

Topic- Kecak: Whether an Ablaze Portrayal of the Balinese Culture or Not

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Abstract

The Kecak is one of the most famous dance forms presented to the rest of the world by the Balinese people. The performance can be paralleled with the jatra-pala from Bengal with at least 45-50 men arranging themselves in concentric circles and chanting the sound “cak-cak-cakcak” (read “chak-chak-chakchak”) in various rhythm, tone and intensity from time to time. It is mandatory to mention the fact that there is no use of orchestra, dialogue or instrument and the only sound is the monkey chant of the 50 men as they call it so. The men interweave almost seven rhythms creating great background music catering to the dance performance throughout. The curtailed story of the Ramayana has given the tourists from everywhere a taste of the Balinese culture that many believes to be ‘authentic and traditional’. However, as we all know how famous the Island of Gods, Bali, is famous for its tourist attractions, not only does kecak performances portray the tradition of the Balinese people in a worldwide platform but also it has become a source of income for the local people. Kecak has been an attraction for the tourists since the 1930s, more so the western tourists who have very minimum idea regarding the Ramayana. I have witnessed the Kecak performance the Uluwatu temple and many enjoy the same over there, however, many villages (desa and banjar) have created their own little groups for kecak performances which are not considered to be in line with the Balinese Kreasi baru or the new music. The objective of this paper is to acknowledge people around me regarding this unique and brilliant performance that is still so underrated and to show how dance, music and storytelling are interconnected in the same form of art.

Keywords: Kecak dance, Performance, Music, Bali, Ramayana, tradition

Introduction

Around February 2024, my father asked me to plan an international trip in the month of May. This is a yearly thing for us. Right after his command, I started researching the destinations, itinerary and plans and finally ended up selecting Bali, Indonesia. We sat off our journey and along with many other tourist attractions, we spotted Kecak dance in Uluwatu temple. Kecak is also known as fire dance and is sort of a drama with five major acts depicting the story of the Ramayana. As I sat in the amphitheatre, I saw almost 50 bare chested men entering the scene making a “chak-chak” sound with their mouths in various rhythms. I did not yet understand what was going on and considered it to be another usual music-dance theatrical performance and to be honest after a point of time, since many were ignorant of the fact of what was going on, the “chak-chak” sound started irritating many. Many decided to leave, but gradually, as it started unfolding and I did my little research, I started finding it interesting. Kecak or Kechak fire dance in Uluwatu is known as Tari kecak in Indonesia, a form of Balinese Hindu dance, showcasing the story of Ramayana as mentioned before. Kecak shows the constant ongoing struggle between the binaries good

and evil, strong and weak, clean and unclean via the Ramayana story. There is no decisive end in this fight but the audience is just content with the temporary joy of good over the evil. This is nothing but the faith of the people that evil will lose in front of the good. People, nature, good, bad, extravaganza or simplicity, everything is interconnected in Bali just like heaven and earth.

Kecak originated from an ancient Balinese ritual called “Sanghyang Dance” in which the dancers fall into the state of trance to perform. At the very starting and right before the ending, the performers are blessed by a priest as it is believed that with these blessings the performers do not feel any pain or sense of burning from the fire. Kecak had originated in the 1930s and gained popularity immediately throughout. Hinduism had its existence in Bali as you’ll see multiple sculptures of the characters from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, assuring the fact that these texts had its importance there. Wahan Limbak created the dance form and also popularised it in abroad. Limbak’s dance form however lacked a story, it was Walter Spies, a German painter and musician who proposed to connect the story of Ramayana along with the dance form which added to the liking of the dance among the audience even more.

As I had mentioned before, kecak dance in Uluwatu is performed by a group of 70 men approximately, wearing the traditional Balinese attire and chanting “chak-ke-chak-ke-chak” in different rhythms and tones acting like the background music to the story portrayed by the protagonists. The protagonists here are Ram, Lakshman, Sita, Garuda, Ravana, Trijata (Ravana’s niece) and lastly Hanuman, the monkey god. The choir, however, sits in a circle, makes various hand movements and keeps on chanting, they seem very obviously in trance. The rhythm gradually increases and decreases as per the need of the intensity in the play. It’s a one hour show dance drama consisting 5 major acts of Ramayana. It starts with the Ram, Sita and the golden deer saga, followed by Sita Haran, meaning Sita’s abduction by Ravana, the king of Lanka. The third act shows the entry of the monkey-god, Hanuman, which is followed by Hanuman travelling to Lanka to save Mother Sita from the hands of the evil Ravana and the last act, Ravana’s defeat as Hanuman sets the kingdom of Lanka on fire with a fierce fire dance. Kecak dance is performed by men mostly and the very first kecak women dance group was made as late as the year 2006.

