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

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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 capping 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 ceremonial and religious event which has the surface of Hindu ideology yet has the religious practices and values of inang enus 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, unidentified 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 Barong and the Rangda mask, not only according to pictures, but also to videos of the performance, as the functionality and aesthetic of a mask fully comes alive only during performances. The importance of the temple space, specifically the Taman, Ayun, will then be considered, and how the aesthetic features and structure of the temple is used for further increase in 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 Barong and Rangda performance, Capak.

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 Rangda. First, Rangda’s bulging wide open eyes suggests many different things; chaos, a lack of resolution, but a degree of containment in which the performance is ultimately tempered, and the gods are put back into their controllable and lethal environment in bringing out the gods, the humans are still able to create order. The Barong mask does contain many similar features, portraying the deity in both masks. The Barong, however, is much more ornate and symmetrical, containing 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 imagine 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 secondary 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 or of the gods manifest in human body. Chaos, a lack of resolution, but a degree of containment and awareness. Ultimately, the visualization of the gods.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank W. M. Keck Foundation Project Director and Associate Dean Lee Kate, Seaver College Dean Rick Marris, Seaver Associate Dean Constance Fulmer, Peer Mentors Joseeta Barsano and Lori Patrick, and Dr. Chiem for their support.

Figures

2. Balinese Theatre, Barong Mask, Created in early to mid-20th century. Wood, leather, twine, wire, hair, mirrors, and paint. Fowler Museum at UCLA
3. Taman Ayun Temple, 1634, View of Inner Shrine Stone, red brick, wood Bali, Indonesia
4. Taman Ayun Temple, 1634, View of Dewi Sri Meru Stone, red brick Bali, Indonesia

Exhibition List

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