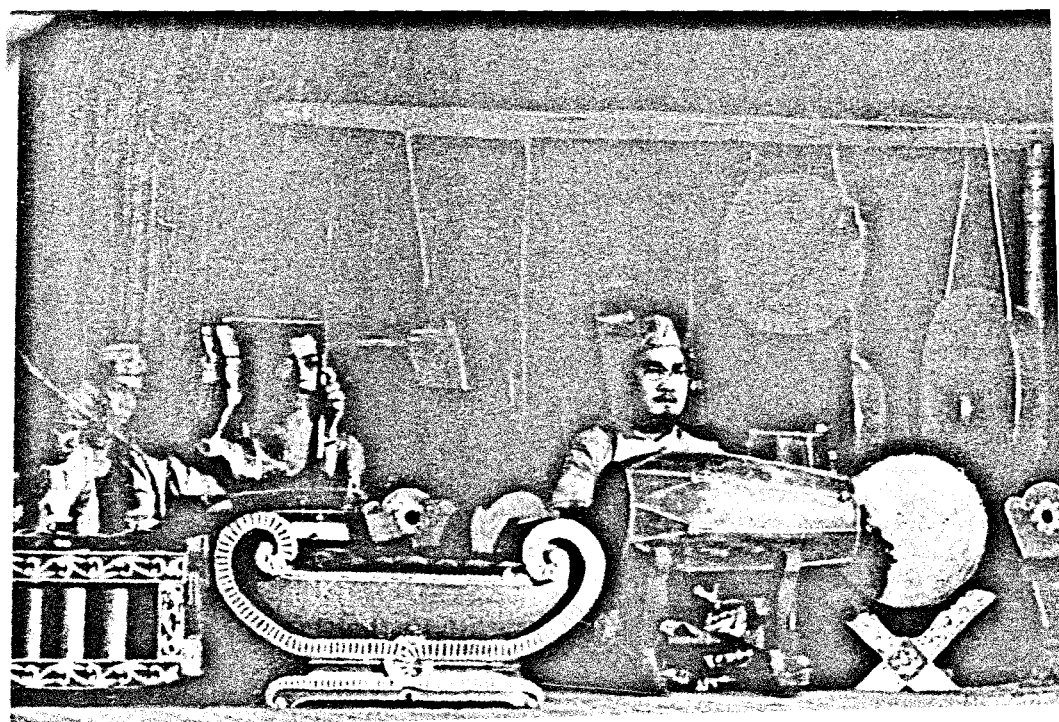
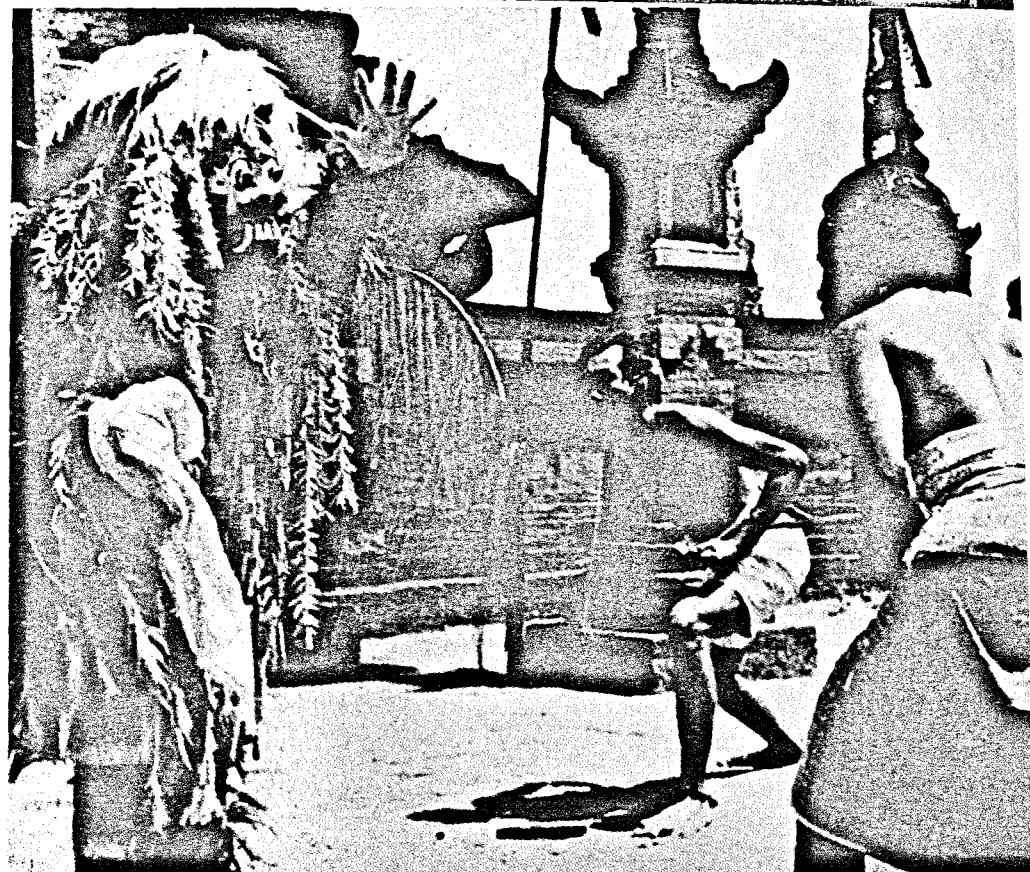
Javanese dancing, like Kathakali, is more acting than dancing, but there is a pure form of dancing, a relic of ancient day ritual dance performed in temples by virgins known as *serimpi*. This type of dance can be seen chiefly in the palaces of the Sultans of Solo and Djoga. These dances are usually performed by four small girls who are either the daughters or the descendants of the Sultan. As soon as these girls reach womanhood, they cease to be *serimpi* dancers. Besides these four *serimpis*, there are grown-up girls between the ages of 18 to 25, who also participate in groups of nine, and they are called *bedoyos*. Though they too belong to the noble families, there is no objection to taking girls of middle classes, if they are beautiful and gifted.

