

ADRIAN VICKERS

## When did *legong* start? A reply to Stephen Davies

Stephen Davies (2008) has recently opened up new ways of looking at the history of Bali's premier dance form, *legong*. He has argued that *legong* started in the late nineteenth century, more specifically after 1887, probably in 1889, and that it is primarily derived from a form which Balinese presently call *andir*. This article, which acknowledges Mark Hobart's attempts (2007) to deconstruct the idea of Balinese dance as ancient tradition, involves a substantial reconsideration of the canonical nature of certain dance forms in Bali. But does Davies go far enough in that reconsideration, and does his claim stand the test of contemporary evidence?

The evidence Davies (2008) used was largely oral history, including publications and theses by Balinese making use of that oral history. Beginning with Moerdowo's drawing together (1977) of oral and other kinds of records available in the 1970s and 1980,<sup>1</sup> Davies has spoken to as many of the surviving keepers of oral history as possible. Davies pays close attention to the details of the different versions, and is very careful to ensure that he is faithful to his sources.

What is missing from Davies' account is evidence from closer to the time period, evidence that can allow us to fix the date of the origins of *legong* more closely, and also to understand precisely what its performative and musical associations and origins might be. This evidence is present in Balinese and Dutch-language sources, and while there are limitations to these sources, they certainly modify the conclusions of the article.

A major window into nineteenth-century Balinese culture is the dictionary of the eccentric Chinese-Dutch scholar, Herman Neubronner van der Tuuk.

<sup>1</sup> Davies actually refers to a later version of this publication, but as far as I can see this is a republication of the 1977 text.

---

ADRIAN VICKERS is Professor of South East Asian Studies at the University of Sydney. His disciplinary background is mainly in history, anthropology and cultural studies. He has been carrying out research on Indonesia for almost 30 years, and in that period has observed the shifts in relations between Australia and Indonesia. He is the author of *A history of modern Indonesia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005, and *Journeys of desire; A study of the Balinese text Malat*, Leiden: KITLV, 2005. Professor Vickers may be reached at [adrian.vickers@usyd.edu.au](mailto:adrian.vickers@usyd.edu.au).

This dictionary was compiled between when he first arrived in Bali in 1870 and his death in 1894 (Van der Tuuk 1897-1912). Although he lived in North Bali, he travelled extensively and had contact with advisors, literati and artists from all over the island. He drew on written, oral and visual sources, and his dictionary remains a treasure-trove for the cultural historian.

Van der Tuuk says of *legong* (s.v.) that it is: 'a certain way of dancing for many, sometimes six, women and the subject matter comes from the *babal bajar*<sup>2</sup> (see *mandir*: two dancing girls, that dance in an unusual way and are not 'ibing'-ed or 'tongko'-d) [...].' The last terms refer to the way that members of the audience of dance forms, such as *joged*, join in stages of the performance in a flirtatious manner, trying to get close to the dancers by dancing in step with them (*ngibing*), and attempting to kiss them (*tongko*).

While Van der Tuuk links '*andir*' and *legong*, he does not see '*andir*' as the main form of the original dance, which he defines under the name of '*mandir*' (s.v.) as: 'Name of the hero of a poem in new verse metres; 2nd name of a dance that is performed by a woman (sometimes by a man) and the performance from the *babad layar*; see *legong*, after *nandir*'. However the reference to '*Babad Layar*' is circular, for it is described under '*layar*' as: 'a certain work unknown in Buleleng [North Bali, where Van der Tuuk lived], in which the performance is of the *mandir* and the *legong*'. Perhaps the confusion comes because '*babar layar*' is now well known in Java and Bali as the name of a musical passage, and perhaps this formed the metrical basis of one of the stories performed in *nandir* and *legong*, of which there are many narratives known. Under '*andir*', Van der Tuuk simply says, 'see *nandir*'. The latter is given as: 'the name of *joged*-s, who dance better than the ordinary dancers, and during whose dance cakes are sold to the by-standers [...]; two women with a *gudrug*; following *legong*'. *Gudrug* (s.v.) is then defined as 'a clown with the *joged geguden* who is supposed to be her father. *Tjondong* is her mother; the *geguden* is then known as *Ambarsari*; see *ludrug* and under *banyak*.' *Ludrug* continued into the twentieth century in Java as a popular comedy form, and *banyak* is the term for a type of clown follower. *Ambarsari* is a heroine from the *Megantaka* story and other narratives, while *condong* is the clownish female servant found in *legong* and other related forms, as I will discuss below. According to Bandem and DeBoer, the *joged geguden* (also called *joged pingitan* and *joged tongkohan*) was the 'private' *joged* of Balinese royalty, and in its first section 'is pure *legong*' (Bandem and DeBoer 1981:102).

