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Why Women Choose Dance: An Analysis of Balinese Women's Participation in the Arts

(Soundbite of Women's Exhibition at the Bali Arts Festival)

The back-less, tile seating was unforgiving after a long day of gamelan rehearsal on Thursday as I waited to watch the women's gamelan exhibition on the main stage at the Bali Arts Festival. The humid and somewhat smoky air was still and hot as more and more people filled the amphitheater in anticipation. When the ensembles finally entered the stage it was with a confident and intimidating grace. The ornate choreography and vibrant uniforms gave off an incredible sense of pride for the art they were about to perform.

At the start of our trip in Bali, Indonesia I had set out to research women's gamelan. All-women's gamelan is still a fairly new concept, only popularized within the last 2-3 decades. From my white, Western feminist perspective, I had assumed the reason more women did not participate in gamelan had to do with empowerment. As we attended the women's gamelan competition at the Bali Arts Festival I wondered if they wanted more out of their gamelan playing. Although the sight of an all-women's gamelan is no longer out of the ordinary, they serve strictly entertainment and secular purposes as opposed to men's gamelan, which also holds sacred purposes such as their performances at temple ceremonies, tooth filings, and cremations. It has been stated, however, by dancer and scholar I Wayan Dibia that in spite of context performers still feel they are performing for a "divine audience" (Gold, 2005, p. 18). Knowing Bali to be a patriarchal society I initially assumed structural and institutional practices were the only forces working to sustain the push for women to pursue dance rather than gamelan. While this still may be true, the women I had the privilege of working with made it sound like there was more to it.

A little over a week into our trip we took a day tour around the island and saw some beautiful sights. I was completely enamored by the stone temples we visited, one situated out on a lake masked in fog and another sat stately on a well-kept lawn. Although a subtle mist was present for most of the day, the remnants of the out-of-season downpour, the mossy, carved

statues and buildings stood with pride and a sense of balance and tranquility. Over the course of our lengthy car rides I was able to talk to Yoni, the daughter of our friend and gamelan teacher, Pak Asnawa. When I asked about the frequency of women participating in gamelan she explained that all young children learn gamelan but that after a certain age women are encouraged to move in the direction of dance. The exception, she explained, was if, like herself, someone in the family was heavily involved in gamelan. Even then, however, there are relatively few women's gamelan ensembles and few performance opportunities for them. For example, a group might be directly asked to perform in the Arts Festival and to prepare a performance and when they do perform gamelan it is almost always on gong kebyar, the most popular style of gamelan. As the trip went on I got to experience more dance rehearsals and performances and my perspectives on dance began to expand.

(Soundbite of Legong rehearsal at the Arts Festival)

In our third week our group headed to central Bali near Ubud where we began learning Puspa Wresti, often performed as a welcome dance that includes men and women and combines a couple different Balinese dance styles. By this time we had seen a number of different dances performed including *topeng*, which involves a solo masked dancer, *baris*, which is a traditional warrior dance, and *legong*, a type of dance once used for royal entertainment and involving a great deal of complex gestures; in fact, most female dance styles make use of the movement vocabulary from *legong* (Gold, p. 75). What I had observed in all of these performances was the incredible amount of detail involved, from the intricate hand and foot placement to the eye movements and facial expressions that are crucial nuances. It is one thing to watch in awe as professional dancers execute these complex moves with precision and it is another thing completely to have to learn these moves from scratch with no prior experience in Balinese dance. While staying in the home of Wayan Rachman, a 2002 Gettysburg College graduate, and his family, his wife Ketut choreographed and taught us Puspa Wresti. During our downtime I was able to talk to both Ketut, a professional dancer, and Wayan, a gamelan teacher and performer, about what other factors contributed to women's participation in dance over gamelan. What I had found out is that there is an economic component that is also tied to the many roles a woman plays in the family. Since fewer opportunities exist for women to perform gamelan, it is unlikely in a family that does not have additional caregivers or sufficient income for the wife to be able to practice and perform gamelan. With dance, however, the increased performance opportunities mean a bigger paycheck, providing more incentive. Similarly, in a family with more economic flexibility there is a greater chance that women who want to pursue gamelan can.

In addition to these economic factors, it is impossible to forget the many roles women are responsible for both in their homes and in their community. For Ketut, this means getting up around 5am to go out to the market to get food for the family and to get supplies to make offerings. By time my colleagues and I would show up at the Rachman home for breakfast at 8am, Ketut was fully dressed, her sons Gede and Deo were eating their breakfast, and she was going around placing completed offerings and incense here and there, high and low. The first half of her day typically involves going to teach dance in Ubud or Denpasar. By the late afternoon she is back to prepare dinner for her sons and husband and afterwards she does her hair and makeup and leaves for her performance, returning around 11 or midnight to wake up and do it all over again. According to Ellen Koskoff's summary of Ortner's theory on women's mediation of nature and culture, women, more often than men, are required to negotiate between different cultural dimensions due to certain gender roles and expectations. Through the existence of gamelan and dance in both sacred and secular realms women are able to transcend boundaries and gender expectations in pursuit of their participation in the arts (Koskoff, 2014, p. 47).

(Soundbite of Puspawrestri)

When it came to the evening of our final performance where our group would be performing Puspa Wresti the women went into hair and makeup first. As Ketut wrapped me in my body binder and I watched as hair was teased and layer after layer of makeup was applied to each girl's face in the unrelenting but waning heat I felt some frustration at how tedious the process was for female dancers. My indignant feelings were quickly extinguished when it was the men's turn and I saw they too would be tightly secured by body binders and covered in vibrant makeup. What I had thought to be unequal gender expectations for dancers was me imposing my own positionality and expectation of inequality.

While I had originally intended to find out why women felt so inclined to pursue dance instead of gamelan, I found that perhaps the problem lied in my perspectives on dance and my assumptions that it was not as significant or respected. What I had come to realize from my experiences in Bali, both from the performances of dance I attended and in my own performance, is that dance is a complex and intricate art where the dancers and gamelan work in tandem and are dependent on each other's cues and expressions to tell stories and convey cultural concepts and ideals. Balinese dance is much more than entertainment and flash, it is a crucial and dynamic part of the religious and artistic expression of the culture.

Works Cited

Gold, L. (2005). *Music in Bali*. New York: Oxford University Press

Koskoff, E. (2014). *A feminist ethnomusicology: Writings on music and gender*. Chicago, IL:
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