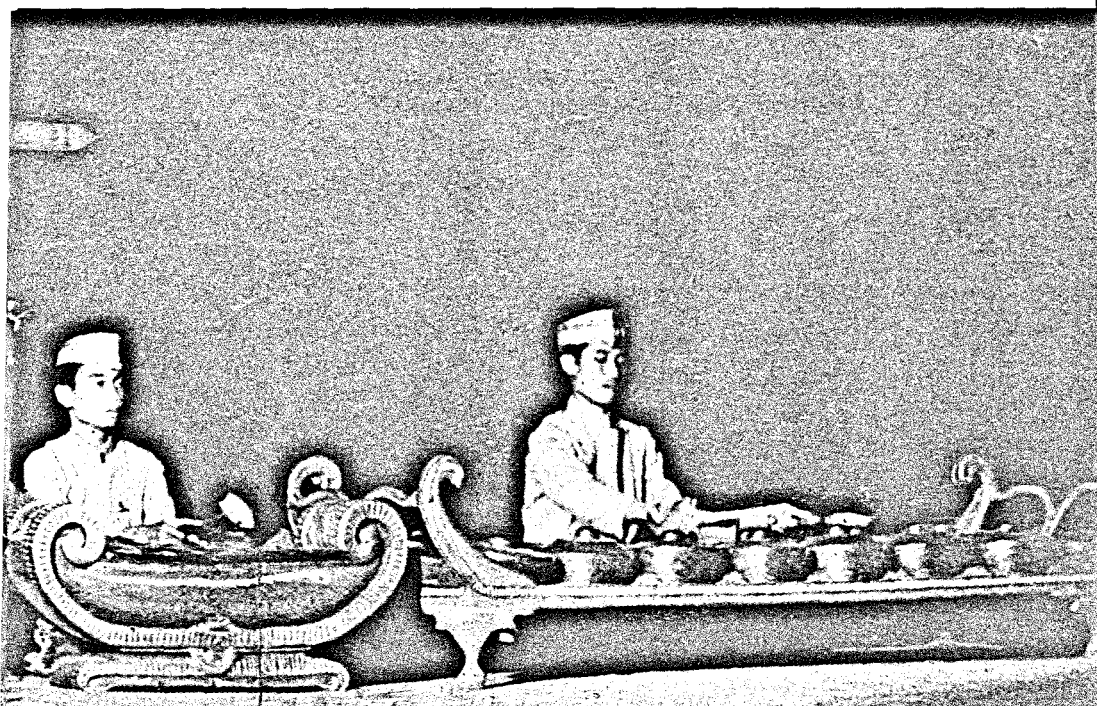
There is an interesting legend about the origin of this dance. It is said that Brahma, in a lighter mood transformed four precious stones into four celestial maidens, who, instantly began to dance round their Creator. They were so beautiful that Brahma could not take his eyes off any of them, but as it did not suit the dignity of a god to turn his head in order to look at created things, he created for himself four faces in order to be able to simultaneously see all of them at once.

