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Embodiment, Balinese Dance Theatre and the Ethnographer's Predicament

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I had carved three *Topeng bondres*¹ masks. My recollection of how this was achieved is now rather dim, but I suspect that mask maker and teacher Ida Bagus Alit had a large hand in the accomplishment. My masks were at the temple in Lodtunduh waiting to be blessed and, as a part of the temple *Odalan*,² there was to be a *Topeng Pajagen* performed. *Topeng Pajagen* is a solo form of the *Topeng* masked performance considered in Bali to be *bebali*, a ceremonial form of sacred performance, which is often but not exclusively, performed in the second courtyard of a temple and, while an optional form, is considered explicitly religious thus appropriate for a temple festival.

There was an intense business in and around the different court yards of the temple as women carried in towers of offerings and occasionally appeared to break into dance movements as they wove a path following a priest and the *Barong* towards temporary shrines in different parts of the temple complex. People continually entered the inner courtyard to offer prayers; throughout the chants of the priest could be heard over loud speakers and the gamelan played.

¹*Topeng* is a masked style of performance from Bali and *bondres* refers to a range of half masks that denote comic characters performed as part of *Topeng* performances.

²*Odalan* is the term given for a temple festival or ceremony in Bali.

The performance of the *Topeng Pajagen* was my first experience of a full *Odalan* performance in a temple, and I worked hard to record what took place and the watching audience's reaction. Having been involved in learning two of the *Topeng* characters, *Tua* and *Dalem*, I was initially very excited by the entry of these characters but then perplexed because, although I recognised the masks and the energy and dynamic of the movements, the exact movements and gestures did not relate exactly to my experience. All of my concerns were overtaken when a white-faced mask with a huge toothy grin appeared carrying an offering and the crowd became excited. The figure threw coins into the collected audience, and the children scampered to collect them amidst squeals of delight. The children then began to shuffle with uncertainty. Some ran away while others sat up very straight and stared fixedly at the figure as he prowled around the edge of the performance space and suddenly snatched at one of the young boys, pulling him into the performance space. The masked figure is the final character to appear in a *Topeng Pajagen* performance and is named *Sidha Karya* (see Fig. 1). The boy and *Sidha Karya* sat cross-legged facing each other with a small offering of rice, incense and flowers between them. *Sidha Karya* incanted some text in the ancient language of *Kawi*³ and then blessed the event, the boy, and the offering. Afterwards everyone got up and dispersed.

This article draws on aspects of my ethnographic journey in Bali and my experience of learning a Balinese dance drama form. The article reflects on and synthesizes the different forms of knowledge that I have encountered and begins to explore whether it is possible to embody performance knowledge when the performance is situated in a culture other than our own.

³*Kawi* is a formal, literary language that came to Bali with Javanese literature and court performances. *Kawi* is only spoken by high-status characters, such as *Sidha Karya*. Very few Balinese would understand the language.

Sekala and *Niskala*, the visible and invisible realms that in Bali are said to co-exist, equate to what we in the west might understand as the physical and spiritual realms of existence (Eiseman 1989, 1990). While spirituality in the west might be argued to be a separate part of our epistemology, in Bali it is embedded in both everyday and ritual practices. Performance in particular is imbued by a strong sense of spiritual effect and, in some instances, spiritual possession. Eiseman states that the Balinese culture does not make a distinction between the secular, the religious, and the supernatural. Eiseman also states that *Sekala* relates to the haptic experiences and *Niskala* “involves that which cannot be sensed directly, but which can only be felt within” (1989, 127). Thus, spirituality might be understood in Bali to be embedded in the everyday, and embodied in the Balinese sense of being.

While the dominant religious belief system on the island is Hinduism, it is a conceptualization of Hinduism that has embraced and been enriched by aspects of Buddhism and also aspects of indigenous belief systems in Bali. Many of the performance practices retain aspects that are pre-Hindu, and a sense of spiritual belief is pervasive on the island in terms of everyday rituals and practices. Both spiritual belief and practice in Bali centre around the notion that a dynamic balance must be sustained at all times and the balance of positive and negative forces, direction, and energy are elements at the core of the belief system and observable in Balinese performance practices. Such modes of balance are key aspects of the embodied knowledge needed by performers.

As an ethnographer studying performance and cultural practices in Bali, I was particularly aware of the dangers of imposing meaning on my experiences and not

interpreting events through a lens of western culture. When I first visited Bali as a tourist I wanted to be someone who was both simultaneously inside and outside the culture. While I sought out experiences that I considered beyond those of the average tourist I did not know quite what to do with such experiences.

