

# **Arja: theatre where women rule**

## *Seleh notes*

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Whatever the vicissitudes of fashion to which Balinese theatre is prone, one genre, *Arja*, has remained popular with audiences over the decades. Temporarily eclipsed, during the late nineteen-seventies and eighties by flashier new forms, which were less demanding of spectators, like *Drama Gong* and *Séndratari*, *Arja* enjoyed a resurgence in the nineties. This was evident for instance in the frequency and quality of televised and live performances, and from the large and appreciative audiences. So what is special about *Arja*? And in what might its appeal lie?

It is always easier to retrodict than to predict what fashion. This said, while *Drama Gong* was easily accessible to audiences with its vernacular Balinese language and popular slap-stick routines, for all its demotic trappings it reiterated a world of unquestioned hierarchy and authority, set in a timeless and imaginary past. *Séndratari*, the spectacular dance-dramas with their big choreographed set pieces, promoted most notably by STSI and KOKAR were closely associated with the New Order régime (Hough 1992). The sight of an entire cast silently miming to the words of a single *dalang* was eerily reminiscent of the New Order's vision of culture (Hobart 2000).

By contrast to these newcomers, *Arja* ranks among the *wayah*, old or mature, forms of theatre with *Gambuh* and *Topèng*. In the nineteen thirties, De Zoete and Spies's described *Arja* as follows.

Among the many forms of Balinese dance-drama *Ardja* corresponds most nearly to our idea of opera, or rather of musical comedy. It is almost entirely sung, and good voices, lively dancing, brilliant clowning, and occasionally pretty girls, make it almost the most popular of dance-forms among the Balinese. The word *Ardja* calls up the sound of high-pitched, wailing melodies, a peculiar swinging cadence of the speaking voice, the slow coiling dance of flower-crowned figures who droop frequently in lamentation; impassioned chidings and chastisings, but above all, alas interminable hours of verbal clowning...

A strongly sentimental note runs through *Ardja*, and sentimental situations are developed as nowhere else on the Balinese stage. There is something of the comedy of manners in its construction... The plot is more developed than in any other play. Whereas in *Gamboeh* a very small section of a story is ushered in and out again by an overwhelming dance ritual, and in *Topèng* an intense dramatic moment is set among a grand parade of dancing masks, *Ardja* generally shows the sequence of a play from beginning to end. The accent in *Ardja* is on the intrigue, on the story, on the singing, instead of the wonderful counterpoint of music and dance, which is so great a fascination in *Baris* and *Topèng* (1938: 196-7).

While *Arja* makes extensive use of similar historical and literary Javanese and Balinese sources to *Gambuh* and *Topèng*, the plots may also be more modern, including, for instance, Chinese tales. More than other older genres though, *Arja* dwells on the private face of public life, the personal motivations and emotional conflicts that underlie appearances. *Arja* plots often draw upon the Panji stories, or else use their conventions to set the scene, down to the names of the kingdoms, Kuripan, Daha, Jenggala or Singasari and their rivals Pajajaran or Metaum. While foreign scholars (and some Balinese) tend to label these as respectively 'good' and 'bad', performers and aficionados distinguish them differently.

The conflict that drives *Arja* depends on there being at least two rival parties, one of which is, or strives to be, *dharma*, honest, virtuous, dutiful, of the right, *tengawan*; another is *adharma*, its members lack such scruples and are prepared to use whatever means serve their often dubious ends. Notably, they resort to techniques of arcane power, or *sakti*, associated with the left, *tengébot*. Significantly, however, they are also mad, *buduh*, which in Balinese

has a double meaning. The denizens of Pajarakan and Metaum are both unbalanced in the sense of insane and also driven to ignore the bounds of propriety and self-awareness by their desires and impulses. The implicit links between immorality, madness and power enables actors to explore complex resonances in performance. So *Arja* is not just a repertoire of diverting tales about passion and predicaments, but it allows actors – depending on their skill, inclination and their sense of the audience – to reflect more philosophically upon considerations the motivation and consequences of human action itself.

