The Gods Come For Play: Visualizing the Divine in Balinese Theatre

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Abstract

Playwrights, practitioners, and art historians have been shocked and inspired by Balinese theatre time and time again because it reveals the extent of devotion the Balinese have for their religion. Although many researchers have investigated the functionality through the performance aspect of the play, there is a lack of published research devoted how the functionality of the ritual and play are influenced by the physical aesthetic properties of the Barong and Rangda mask. The theatrical aspects are to be considered through investigating these masks in relation to the temple space of the Taman Aran. By investigating the aesthetic properties of the Barong and Rangda in relation to the Taman Aran temple through investigating the correlation between the functionality of the play and the effects of the aesthetic features, we have found that the masks act as a catalyst to physicalize and magnify the unseen battles between Rangda and Barong into human flesh within structure and perimeter in order to ultimately soothe the audience’s conscience by cupping the performance and reinstating the spirits to their original place. Thus, our study reveals that the Balinese culture does not have a religion wholly devoted not to defeat “evil”, but rather devoted to awakening the mind to these supernatural forces in their daily lives.

Introduction

Balinese theatre is an extreme example of how a religion believes in visualizing the divine. In their society, the people believe that by entering this trance state and putting on masks one becomes the god to the point where even their words are authoritative, as stated by Jane Belo. Balinese theatre is typically performed in the nista man dala or outer zone of the temple, attracting the entire village to attend this ceremony and religious event which has the surface of Hindu ideology yet has the religious practices and values of indigo q enous Bali which run deep within the performance. Within these performances, the Barong mask is representative of good and comes in many different forms; it most commonly presented as a barong kek, a mythical lion or dragon-like animal. The Rangda mask is made to represent evil and is most often depicted as a terrifying, unidentifiable creature.

Methodology

The method we will use to analyze the artistic features of the Barong and Rangda within Taman Ayun is largely based upon finding the original functional intent through scholarly research and then observing the art pieces to see how the artistic features work in accordance with the performance’s function. First, we will compile more research and information about the functionality and ritualistic role of the performance, and also gain some basic cultural and religious understanding. Then, we will create a visual analysis of the Barang and Rangda within Taman Ayun is largely based upon finding the original functional intent through scholarly research and then observing the art pieces to see how the artistic features work in accordance with the performance’s function. Lastly, we will conclude by reaching further cultural and religious conclusions about the Balinese culture gained from the fuller understanding of the Barang and Rangda performance, Cakra.

Conclusion and Discussions

The Barong and Rangda performance deals with the balancing of order of the evil spirits. It is not the full exorcism of the Rangda nor does it show the victory of the Barong. The mask portrays the hideousness, ruthlessness, and mightiness of the Rangda. First, Rangda’s bulging wide open eyes suggests many different things. First, immediately, the image does convey a sense of chaos and craziness, yet it is the same time, as do the Hindu gods, the width of the eyes also represent in sight and knowledge of the universe, whether it be good or for bad. The lined strpes seem to be predominant throughout the mask, and it produces a hypnotic effect for the audience. The Barong mask does contain many similar features, provoking the deity in both masks. The Barong, however, is much more ornate and symmetrical, containing much more order. Rangda’s features, although still present, are not as emphasized. The performance space seems to serve as a limitation to where the action takes place, which would be strange it is hard to image these men in trances really have consciousness to distinguish borders, but willing to stab them selves. This limitation or barrier within structure is perhaps important to the secnary function of the performance, which is to calm the audience. Amidst the uncontrollable and lethal environment in bringing out the gods, the humans are still able to create order. The apex demonstration of this idea comes at the end, in which the performance is ultimately tempered, and the gods are put back into their place. Why are these performances so integral to the Balinese culture? What is the next step we need to take to learn more? The magnification of the gods manifests in human body. Chaos, a lack of resolution, but a degree of containment and awareness. Ultimately, the visualization of the gods.

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