On one occasion I was invited to a cremation ceremony. I was informed that it was good to have strangers attending as it helped free the spirit in the body of the dead person. At the ceremony I stood a dignified distance away but was encouraged to move closer and take photos of the body as it was set alight. While I attempted to argue that this was not necessary, the family insisted. Was this because they thought as a tourist I wanted to photograph the scene and so were trying to accommodate me? Should I have resolutely resisted showing that this behaviour was not what western visitors needed to do? Would my remonstrations have insulted the family? What were the rules of engagement here?

Having recovered my composure, I asked a local villager about the significance of the ceremony, and he informed me that he had no idea as he now lived in the town. Was I expecting too much of a local agent? Would I be able to answer a similar question regarding the symbolic nature of lifting the veil in a Christian wedding ceremony?

My research in Bali entailed attending a daily, individual dance class each afternoon, each morning was spent in Lodevuh, a small village outside Ubud, with Ida Bagus Alit⁴ who taught me to carve *Topeng* masks (I also received impromptu dance lessons from Alit's uncle, who was a local *Balian*: he fulfills a function similar to that of a shaman). I was also given the opportunity to attend classes at the government run academy for performance (ISI) where I was able to speak with some of the teachers.

⁴Alit is now also a very well respected *Topeng* performer in Bali.

Formulating the “right” questions was a continual problem, and learning to learn took many different forms here. I tried asking about the symbolic meaning of the gestures in *Topeng* masked performance and received a range of answers, which ranged from “people used to know but have forgotten,” to “I do not know but the government do know.” and “they mean nothing but must be aesthetically pleasing.” While watching performers at ISI I asked a teacher where the internal focus of the performers was directed, and he informed me that I must watch and I would understand – how long might this take? I suspected that there was not enough time for me to gain that level of understanding and perhaps I did not have the sensibility to learn this aspect of the practice. Eiseman reports that following his witnessing a range of quite different performances of the *Rangda* and *Barong*⁵ confrontation, he spoke with many Balinese religious scholars, whose conclusions “in the best Balinese tradition were contradictory” (1989, 315). Such instances are widely reported in the writings of other Bali commentators⁶ and certainly there is a sense that, for the Balinese, historical accuracy is not as important as present lived experience.

Kirsten Hastrup says that as an ethnographer/participant observer we need to find our zero point of perception; we need to acknowledge and understand our own sense of selfhood and cultural baggage so that we can begin to understand that which is different from ourselves. The process of learning I had engaged with enabled me to transcend my own cultural fixity and have the experience of learning a different physical behaviour;

⁵*Rangda* and *Barong* are masked performance figures who represent a range of dialectical characteristics and whose “battle” personifies and reaffirms the need for balance in the cosmos. The two figures depict the Balinese sensibility in microcosm. See Coldiron 2004 for further details of performances involving these figures.

⁶See for example Coldiron 2004 and Rubin 2007 and Sedana 2007.

however, I also learnt that I have inculturated⁷ learned dispositions and that unlearning these dispositions is extremely challenging. We incorporate knowledge through the physical behaviour of our bodies and thus our learning is constantly active and our behaviours constantly in a process of being modified. The learning of particular performance techniques opens up a new set of dispositions, new rules for behaviour. Hastrup describes this as “[t]he sensation of displaced experience,” what she calls the “performance parallax” (1995, 9). Such a change in perspective does have the effect of challenging our own sense of habitus and can enable us to mentally and/or physically engage with different approaches to performance practice.

Philip Zarrilli’s writing on Asian performers offers a challenge to a western conception of performing. He reveals that the Kathakali performers he worked with engaged with character in a way that was “transparent” and without ego. Kathakali performers create “a dynamic figure existing between audience and actor, transcending both. Pointing beyond itself” (Zarrilli 1990, 144). By this he suggests that the Asian performer seeks to assume a position of “you are that,” not “you represent that” but “you are that”: this process Zarrilli refers to as psychophysical⁸. However, if we also acknowledge the diffusion of the performer’s being as also inhabiting a spiritual dimension, as occurs in Bali when performers take on roles such as *Sidha Karya*, then we might use the term psychospiritual.