Early history and development of kecak into a tourism attraction

It is a fact that everyone takes kecak to be an independent genre as it’s a trance dance that came out from Sanghyang dedari, however, the dispute lies in the fact as to who, how and when exactly developed it as a whole new genre. Two villages, named Bona and Bedulu, claim to have developed the form of art first. Another question that surfaces quite often as and when we talk about kecak performances is that if it is a Balinese traditional dance at all which was birthed by the Balinese local, or was it formed by the Western-trained artists living in Bali for their sheer economical growth and employment, just adhering to the name of ‘culture and tradition’. As mentioned before, a German Musician cum painter had brought this art form into being, the agenda, hence, behind all these question lies is whether a genre, solely created by a person from American or German ethnicity can be considered a traditional form of art of Bali or not. Archival remnants reveal the fact that Wayan Limbak, a Balinese dancer from the village of Bedulu, started experimenting with Sanghyang dedari and is also believed to be the one interconnecting the dance with the art of storytelling, here Ramayana. As we talk about kecak’s genesis, apart from Walter Spies, Katherane Mershon’s name comes up (an American dancer and choreographer and Spies’s acquaintance.) Spies seemed to be very fascinated by Sanghyang dedari from his very first visit in Bali in the year 1924 as it was revealed to Jaap Kunst by him between 1924-1925. Both of them had an immense musicological exchange revolving around the same form of art for several months during that point of time. It has also

come to the knowledge of general people that Kunst was asked to make phonograph recordings of Sanghyang dedari by Spies. Thankfully so, the aforementioned recordings have been preserved and can be found till date in Berlin Phonogram Archive. Kunst in his second publication of Balinese music, dedicated a whole chapter to Sanghyang tunes and included a vivid description of the rituals authored by Spies. The Sanghyang dedari was documented thoroughly in several early descriptions and film materials. There were also a few analytical depictions from the later years of the same and it is noticed that there is a sleek but distinct difference between the art form of 1920s and 1930s. It is a fact that kecak is a trance performance and it has been discussed a several times in this paper. For a matter, Sanghyang dedari is considered to have some exorcist elements and is a purification rite as well. It was not that common back then and would be carried out in the villages when it would be struck by plague or any sort of misfortune. It was believed by the locals that this dance form could wash away the evil spirit and bring them fortunes back. In Sanghyang dedari, to pre-adolescent girls fall into trance and are possessed by two heavenly nymphs and the ritual takes place in the inner and outer courtyard of the pura dalem, i.e. the death temple housed in every Balinese village. The music that accompanies the ritual can be divided into two or three parts. The first part of the dance, the dancers are made to go in the state of trance making them inhale the smoke of burnt incense and the choir starts singing the smoking melody. All the melodies are phonographed and preserved and it can be noticed not much had changed in the melodies between 1911-1930s. The second part of the ritual starts when both the dancers are in the state of trance and are ready to dance. Many descriptions mention that the dance steps resemble with the legong dancers but with a bit of improvisation in it. As the dancers are not in their right state of mind, the performance is not a choreographed one, this state of mind is termed as 'kerawuhan' or 'kerauhan' by Spies. In the recordings of Kunst, the structure of the male cak chorus is that after the introductory part, also known as pengalang a basic melody, lagu polok comes up. Pengalang consists of lyrics, most probably from the Ramayana and is sung by only one singer, whereas, lagu polok consists of two or three notes and is sung by several singers. The lagu polok keeps on repeating and the rest of the group vocalizes the syllable cak in a complex structure, in various tone, melodies, rhythms and intensity. This is termed as pola cak. The pola cak continues throughout as the dancers are in trance with minimal breaks. A gamelan is introduced to take forward the pola cak whenever the male choir is tired of singing. However, descriptions after 1930s do not mention a gamelan's existence in Sanghyang dedari and it is hence evident that the gamelan was left out and only the more important male and female choir were kept in the performance. The whole performance could last up to two-three hours. However, in Uluwatu, the full performance was wrapped up within one hour. After the performance, the dancers are taken out of trance by a pemangku, a local priest, accompanied by a Sanghyang melody sung by the choir. Spies's own publications and various journals from the corresponding times make it clear that he played a very important role in the shaping of kecak performance and more broadly, Sanghyang dedari. From the records that we have now, it seems Spies did not want to make his involvement direct in the development of the art form but however, felt the necessity to clarify that some way or the other he was connected, and hence, he ascribes himself the role of director who led Limbak towards creating kecak. He highlighted Limbak's role and took a backstage himself as he solely wanted to portray kecak as a Balinese traditional dance, he understood that his nationality would not end up showcasing kecak as a Balinese tradition and rather arouse questions in adversity.