The *Gamelan*, Orchestra, begins its soft languishing tunes ; slowly the four *serimpis* and the groups of *bedoyos* step in one by one, in single file. They put one foot in front of the other, and glide along with bent head, half-closed eyes and sunken shoulders as befitting girls of noble birth.

Their faces and arms are painted and their natural eye-brows shaved to be replaced by artificial ones. As a skirt, they wear a long *sarong batik* (hand-painted cotton cloth), a corner of which is allowed to hang between their feet and which is rhythmically kicked to the right and left by the dancer. Their body is laced into a tight velvet bodice, and on their head they wear a crown gilded and with ornaments. The *sarong* is always brown. The long gliding file of dancers kneels down, facing the Sultan, their hands lifted to their forehead as a gesture of prayer and









worship. Slowly, they rise again, and with a peculiar rhythm they perform the same movement at the same time—limp, snake-like movement—following one another in slow succession. They bend their bodies to the right and to the left, always with knee bent low; with their long pointed fingers, they take up the ends of the sash and throw them back—over their shoulders and, at the same time, their fingers tremble and shake. The joints of arms and fingers bend backwards and forwards like the opening of a flower. These movements are considered even by Javanese to be extremely difficult to learn and require a great deal of training from childhood. According to Javanese poetry, the *serimpis* are meant to represent “flowers swaying to the wind on the bending stalk” or “petals opening to the rays of the Sun”, or “pistils that softly tremble to the breath of air” or “faded petals that fall”. The Javanese hate liveliness and rapid movements as being something vulgar, incompatible with noble dignity.

The dancers dress according to the prescribed rules of costumes and colours, and the identity of the characters, is inferred by the kind of head-dress, crown, and costumes they wear. The costuming is exceedingly beautiful and artistic, generally consisting of a richly designed crown, ornaments round the arm, bare-bodied or with a small, coloured, *batik* waist-coat and a delicately coloured *batik* cloth tied shorts-like round the waist and thighs. Two beautifully painted tailends, either at the back or in the front, which the dancers throw significantly now and then, complete the dress.

There is no singing or acting on the stage; only movements of extraordinary vigour and skill, and animated poses full of meaning. The musical accompaniments are behind the curtain, and the *dalang* narrates the story in the usual manner. There is not much *nritya* or *abhinaya*, as we have in India, and, on the whole, there is more restraint and refinement in the execution of the dance pieces. The graceful gliding of the legs and the gentle movements of the neck to the soft tunes of the *gamelan* contrast strikingly with the more vigorous movements that we see in Kathakali. The dresses of the dancers harmonise with the simple settings, and the grouping of the dancers is natural and effective. The soft melodies of the *gamelan* behind, enhance the beauty of the production, and the whole atmosphere is very soothing to the nerves. A dance

Photographs: P 20-21: 1. “Rangda”, the witch, is attacked by followers of the “Barong”. 2. The “Barong”, benign animal-deity, moves in to protect his followers. 3. “Gamelan”, the orchestra.

P 22: “Legong” from Bali, a young maid

is better appreciated under such conditions than when there are glaring lights, of varying colours shrieking at you as on some of the professional stages here.

