

# Sabbatical Report

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Dance  
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Traditional Balinese Dance

Exploring Taksu—the divine energy in the dancer

I am grateful to Lane Community College and the sabbatical committee for providing me the opportunity and resources for one term of study of dance in Bali. Fully immersing myself in a dance form and culture I admire and love is a privilege and an honor. This experience proved not only invaluable for my career as a dance educator, but also uplifting and nourishing for my soul. This sabbatical gave me a much-needed rest from the rigors of teaching and directing the Lane Dance program. It has fulfilled my quest for better understanding the mysterious and beautiful culture of Bali.

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, consists of over 17,000 islands, and set apart from the Muslim religion, the small island of Bali just west of Java, practices a unique form of Hinduism: Balinese Hinduism. An intricate part of the Balinese Hindu spiritual tradition is dance. No temple celebration or ritual ceremony is complete without the presence of dance or music.

## GOALS

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Having traveled to Bali to study dance previous to this sabbatical, I was aware that the abundance of styles, practices, and specific uses of dance in Bali could be overwhelming. Setting out this time, these specific goals guided my sabbatical study.

- To better my skills in traditional Balinese dance
- To research the concept of Taksu: the divine energy that runs through the dancer
- To lay groundwork for future PhD. research in Balinese Dance and Culture

## OBJECTIVES

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My objectives for this experiential research include studying the Legong Kraton Playon, investigating Taksu, living with a Balinese family to intimately experience their daily life, attending Odalan: the temple anniversary celebration of a 999 year old temple—Pura Samuan Tiga, and the Bali Arts Festival in Denpasar. These objectives are elaborated in the paragraphs below.

### Legong Kraton Playon

The traditional Legong is a complex and beautiful dance, and is described as the epitome of femininity and grace. My teacher, Sang Ayu Ketut Muklen, is one of the last surviving Legong teachers of her generation. At age 84, she is a living, moving, dance museum. Dances are etched in her body memory, and she carries stories of dancing in Bali that date back to the mid 1930's when Bali had just begun to catch the attention of Western travelers and artists.

I had originally intended to study a variety of traditional dances while in Bali, but decided to focus solely on the Legong with Sang Ayu. It was a simple and obvious choice.

It is said that if a dancer can dance the Legong, the dancer can dance any other Balinese dance. It is the most complicated and difficult dance, and very long—40 minutes requiring stamina and rigor. I was not sure how long Sang Ayu would be teaching, and if or when I would be able to study with her again.

I set out to perfect this 40-minute dance, which I would later learn is rarely performed, even in Bali. What began as a quest for embodying the movements and character of this dance, became a loving friendship the power of which I still have no words to describe. We bonded in a unique and special way, beyond any barriers of culture, generation, or language. This relationship deepened through the methodical physical transmission of the Legong dance, from her body to mine.

For three and a half months, we met five or six days per week, for two hours each day at her family compound (house) in the village of Pejeng for my private lessons. I would walk to Pejeng from my house in Bedulu, a ritual that puzzled my Balinese friends and family (they thought I should go by motorbike.) But I found this walk meaningful. Not only did I get to experience walking through the rice fields for one seasons' growth, but I walked the reverse route that Sang Ayu walked 75 years ago for her daily lessons with her teacher who lived in Bedulu.

My skill level, memory, and stamina increased all under the watchful and patient eye of my teacher. I am proud to say I am able to execute the quality and character of the Legong with confidence and joy.

## Taksu

Taksu is the divine energy that runs through the performer. My research into the concept of Taksu and how dancers in Bali understand it began with a series of interviews with master dancers. The interviews were carried out with Sang Ayu, Pak Djimat—master Topeng (mask) dancer, Ni Sekar—master Gambu dancer, Ibu Luh Menek—master Terunajaya dancer and teacher, and Ida Pedande Istri Alit—a Brahman priestess who is also an accomplished dancer and teacher.

Ibu Wiratini, professor of dance at the art institute in Bali, ISI, and wife of distinguished professor of dance Pak Dibia, served as my translator and companion for these interviews. Since the first language of my interviewees is Balinese, and the second Bahasa Indonesia, I chose to have the interview conducted in Balinese and translated to English so the speakers would feel completely free to give words to feelings and ideas in their native tongue. I have transcribed the interviews and am currently writing a paper to present at the American College Dance Festival this spring in Idaho.

In brief, all of those interviewed agreed that:

- Taksu comes from the Gods.
- It comes from serious practice.
- One prays not for Taksu, but that the dancer is able to do their best.

- If Taksu enters the dancer, the audience will know. It is not for the dancer to decide.
- Taksu cannot be taught.
- It is not religion specific.
- Taksu cannot be present if there is fear.

## Offerings and Bahasa Indonesia

Living in a traditional family compound allowed me the opportunity to communicate with native Balinese. It also allowed me to take part in the endless preparation of offerings used in rituals and ceremonies that range from daily offerings to bless the house, to complex offerings for temple celebrations and village ceremonies.