Again, in an interview with a newspaper in the year 2002, Limbak said that kecak was the result of a collaboration between Spies and village elders where Spies determined the theme of the dance and timing.

Now, the fact arises, if that would have been the case then Limbak would be having no role to play at all since he was pretty young at that point of time and definitely not one of the elders in the village. Its contradictory to what Spies had mentioned throughout his lifetime, but it could also be the case that Limbak tried to be humble and downplayed his own contribution. The ambiguity still remains as many other sources confirm that Limbak had a major role to play in the creation process of kecak and neither Spies nor Limbak alone can be credited as “the creator” of kecak. Both happened to inspire each other to create this magical art form. It would be wrong to say that kecak replaced Sanghyang dedari or that with the development of kecak, a sacred genre of art has come to extinction. Rather, Sanghyang dedari can be considered as the mother dance form of kecak. Kecak is a completely new genre which is based on musical and some choreographic elements from Sanghyang dedari. Kecak and Sanghyang dedari have not shadowed each other, rather, they co-exist till date. It is said that Sanghyang dedari evolved into kecak because of the filming of *Insel der Dämonen*, a motion picture which was filmed by Viktor von Plessen, a German director in the year 1931-1932. However, we do not get to see kecak in the film and rather, the climax has a great exorcism rite including Sanghyang dedari. Spies was involved in the filmmaking as an artistic consultant and, choreographer and ethnographic adviser and it is believed that he was the one to choose the music and dance form for the film. He chose figures of barong and rangda for the final climax scene, he also introduced a voice of a pemangku in trance. Most of the rituals were borrowed from Sanghyang dedari and to be honest, it is absolutely not questionable considering the obsession Spies had with the genre. In the Sanghyang dedari, we can see male and female choirs, dancers dancing in the temple courtyard. Now, the condensed form which is rather used for filming has a clear choreography and the dancers are of course not dancing while in trance. This condensed form, was indeed, the first time that Sanghyang dedari was taken out of the trance context and made to be more of an art form to be presented to the rest of the world. When we compare kecak from 1920s to the 1930s, it is very much evident that there are many similarities in both the time frames and yet, a distinct dissimilarity. One major thing that has been transferred from Sanghyang dedari to kecak is the cak chorus, pengecak movements and pola-pola cak. No trance female choir, dancers can be found in kecak. Today, structures like pola cak, lagu polok and pengalang have been bit enhanced with time as they seem when compared to Kunst's 1925 sanghyang recordings. A few more things like the beat keeper, called juru klempung and the pengecak-pengecak have been added and formalized. The most valuable and authentic source considered to determine and identify which elements have been adapted by kecak from the male choir is a film named ‘Bali’, made by Vicky Baum in the year 1935. The film contains a kecak performance which is usually carried out for tourist during the dusk, however, it was performed in broad daylight in the film with almost 150 men sitting in concentric circles for the pengecak-pengecak.

Very shortly after kecak was established Bedulu, the people of Bona along with the guidance of organizer and businessman Nengah Murdaya, founded their own kecak group and promoted it heavily along with several tourist agents. The new group formed added some more artistic features to the genre, like the costume of the lead characters, which again, ended up giving much more positive response to the genre by the tourist. Therefore, while Spies and Limbak were trying to evolve kecak as a performance, Nengah Murdaya along with the other villagers of Bona were trying to make kecak known to the tourist and turning it more to the western taste. The popularity of kecak back then in the tourist industry should be completely attributed to the villagers of Bona and Nengah Murdaya. It has come to notice that Spies still uses the term ‘Sanghyang Dedari’ while talking about the cak elements of the film *Insel der Dämonen* in the letters written to his brother in the year 1932, however, it can be concluded that during that period (1932-1934),