Among the distinctive features of *Arja*, two perhaps deserve special mention. Singing is so central to *Arja* that it is usually described as ‘opera’. The plot is elaborated around songs, delivered in a range of different metres, *tembang*. Many of the key pieces are extrapolated from sources in *kawi* (the literary language used in Java and Bali, often known as ‘Old Javanese’), others are written more recently. However the mark of really fine *Arja* singers is their ability to extemporize on the spot as the plot unfolds. Doing so well is peculiarly difficult, because not only the final vowel of each line is fixed, but so are the number of syllables. Also, according to other conventions, some or all other syllables may be fixed, as is their relative duration when sung. Ad libbing songs then requires a prodigious familiarity with, and skill in handling simultaneously, language, metre and music, in ways which are quite different from European opera.

A striking feature of *Arja* is that, nowadays at least, the cast is usually almost all female, including the romantic male lead, the prince or *Mantri*. On most accounts, in the nineteenth century *Arja* was danced exclusively by males, but with the advent of a number of particularly fine women singer-dancers in the nineteen twenties and thirties, male actors became mostly confined to the roles of the coarser servants or clowns, the *Panasar* and *Wijil*. Cross-dressing, *bebancihan*, however remains a distinctive part of *Arja* performance. For instance, an all-male troupe of students, *Arja Cowok*, from STSI scored a hit in 1997 with a televised performance of *Siti Markonah*.<sup>1</sup>

Whether felicitously or not, the predominance of female actors is most appropriate because female character is differentiated and developed in *Arja* in a way that is unmatched anywhere else in Balinese theatre. There are five quite distinct female roles in almost all performances, comprising two servants and three royal, or leading, parts. These are:

*Condong* The first person out on stage is almost always the *Condong*. She is a low caste servant, usually called ‘Bibi’, because she is the nurse or nanny to the heroine, *Galuh*, whom she still looks after and whose *kawi* she translates into Balinese, just as the male servants, *Panasar* and *Wijil*, do for the king. Actors tend to agree that the roles of *Condong* and *Panasar* are the hardest to play as is suggested in the common etymology of *Panasar* as the person who is the *dasar*, base or basis. In *Arja* the *Condong* is the foundation in several senses. She is first person on stage and must establish the background and explain what is going on. As *Arja* is extemporized, apart from the main songs, the actors have the task of relating to the particular audience that evening, feeling their mood and to what they respond well and badly. It falls to the *Condong* to lay this foundation, while the rest of the cast listens attentively backstage. Again, if there is a hiatus, the plot wanders or the audience start to get bored, the *Condong* has to intervene. Crucially, the two key characters, the princess and

<sup>1</sup> *Siti Markonah* is a romantic story of Minangkabau princes and Madurese princesses. The performance together with a transcription is part of a set of Balinese classical theatre broadcasts, recorded and digitized by the STSI-SOAS Balinese Television Project and available on CD for research and educational use.

The late I Midep, a powerfully-built man, made a great career out of playing the *Liku*, the spoiled princess in *Arja*, in *Prèmbon* and *Bondrès*.

prince, only sing in *kawi*. The task of *ngartiang*, ‘translating’, falls to their servants, a far more complex business than simply translating, because the servants have to elaborate at length on brief sung phrases. The *Condong* sings in the versatile metre of *Pangkur*, which can register feelings as varied as anger and longing.

*Désak* Only in *Arja* is there a second, and quite distinct, kind of female servant, who waits on the senior women. Although her status is not made explicit, she is addressed as *Madé Rai*, and her bold behaviour is consonant with her being of aristocratic descent but by a secondary wife of lower status. Unlike the *Condong*, who always speaks respectfully to her mistress, the *Désak* is prepared to say exactly what she thinks. Indeed, actors compare her to the key figure of Balinese shadow theatre,



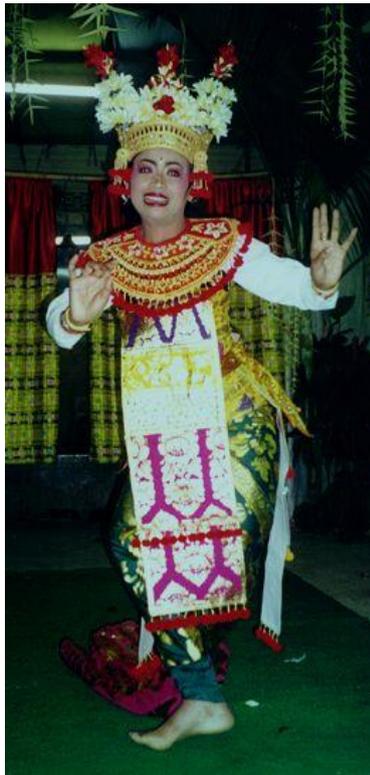
*Désak* played by Ni Wayan Roti (here in the story of *Cupak*, using a variant of *Arja*)