Offerings are made from palm leaf and plants, fruit, rice, spices, cakes, and sometimes meat. My teacher and guide for this work was Nenek, (translates to grandmother) whose primary contribution to the family's work was making offerings. Some afternoons after my lesson, I would sit with her on the porch making plates, bowls, and intricately cut and folded designs from leaves stitched together with dried skewer-like twigs. My time sitting with her and making offerings filled my need to make a contribution and feel useful.

Living with a Balinese family outside of the popular tourist destinations gave me the opportunity for daily practice in Bahasa Indonesia. Although a few family members spoke some English, for the most part, I spoke Indonesian.

## Odalan

The second largest temple in Bali, Pura Samuan Tiga (Temple of Three United) is a block up the road from my house. Being the temple of my "family", they take great pride and joy in the extravagant 20-day temple anniversary celebration called Odalan. My husband and I arrived just days before the celebration began, and witnessed a three-week long extravaganza that redefined my concept of parade and ritual as theater. Endless processions of temple goers playing traditional music and carrying offerings passed by the front steps of the compound. Hindu worshipers from all parts of the island came to be a part of the celebrations.

At the temple, I witnessed rare and unusual dances performed only at Pura Samuan Tiga. There were rites and rituals that long-term expatriates had never seen or heard about, like the wild sacrifice of the small pig or the unique version of the Rejang dance. There were seemingly endless hours of dance, theater, and music of the highest caliber stretched through the days, turning to weeks, commencing early each morning and ending after midnight.

Experiencing Odalan from the perspective of living in the Balinese compound, I was able to see and experience the preparations and planning that occurs, and feel the excitement, especially from the children, of readying to go to the temple...over and over again. On one occasion, I had the honor of carrying a beautiful (and heavy!) offering on my head to and from the temple. Ibu Komang gently coached me along the way, encouraging me to go slowly and carefully. "Pelan-Pelan dan hati-hati."

## Bali Arts Festival

Every year the Indonesian Government hosts a month long Bali Arts Festival featuring dancers, musicians, and performers from all over Bali and throughout Indonesia. The event is free to the public, with daily performances in the morning and evening. I spent 10 days in Denpasar, the biggest city on the island of Bali, and attended several performances at the Bali Arts Festival.

While in Denpasar, I stayed with master dancer and teacher Ibu Arini, considered the best dance teacher for children on the island. We attended the festival together, and had daily lessons that consisted of notating and scripting the precise movements of the Legong I had learned from Sang Ayu. Our time was spent decoding the steps and discussing the meaning behind the gestures. Ibu Arini was impressed I had learned the entire dance, and was extremely curious about the idiosyncratic differences of this old form of the Legong. The styles of dance vary widely throughout the island, and the style I learned was old and unusual. My experience with Ibu Arini was priceless. We became fast friends, and bonded immediately through our love of dance.

## OUTCOMES

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As with most experiential research, some outcomes can be surprising. These glittering unforeseen insights are often the most valuable to me. I have described a handful of them in the paragraphs below.

### Finding New Ways to Breathe: Dancing in Costume

When I felt I could portray the various feelings and character qualities of the Legong with confidence, I set out to purchase a costume and organize a performance to celebrate my efforts. Buying the costume was as an event in and of itself, with several trips for fittings to Pak Redha's costume shop in Batuan. His shop was staffed with a dozen men sitting on the floor working on various stages of Balinese dance costumes. The intricate and elaborate designs are drawn on cowhide, cut with fine tools, painted first red then gold, and adorned with jewels. The gold printed fabric, or "prada" is hand stamped in an assembly line fashion by a team of young men.

Several layers of fabric wrap to bind the torso, pounds (or kilos) of leather accoutrement decorate the torso, and a snug fitting headpiece laden with frangipani flowers adorns the head. Dancing in costume for me was the final embodiment of the dance, and gave me a deeper appreciation of the dancer and their experience. The process begins with an hour-long session of makeup application, and another hour to put the costume on, which is held together with safety pins! Once in costume for the first time, I could barely stand there and breathe, and was convinced there was no way to execute the complicated dance for the entire 40 minutes. I had to find a new way to breathe, and imagined my lungs moving to my thighs. Fortunately the costume gives a bit, and my focus on remembering what comes next replaced my thoughts and fears, and eventually the dance itself took over.

My Legong performance took place at the Mask and Puppet Museum in Mas, Ubud, Bali in a beautiful garden setting just before dusk. I hired a professional videography team, Jungle Run, to document the event that was attended by my “family” and friends.