The stage setting for these dances are exceedingly refined and interesting. No crudely painted curtains or loud decor adorns the stage. The background is beautiful in its simplicity, dignified and artistic. Generally, a long platform is erected in the midst of a shady grove and finely carved wooden frames with simple motifs make the setting. At times, levels are introduced, which add to good grouping effects. The background is either a richly carved design of *kirtimukha*—a common architectural motif in Java as in India—or a plain *batik* cloth is hung tastefully, at times with a canopy supported by elegant pillars. The sides have openings with *batik* curtains and the exteriors of the projecting wings on either sides are painted with trees, flowers, birds or mountain landscapes. The colour-scheme is warm, chaste and pure; nothing loud or vulgar in the colours used. This sensible simplification of stage-setting was the result of Dutch scholars and the Javanese dancers cooperating together to raise the level of the theatre. For nearly fifty years or more, it has been a tradition to have these dance performances at the Java section of the Theosophical Society during its annual conventions. The first troupe of dancers to visit India from Java was in 1925, when the late Dr. Annie Beasant invited them to attend the Jubilee Convention of the Theosophical Society at Adyar. Over twenty first-rate dancers came and gave several shows in Madras and Calcutta, and India had the good luck to witness for the first time, a great art from the Greater India.

Sumatra

Though *Wayang-wong* is the better known of the Javanese dance-dramas, there are other dances which are not so well-known as, for instance, the Soundanese dances in Sumatra. The Soundnese, like the Javanese, are born dancers and actors; and, while the dances of the latter have been much influenced by Indian ideals and traditions, the Soundanese dances remained pure. Living in mountain regions and for centuries cut off from the plains and coastal parts, they have retained certain primitive forms, which are both vital and vigorous. One of the most popular stories for their dances is the story of the Seven Sisters, where the jealousy of the eldest over the beauty of the youngest sister reminds one of the story of Cinderella; only it is more weird and blood-curdling in its presentation.

Bali, a tiny island to the east of Java, is, in a sense, more widely known as the homeland of dances than even Java, and is more often visited by tourists from all over the world. It is really the artists' paradise in the best sense of the word. Its attractions are many, and the beauty of the island, especially of its womenfolk, has been recorded in glowing terms by every distinguished writer who happened to visit it. Bali is a cultural projection of Hindu India, especially of South India, and we can see in the island, even today, ancient Hindu customs, rituals, religious worship and arts introduced there by the colonists centuries ago. Bali is a fragment of Hindu India even as Lanka is a fragment of Buddhist India.

Balinese

Among the well known dances of Bali, *legong* held the place of pride in the past—an art that has been photographed and filmed more than any dance in the world. It is a dance form, though technically simple and less complex, that is exceedingly attractive with its graceful glidings, decorative movements and abstract character. There is no story-telling in this dance, and hence no elaborate *abhinayas*, as in Kathakali or Bharata Natyam, though the science of *mudra* for rituals is very highly developed there. *Legong* is a type of dance that is aesthetically satisfying; and, as the girls glide-smoothly before you with sensuous expression, knees apart and toes curled up, and, as the tempo of the dance increases with the fast playing of the *gammelan*, one feels as if one is transported to a world of dream-fantasy where colour, sound and rhythm merge magically into one another. *Janger* is another type of dance with fast-moving steps and seductive poses, which was as popular as the *Legong*. *Rangda Barong*, trance-dancing, fire-dancing, are all associated with the religious life of the people, and like the Devil Dancing of Ceylon, they have certain primitive elements in both their rhythm and structure.

South-East Asia includes not only Indonesia, but also Thailand, Cambodia, Viet Nam, Malaya and Ceylon. All these parts of Asia may rightly be called the Greater India, as the religion and culture of these people have one thing in common in spite of their own conventions, peculiar art idioms and methods of presentation, in that their source and inspiration has been India. Such dances as the *Kandyan* in Ceylon, *Khon* and *Lakon* in Thailand, and *Sampieh* in Cambodia, strongly bear the impress of Hindu art and culture, and often deal with Hindu *Puranas*. A comparative study of the dances of the South-East Asia will

show the remarkable and most astounding influences both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have had on the lives and arts of these people and and their powerful hold even today.

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