From all this we can say that there was already a defined form of *legong* at the time Van der Tuuk was writing, and that this form was closely related to

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere '*babad lajar*'. Note that this dictionary was assembled by J.L.A. Brandes from Van der Tuuk's notes, and hence mistakes occur based on handwriting or other lack of cross-referencing.

the form known at that time as *nandir* or *mandir*, which in turn is related to *joged*, particularly in its royal form. The major difference he identifies between *joged* and *legong* is that the latter involves no audience participation. It is not at all clear which of these was the prior form. Van der Tuuk might describe *legong* as unusual in some aspects, but he does not call it 'new'.

Van der Tuuk was also an advisor to the Dutch medical officer Julius Jacobs, who visited Bali in 1881 (Jacobs 1883). Jacobs was feted by various Balinese rulers, including the King of Gianyar in South Bali, one of the major political players of the nineteenth century. Jacobs was entertained in the royal palace by music from the *semar pagulingan* orchestra or ensemble. He specifically says that the *semar pagulingan* 'is the only one used whenever gandrung and legong or joged gegudegan are performed'. Here again *legong* and *joged gegudegan* are described as related forms.<sup>3</sup> *Gandrung* and *joged* are very closely connected, the main difference being that the former is played by young boys and men in drag, the latter by women. Jacobs and other observers describe how both dances were often connected to forms of sexual play and prostitution.

As I have shown elsewhere (Vickers 1985), there is a detailed Balinese musical treatise that deals with the *semar pagulingan*, its different variant forms, and the types of performance associated with these different ensembles, including *joged* and *legong*. This text is called the *Aji Gurnita*, also known as the *Tutur tabeh-tabehan*. The *semar pagulingan* was originally a seven-toned musical genre, although some twentieth-century adaptations have been changed to follow the dominant five-toned forms of music. The tunes played on the *semar pagulingan* in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were usually the same as those played for the *gambuh* dance-drama, which is regarded as the 'classic' form of Balinese theatre, with antecedents going back to Majapahit Java. *Gambuh* is regarded as the form of dance-drama from which others are derived, and was certainly the dominant form in the nineteenth century (Formaggia 2000; Vickers 2005). New forms of *semar pagulingan* tunes became important in the latter part of the twentieth century, as knowledge of the more complex older tunes declined.

There are difficulties dating the *Aji Gurnita*. The extant manuscripts of this text are largely undated, but were all written before the middle of the twentieth century (Schumacher 1985). The known manuscripts all come from the former South Balinese kingdoms of Badung and Mengwi, and are closely related. These texts refer to the practices and milieus of the Balinese courts, in particular the importance of *gambuh* and its related forms, which celebrate the roles of the God and Goddess of Love, Smara and Ratih. The texts are probably from the late nineteenth century, although they could even have

<sup>3</sup> Quoted and translated Vickers 1985, p.144.

been written in the early twentieth century after the Dutch conquest, as a way of attempting to conserve a set of practices and values that were in decline. Van der Tuuk did not know of their existence, an argument that these texts, in their current form, date from after the 1890s, but we cannot assume that even Van der Tuuk would have been able to get access to all texts that were in circulation at the time he worked, particularly when, as with the *Aji Gurnita*, these texts contained esoteric knowledge to which access was restricted by the royal and priestly groups.

In his article, Davies tries to refute the probable myth that the late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century king of Sukawati Dewa Made Karna invented the *legong* through meditation. In this myth *legong* is connected to the exorcistic and more folk-based *sanghyang* performance. The new form '*sanghyang legong*' was adapted elsewhere into (*n*)*andir*, which was in turn later adapted into *legong* (Davies 2008:199). Davies demonstrates convincingly that *legong* is probably not related to the *sanghyang* performances. This case is well made. However, by overthrowing the myth of the *sanghyang* origins, Davies also shows, intentionally or not, that the story which says that *legong* in its current form originates from (*n*)*andir* may not be true. What if the derivation was the other way around? The problem is that we know very little about (*n*)*andir*, and what we do know links it very closely to *legong* (Talamantes 2006).