kecak did not just develop into an individual genre but had also gained a new identity and name. right after its kecak's separation from the ritual and trance and the addition of the storyline, mostly Ramayana, kecak seems to have been performed only for the western audience or broadly, the tourists that visited Bali. It could be possible that kecak was performed just for a Balinese audience, but there is no evidence supporting the same as of yet. All the evidence, descriptions, photographs and films of the period show either tourists as audience or none at all. If there were Balinese audience at all, they were probably in a distance and never came to be in the highlight. As kecak was gaining popularity, several kecak groups started coming into the scenario causing humongous competition almost immediately. Great advertising, good tie-ups with the tourist companies and of course the competitions between several groups and villages made kecak a must-see thing if one visits Bali in the late 1930s. Many travelogues from the period have the mention of the 'monkey-dance' as Spies himself called kecak. kecak was performed for tourists and visitors to the island did not change in the course of the following thirty years, however politically and socially turbulent life on Bali came to be. In the late 1960s, however, a great innovation took place that led to the currently known kecak Ramayana.

Ramayana Standardization in kecak

Indonesia's political stature was really deteriorating in the 1960s as the rivals started gaining power and getting violent. Sukarno, the first president of Indonesia started advertising Bali as a tourist destination, however, it did not prosper then. The years that followed were not good too, many were killed, imprisoned and the members of the communist party were to be suspected. An estimation reveals that around 40,000 to 100,000 people were killed in Bali itself, let alone the whole country of Indonesia. Of course, a nation facing such a turmoil, which even risks lives cannot be an ideal tourist destination. However, the situation started getting better in the 1960s and then tourism started prospering again, and now, in a full-fledged form, which resulted in the increasing demand for the traditional cultural performances. Kecak was rediscovered again hence, during the late 60s. another advantage was the inauguration of the international airport in the year 1969. Travelling had become much more easier resulting in the surge of tourists. Another reason that led to the popularity of Kecak was the collaboration of kecak and Sendratari Rayamana.

They year 1970 can be marked as the year that standardized the kecak Ramayana and not only popularized it. There was an upswing in the number of groups that incorporated the storyline of Ramayana in Kecak and had their own music, choreography and a different episode of Ramayana to be performed. The two major reasons for the standardization of kecak was first, the kecak groups formed during the 1960s-1970s were taught by the teachers from Bona and hence, they had learned the same elements and had a similar training. The second and the most important reason was that travel agents paid much heed to these cultural activities and there was a huge demand for the cultural and traditional show in the tourist industry.

Conclusion

Kecak performance can be described as a dramatic dance performance, initially staged for the tourist audience that somehow tuned up to be a massive hit and one of the most important factors that started boosting the economy of Bali by increasing the number of tourists. It is very much understandable that Limbak, Spies and Mershon did not plan the trajectory of Kecak and rather, they were much more focused in the artistic and aesthetic qualities of the performance. Thus, it was never planned to gain such popularity and become a major source of income for the Balinese people. The Kecak Ramayana started since the year 1970 and is performed the same way till date. Gradually, different forms of kecak started developing beside

Kecak Ramayana as well, namely Kecak Kreasi, Kecak Kontemporer. These contemporary Kecak is more popular amongst the Balinese population whereas the Kecak Ramayana is popular among the tourists that visit Bali. As I started reading journals, attended a kecak performance myself and started researching for the paper, one significant thing that came to my notice was that Kecak is much loved by the tourists than the locals of Bali. But as I proceeded further in my research, my notion changed to the fact that Balinese people like Kecak, but not the Ramayana Kecak. Now the reason for this, as per my believe is that, Kecak Ramayana is a mere performance, performed by the locals for the tourists, to increase the economy or the country, for their own earning. It is work for them and not a source of entertainment. If it is questioned to any of the locals to explain what Kecak Ramayana is, he will describe it as a genre of dance that is staged by the Balinese locals for the tourists and its in opposition to other genres such as barong or rangda dance. Now we can all relate to the fact as to why the locals do not find Kecak Ramayana entertaining, something that you do several times a week cannot be desirable. Kecak kontemporer form is however appreciated by the locals just like any other Balinese genre. Kecak kreasi, in comparison, have been marginal and will probably get more popularity in the coming years.

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