*Twalén*, the senior servant to the *Pandawa*, is the incarnation of Divinity (commonly *Sang Hyang Wismaya*). Like *Twalén*, *Madé Rai* speaks the truth, even if people do not want to hear it. She is licensed to rip aside the mask of manners and appearances, whether within the context of the play or within Balinese society at that moment, and tell things as they are. Perhaps to diffuse the danger in such a role, while her thinking is sharp, the *Désak*'s speech is *ngacuh*, undisciplined, all over the place. Audiences have to sift out the unvarnished truth from remarks going off in all directions. The *Désak* sings in *Dangdang* (see the *Galuh* below).

*Limbur* She is a mature figure, a queen or mother, with a deep voice and commanding presence. However, she is also strange, *aéng*, which is appropriate as she is often plotting something distinctly fishy. The *Limbur* may be either the real mother of the mad prince or princess, or else she may be the step-mother in the court of the hero or heroine. Her most interesting aspect of her role however hinges on a pun, when she is the co-wife of the

heroine, *Galuh*, and demands to be *kalimburang*, to be comforted and cared for by her husband to the exclusion of her co-wife. De Zoete and Spies described her as masculine to the point of wearing a man's sarong (1938: 197). However her deep voice (*suara gedé*) signifies age and she actually wears a woman's sarong and a short top, unique to her role. She sings in the angry and fierce (*galak*) metre of *Durma*.

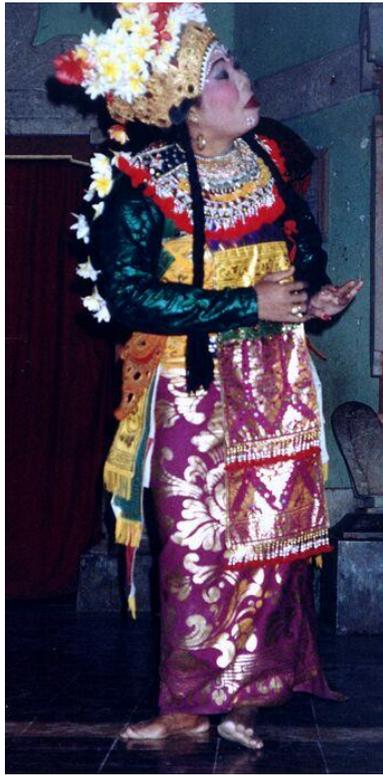
*Galuh* The *Galuh* is one of two characters who never speak, but only sing. Even if she is not a princess, she is sufficiently well placed as to have a servant, *Condong*, who paraphrases her. As the heroine, or romantic female lead, she should be beautiful, *lansing lanyar*, with a soft willowy figure and a sweet and *renyah* (fragile) voice. In order for there to be a plot inevitably she encounters difficulties, not least the envy of other women, who compete for the attention of her beloved, the hero, or *Mantri*. Once



Ni Madé Pujawati playing *Galuh*.

again a pun lies at the heart of her role. *Galuh* is the *galah*, opportunity or occasion, for an argument or fight. As one old *Arja* actor put it, whether in theatre or in life, men fight over women. And women fight for the attention of men. The *Galuh* sings in Dangdang, which is sweet, drawn out, soft and gentle (*luwes*) and, when sung well, enchanting.

*Liku* The most diverting, eccentric, and popular character is the mad – and ugly – princess. For a skilled actress, it offers enormous range, from the vain and ridiculous to gauche vulnerability and petulant self-centredness. Unwashed, obsessively desiring the hero and not above rolling around on the floor in a tantrum, the *Liku* instantiates every spoilt Balinese child. Again the hinge of many stories is when her crying and sulking



Ni Madé Rusni playing the *Liku*

over the hero's lack of interest moves her indulgent parents to use nefarious means to placate her. Indeed there is one form of what Balinese now call 'magik' known as *kalikuan*, designed to made someone, who previously did not care, mad about you. Unlike her servant, Désak, whose speech is all over the place, the *Liku* thinks, speaks and acts confused. She sings in *Pangkur*, which is suitably versatile for her range.