Davies has the problem that much of the current oral history of dance-drama in Bali is focused on the region of Gianyar, specifically on Ubud. This is because the cultural politics of Bali have produced a new myth, that this region is the centre of the arts in Bali, and thus the present-day perceptions tend to filter out information that other regions all had strong cultural and artistic traditions. This myth was constructed through the patronage of artists, but more importantly of western writers, by the Ubud royal family from the 1930s onwards. Moerdowo's systematizing (1977) of information about Balinese cultural history was carried out in the 1970s, and forms the basis of most subsequent accounts. It was based on materials collected at a time of revived interest in Balinese cultural forms when new institutions for cultural preservation were being established, and a number of seminars and publications were being sponsored by the government. Moerdowo, a Javanese medical practitioner who lived on Bali for many years, relied very heavily on the knowledgeable Balinese performer and intellectual, Ktut Rinda. Rinda was a *dalang*, a puppeteer, as well as a dancer of the historically-based *topeng* masked dances, and was responsible for the writing down of many genealogies (*babad*), although questions about authorship of these texts are fraught, as their claims to legitimacy are based on their supposed antiquity.<sup>4</sup> The

<sup>4</sup> I had got to know Ktut Rinda quite well in the early 1980s when he was providing valuable advice to me on *gambuh*.

younger generation of Balinese involved in documenting Balinese performing arts, writers and teachers such as Made Bandem and Wayan Dibia, relied heavily on the authoritative information provided by Dalang Rinda. It should be noted that Dalang Rinda was from Blahbatuh, in Gianyar, and his knowledge of oral history provided by his teachers and ancestors was oriented towards the major palaces of Gianyar. Bandem and Dibia also come from the former kingdom of Gianyar.

Early on in his article Davies rejects an alternative account of the origins of *legong*, from a book that was also produced as part of the reconsideration of Balinese cultural history in the 1970s. The principal author of this work was Nyoman Rembang, a great musician from Sesetan, in the former kingdom of Badung. Rembang and his co-authors provide another narrative from Balinese oral history (possibly one influenced by their knowledge of the *Aji Gurnita* text). In this version, when the pre-eminent kingdom of Bali, Klungkung, was being established out of the ruins of the kingdom of Gelgel, the completion of the palace was marked by the creation of the *semar pagulingan* ensemble, and according to one legend, at this time (probably the beginning of the eighteenth century) *legong* was first performed. Rembang et al. (1974/75) then go on to speculate that *legong* may actually date to the era of the great king of Gelgel, Baturenggong, but then almost all major developments in Balinese history are attributed to this era. Davies (2008:196) dismisses the whole account as 'speculative', and gives only cursory treatment to links between *legong* and the *semar pagulingan* and related ensembles, but he should have given more consideration to the Klungkung origins of the form.

As already mentioned, *gambuh* was the major dance-drama form of the nineteenth century, and probably of the preceding centuries. *Gambuh* and *semar pagulingan* have the same musical basis: they are both seven-tone musical forms, and *semar pagulingan* tunes were originally from the *gambuh* repertoire. As the *Aji Gurnita* indicates, *legong* was performed to the accompaniment of a variant of the *semar pagulingan*, and some of the *gambuh* and *semar pagulingan* tunes, such as *lasem*, *palayon*, *kuntir*, *bramara* and *gadung melati*, are still used as *legong* tunes (Davies 2006:315). *Gambuh* performances usually open with a dance by the servant and companions of a princess. The companions are four ladies-in-waiting, called *kakan* or 'sisters' of the princess (who is usually either Rangkesari or Ratnaningrat, although other princesses appear). The servant, *condong*, is a key figure whose dance is quite difficult, and who presents key narrative elements to the audience, as well as translating the words of the princess and *kakan*, who declaim in Kawi, the poetic language usually known as Middle Javanese.