In order for me to move beyond a mere comparative understanding of the locus of physical energy in different performance techniques I would have needed to immerse

⁷Inculturation is socially learnt behaviour and acculturated behaviour is a consciously learnt technique of behaviour such as *Topeng Pajagen*. See Barba 1995 for more on these concepts in relation to performer knowledge and theatre anthropology.

⁸See also Zarrilli’s more recent research findings on the psychophysical in Zarrilli 2008.

myself into the mindset of the culture, to accept and embody the notion of *taksu*⁹. In addition, witchcraft and magic are still very much part of the belief system – the *Rangda* mask worn in performance is kept in the Death temple (*Pura Dalem*) and can only be worn by performers who are spiritually very strong and can withstand the potency of the mask. *Rangda* is considered to be demonic and an aspect of the witch *Calonarang*, so, while I might be able to incorporate the physical behaviour technically, the mindset would be far more challenging to *embody*.

Laderman (1994) provides an account of her experience having returned from undertaking extensive fieldwork with a shaman in Malay. Back in New York she became very sick; she reports experience that seemed to her as if the Malay spirits of the wind inhabited her and brought back her energy. Csordas's commentary on Laderman's chapter states she *incorporated* the symbolic symbols of Malay *embodiment* (1994, 17). My italics emphasise his significant use of incorporated and embodied here. In Laderman's chapter, her argument suggests that our lived experience indeed incorporates subconscious phenomena and these traces—ghosts or spirits, if you will—continue to inhabit us amidst the plethora of other incorporated phenomena.

As a western student developing her skills as an ethnographer, I adopted the position of a participant-observer to provide what I considered to be a fuller understanding of Balinese culture. Studying *Topeng* enabled me to explore an example of Balinese performance that operates at both a sacred and secular level simultaneously. *Topeng Pajagen* is a masked form, and the masks and headdresses used are considered to be *tenget* or “magically dangerous” (Bandem and deBoer 1995, 152). Masks and

⁹*Taksu* is a complex Balinese term connected to performance that is understood variously as spiritual energy, a transformation of consciousness or possession by spiritual entities.

headresses are both considered to be strong and vital channels by which the spirits can travel and affect a performer and, subsequently, a performance. Thus masks worn for performance, in particular *Rangda* masks and some *Topeng* masks, are held as sacred and stored in temples. Their potency is such that performers wearing the masks need a spiritual strength to perform with them. Masks used here may have been handed down through generations and are permanently empowered, thus explaining why they are stored safely in the temple. While not all masks are considered *tenget*, at least one of the masks being used in a *bebali* performance needs to be spiritually powerful for the performance to be efficacious. The final masked character played out in a *Topeng Pagagen* performance is the previously-mentioned *Sidha Karya*, and it is at his entry that the ritual aspect of the performance is inscribed. As the spiritual efficacy of the performance is marked by the performative gestures conducted by *Sidha Karya*, it is likely that this mask in particular would be *tenget*.

The process, from cutting the wood to make the masks to carving the masks and preparing them prior to each performance, is suffused by purification rituals, blessings, and prayer (see Coldiron 2004, 81). Similarly the performer undergoes extensive ritual preparations and blessings throughout—even prior to their training and certainly before and following performances. Coldiron (2004) offers a comprehensive view of the ritual preparations, and pays particular attention to the notion of *taksu*. Quoting Ballinger, Coldiron references the ceremony of *ngundung taksu*, undertaken by performers embarking on their career (ibid. 89). Here the performer prays to *Dewa Pregina*, who has a spiritual connection to dance and theatre, for the spiritual strength to perform. Other ceremonies essential to performers working with spiritually powerful masks and other

potent performance objects, such as headdresses and *Kris*¹⁰, are also regularly performed. Purification rituals to protect performers from the power of these objects are particularly common. It is evident that performance in Bali is taken seriously, is a vital mechanism for maintaining balance and well being in the society, and entails complex levels of training to attain full embodiment. As Rubin and Sedano note, “[I]n Balinese performance aesthetic, technical skill and sacred elements coexist without tension.” (2007, 111). A key function of aesthetic performance in Bali remains spiritual, a concept that in the UK diminished in significance in the nineteenth century when the notion of art as a particular aesthetic practice was in ascendance; as Max Weber (in Gane 2004) notes the modern world became disenchanted. More recently Gablik (1991) has written about the reenchancement of art and Yarrow (2007) about Sacred Theatre. In both these cases the notion of a spiritual domain is understood as an individualized experience that results from a connection made through an aesthetic practice rather than a socially engaged practice. For the Balinese, the spiritual implies a metaphysical connection with a separate spiritual realm. David Ray Griffin, in a discussion of postmodern spirituality states that there cannot be an “abstract spirituality that is not connected with deep habits and our bodily way of being” (quoted in Atkisson 1990, 24). In this sense, as a western performer I have the possibility to connect spiritually with performance but not with a specific spiritual practice.