By contrast to the rich variety of female characters, the three male roles seem quite tame and constrained.

*Mantri* When I have asked Balinese actors about the role of prince, they are curiously muted. It is he who wields power (*ngawé wenang*), whose authority is unchallenged. So he encompasses everything. What can you say about him? He permits of no comparison. He is beyond description.<sup>2</sup> Appropriately therefore he only sings, mostly in *kawi*, the task of expatiating on what he says being left to his servants. In some plots there is a mad prince, *mantri buduh*, who, unlike his refined counterpart, may also speak.

<sup>2</sup> Parallel to Roland Barthes' idea of exnomination, by which those in authority avoid being named, so naturalizing power (1973: 138-142), Balinese kings may be alluded to but, ideally like the Divinity they seek to emulate, remain beyond description.



Ni Wayan Sani dancing the role of Mantri manis

The *Mantri* sings in *sinom*, a *tembang*, noted for being slow and beautifully modulated. It attracts (*nudut ati*) and absorbs and enchants (*ngulangunin*) the audience. In contrast to the sweetness of the prince's movements and singing (his soubriquet is *Mantri manis*), the mad prince's gestures are violent and abrupt and, like the *Limbur* (often his mother), he sings in *Durma*

*Panasar* and *Wijil* These are the servants of the prince and the only characters nowadays played by males. In *Topèng Prèmbon* the *Panasar*, with his younger brother or partner *Wijil*, is the anchor of the play as a whole. Here the responsibility rests first and foremost with the *Condong*. Just as she has to paraphrase, explicate and intercede between her mistress and both the other protagonists and the audience, so do the *Panasar* and *Wijil* for the princes. The *Panasar* sings in the fierce metre of *Durma*, while *Wijil* is free to choose his *tembang*.

Even this brief sketch of the main roles should give some idea of the richness, complexity and nuance on *Arja* plays. Like almost all Balinese theatre, it is set in timeless world of hierarchy and authority – singularly congenial to the New Order régime – where men are men and everyone else is afraid.<sup>3</sup> However, while theatre depicts and celebrates the privileged world of courts and rulers, in the more classic genres like *Wayang*, *Gambuh* and *Arja*, the aristocrats can only speak in registers that have little to do with the spoken language of the island.<sup>4</sup> The great movers and shakers of the earth turn out to be so trapped within a

<sup>3</sup> The occasions that I know of when actors performed plays on themes of contemporary relevance, they were cautioned afterwards by the police or civil authorities and ordered to stop. It is an interesting reflection on the hegemony of the New Order that direct airing of issues to do with youth, poverty, urban life or whatever was sufficiently potentially threatening that its apparachiks felt compelled to impose bans.

<sup>4</sup> The disjuncture between the theatrical and actual language of Balinese courts perhaps deserves more comment. In practice, although there are occasions on which royals speak elevated (*singgih*) Balinese, almost

recondite and remote world that it is left to ordinary folk to explicate, interpret and act on their behalf. The purer power becomes the less it is able to articulate itself.

The plots of *Arja* reiterate a Balinese world where males, whether royal or otherwise, hold unquestioned power. As in other genres of theatre, women for the most part are supposed, as are servants and followers, to support and comfort, *ngalimburang*, their husbands, fathers and brothers, and bear the responsibility for passion and its predicaments. As with batik however, is it the absences which make the pattern? Closer analysis of what is actually said suggests the possibility of a more radical interpretation. In exploring the ways in which women are interpellated in structures of power, in showing how decisions are made and the public face of authority constructed, *Arja* invites members of the audience to reconsider idealized, and phallogocentric, representations of the natural order of things. More than any other Balinese theatre *Arja* exposes the fragility of the workings of power itself, which turns out to be motivated by concerns it cannot acknowledge. *Arja* tells us, if we listen carefully, that power is a spectacle which rests upon complex motives and passions – and it is the realm that women understand and where they often rule.

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always it is their humble subjects who use it to address their masters, while these refined and superior beings speak in the clip, harsher tones of ordinary (*biasa*) language. Whatever it does, the language of theatre does not reflect the world as it is, or, almost certainly, ever was.