## Bahasa Bali

My Bahasa Indonesia skills went from very basic to decent over the course of my sabbatical. My family insisted I speak Indonesian with them, which helped to further develop my skills. But my desire to learn Bahasa Bali grew too. For the most part, the Balinese speak Bahasa Bali to each other. So in order to really understand what is going on, I will eventually need to learn Bahasa Bali as well.

## Odalan—Walking to the Sea

The traditional ending of Odalan at Pura Samuan Tiga is a procession of Hindus who carry sacred objects from the temple to the sea for a final ritual prayer. 5000 people rose before dawn to walk the 17 km (roughly 8 miles) to the ocean. Adorned in fine temple attire and accompanied by the non-stop music of the gamelan, this mass gesture of moving people was thrilling. My escort for the event was Putu, my 11-year-old “nephew” and his two friends. Keeping track of me in the crowd was their charge, which was not easy but they somehow succeeded. Time warped as we walked, bodies like a river, weaving through the streets toward the sea. I felt a part of something ancient and significant.

## Support of the Arts in Bali

My two weeks spent in Denpasar with Ibu Arini gave me appreciation of the Indonesian government’s support of the arts in Bali. In the mid 1970’s the government created an expansive arts park in the center of the city, with several performance pavilions solely for this annual month-long arts festival. The performances are totally free, something I see as remarkable compared to the commercialization of arts events in the West. Ibu Arini lives and runs her dance school just around the corner from the festival grounds. We enjoyed long talks about the changes to the land since her family owned the adjacent property, and about her life and career as a dancer. In addition to seeing a variety of performances at the arts festival, I accompanied Ibu Arini to an island-wide dance competition, with hundreds of young dancers ranging from ages 5 to 14 performing before a panel of judges. Not to her surprise, her school took most of the prizes!

## Dance as a cultural Ambassador

The language of dance moves beyond cultural barriers. The love of dance as felt by the dancer—the moving body expressing inner feeling and being transported to another realm, is universal. Through meeting several wonderful new friends during this research: Ibu Wiratini, Ibu Arini, and Ida Pedande Istri Alit, I realized that dance serves as a cultural ambassador. It is a bridge that allows connection, understanding, respect, even love, between people of different cultures. This process of conducting interviews affirmed my belief of the universal bond that exists between people who have dedicated their lives to the art of dance. This is not culture specific, but universal.

My interviews with master teachers on the concept of Taksu, not only helped me to better understand Taksu, but also served as kind of a reunion and a meeting point for major dancers figures on Bali. Ibu Wiratini, my interpreter, had heard of Sang Ayu, but had not met her. It was through this interview process that they finally met. She had not seen Pak Djimat or Ni Sekar for a few years and their meeting was a welcome event. Ibu Luh Menek lives in the north side of Bali, and Ibu Wiratini had not see her for many years, despite being colleagues at ISI with her daughter and son-in-law. Theirs was an uproarious reunion with lots of excitement, laughter, and imitations of good and bad dance techniques. Finally, meeting Ida Pedande Istri Alit was of great interest to Ibu Wiratini since it was unusual for a priestess to take the role of a dancer and teacher. Hers was the longest of the interviews, and at the end of the interview I asked an additional question. "Do you know an American who has Taksu?" On the other side of the world, a Brahman priestess who has dedicated her life to Hindu spiritual practices replied without missing a beat, "Michael Jackson." She went on to express how sad she is that he is dead, and how tragic it is to loose such a creative artist.

Through this interview process and attending the Bali Arts Festival I made connections and began building bridges for my future PhD studies. My contacts in Bali are the leading figures in Balinese dance. They are both academic figures like Pak Dibia and his wife Ibu Wiratini, and famous maestros from the villages like Sang Ayu of Pejeng and Ibu Luh Menek of Tejakula.

## Fearlessness through Motorbike Riding

Lastly, an unexpected pleasure, and something I had sworn I would never do, was to ride a motorbike in the crazy third world driving environment of Bali. My husband gave me some training, and within minutes I was in the stream of traffic. Negotiating the road with families of up to five on one motorbike; guys dragging 30-foot long bamboo poles or plywood sheets off the back of the motorbike seat; cars and trucks spewing exhaust, street dogs and the occasional chickens, required a Zen-like concentration and fearlessness. This concentration and fearlessness was similar to what is required to perform the Legong. These two very different activities required a strangely similar mindset. I came to feel that while zipping around on my motorbike, I was in fact preparing for dancing.

## Changes

I had planned to travel to India for a two-week visit to Nrityagram, a dance village in Bangalore, but unfortunately the company had booked a tour during the time I was schedule to visit. However, my studies in Bali were more than fulfilling, and I felt saturated from my experience there. Upon returning, I have performed the Legong six times for a variety of audiences, and given lectures and slide shows in the community and beyond. I have developed curriculum for and am teaching Balinese Dance to a group of dedicated students at Lane, and look forward to expanding our curriculum to include a course on Asian Dance.

Terima Kasih Banyak!  
(Thank you very much)