In formal terms, classical versions of *legong* look very much like adaptations of the *condong-kakan* and princess sequences from *gambuh*. Davies argues that the *condong* was a late introduction to *legong*, although using

evidence focused on Gianyar (Davies 2008:206). Even if this is the case, the dances of the princess and *kakan* in *gambuh* still remain elements that could have been adapted to create *legong*, since there are still narrative links: the most famous narrative performed in *legong*, the story of the portents of the death of the king of Lasem, is a *gambuh* narrative, as are other *Malat* episodes performed in *legong*.<sup>5</sup>

Depictions of women dancers that can be associated with the *semar-pagulingan* (or related) ensembles are found in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Balinese paintings and manuscripts. One of these, originally from Klungkung, shows a young woman dancing in the presence of the god Indra, accompanied by other women performing on what I interpret as a *semar pagulingan* ensemble, with short flute, *rebab* (lute) and metallophone. This depiction is not decisive, as the same elements (female dancers and instruments) could also be used for performing the *joged*, although other nineteenth-century depictions of the *joged* usually include the element of the dancer carrying a fan. What is significant is that the manuscript with this illustration is a work on English paper, which most likely dates to the early nineteenth century, perhaps even to the second decade of that century (Vickers 1985:159).

If we view *legong* as a segment abstracted and adapted from *gambuh*, using the *semar pagulingan* rather than the usual *gambuh* ensemble, then it would not be unusual for this form to have been created in the nineteenth or even eighteenth century, when the courtly orchestras and performances were at their height, rather than in the period around the final Dutch conquest. *Legong* was definitely already in existence in the 1880s. *Legong*, as with all the other forms of Balinese music and dance-drama, has undergone substantial change over the course of the twentieth century. Such change does not go in a single direction, and clouds any attempts at historical reconstruction, particularly when, as is the case in Bali, originators of variations in choreography are ascribed with creating the form as a whole. Davies has provided important evidence for the history of Balinese cultural forms, but since the evidence is so patchy, more work remains to be done on older forms of evidence, such as Balinese texts and visual representations.

<sup>5</sup> And also in (*n*)*andir*: Talamantes (2006) indicates this with her description of a variant version of the Lasem story as performed in the village of Carik.

## References

- Bandem, I Made, and Fredrik Eugene DeBoer  
1981 *Kaja and Kelo; Balinese dance in transition*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

- Davies, Stephen  
 2006 'Balinese legong, revival or decline?', *Asian Theatre Journal* 23-2:314-41.  
 2008 'The origins of Balinese legong', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 164:194-211.
- Formaggia, Cristina (ed.)  
 2000 *Gambuh: drama tari Bali; Tinjauan seni, makna emosional dan mistik, kata-kata dan teks, musik gambuh desa Batuan dan desa Pedungan*. Jakarta: Lontar.
- Hobart, Mark  
 2007 'Rethinking Balinese dance', *Indonesia and the Malay World* 35:107-28.
- Jacobs, Julius  
 1883 *Eenigen tijd onder de Baliërs; Eene reisbeschrijving met aanteekeningen betreffende hygiëne, land- en volkenkunde van de eilanden Bali en Lombok*. Batavia: Kolff.
- Moerdowo, R.M.  
 1977 *Reflections on Balinese traditional and modern arts*. Denpasar: Udayana University.
- Schumacher, Rüdiger  
 1985 'Aji Ghurnita; Eine Balinesische Musiklehre', *Jahrbuch für Musikalische Volks- und Völkerkunde* 12:13-49.
- Rembang, I Nyoman et al.  
 1974-75 'Proyek pengembangan sarana wisata budaya Bali; Perkembangan legong sebagai seni pertunjukan'. Denpasar. [Typescript.]
- Talamantes, Maria  
 2006 'Performance of identity; The pelegongan andir of Tista, Bali', *Asian Theatre Journal* 23-2:18.
- Tuuk, H.N. van der  
 1897-1912 *Kawi-Balinesesch-Nederlandsch woordenboek*. Batavia: Landsdrukkerij. Four vols.
- Vickers, Adrian  
 1985 'The realm of the senses; Images of the courtly music of pre-colonial Bali', *Imago Musicae: International Yearbook of Musical Iconography* 2:143-77.  
 2005 *Journeys of desire; A study of the Balinese text Malat*. Leiden: KITLV Press. [Verhandelingen 217.]