Developments from the twentieth century onwards in western theatre practice have often demonstrated an eclecticism that has led to a pick and mix theatrical culture. The relatively recent establishment of a workshop tradition continues to support the

¹⁰A *Kris* is a ceremonial dagger often carried as a part of a male character’s costume in Bali.

“unruly experience”¹¹ that many western performance practitioners follow as it has enabled us to “taste” and “sample” a huge range of diverse vocal and physical performance strategies and techniques from all around the world. The recent interest in somatic¹² learning strategies invites us to consider how we – or more specifically our bodies - engage with and learn physical behaviours both inculturated and acculturated. Alongside such developments, academia sets us the challenge to find ways by which we can articulate and textualise such experiences, and here the term embodiment has begun to feature prominently. *Topeng Pajagen* appears to be the most common form of dance drama in Bali for western performers to initially learn, whether male or female, although the form in Bali is designated as a male performance domain. The two roles that I was taught when I began my “unruly experience,” *Dalem* and *Tua*, are often taught to western students of *Topeng Pajagen*. This is particularly the case for women because of the required physical dynamic of the characters and because they are silent figures who are fully masked¹³. The *Dalem* figure is renowned for his grace and delicacy. *Tua* allows the performer to be slow and faulting in their movements, but there is also scope to explore the comic potential of this old court retainer. My study enabled me to become competent (in Balinese terms: *Wiraga*).¹⁴ I was able to transform my physical everyday body to the extra-daily¹⁵ body that is required to perform the roles, and I learned the choreographed moves. I also had begun to achieve the second level of competency, which entailed being able to follow and work with the musical accompaniment of the *gamelan* and to develop a characterization of the role without the mask. To be judged as having fully embodied

¹¹See Clifford 1983.

¹²Somatics – relating to the body as distinct from the mind.

¹³Diamond reports on a western woman who performed *Rangda* but without a sacred mask (2008).

¹⁴See Rubin and Sedana 2007 for clarification on the levels of competency.

¹⁵See Barba 1995 for a discussion of theatre anthropology and the notion of the extradaily body.

the form, however, I would need to achieve *Wibawa*. Rubin and Sedana report on the four qualities that are applied to performers to judge the quality and define *Wibawa* as a spiritual aura and value:

The stage when a performer has internalized a certain dramatic character and possesses the spiritual aura in line with the vocabulary of movement and choreography of a given character. The *wibawa* is the internal power/values that are widely known as *Taksu*. (2007, 125-6).

Wibawa appears to be a quality that is observable external to the performer and *taksu* is understood to be a quality experienced internally by the performer. As a western performer, key questions for me concern whether I could learn *wibawa* and whether it is achievable for a non-Balinese person. If not, then it would follow that embodiment is not possible.

Sally Ann Ness refers to embodying cultural knowledge as a process of “gathering culturally novel forms of lived experience” (Ness 1996, 141). Arguably in my role as a participant observer I am engaged in such a gathering of “novel forms,” but, while I might be able to appreciate that knowledge is constituted differently in Bali and synthesise the experiences derived from participation in the culture in relation to these knowledges, my understanding does not necessarily lead to an embodied knowledge. The notion of embodiment is a term which in Bali encompasses a spiritual element whereby the performer opens themselves to the gods who can empower them and give them divine inspiration to perform more effectively. My performer training may lead to a level of incorporation but, as suggested above, my experience was “unruly” and, as Gablik describes, my faculties, that might have allowed me to meet with the gods, have been atrophied (1991, 43).

The task of the ethnographer is a process of “locating the unruly meaning of a text in a single, coherent intention” (Clifford 1983, 132) but in order for an individual “meaning” or experience to be coherent it must be incorporated alongside my already existing inculturated experiences. The challenge of processing ethnographic experience into some form of textualisation is highlighted by Clifford:

How precisely is a garrulous, overdetermined, cross cultural encounter shot through with power relations and personal cross purposes circumscribed as an adequate version of a more-or-less discrete “other world” composed by an individual author? (Clifford 1983, 120).

Ness recounts her experience of learning to dance in Bali. She notes that the lesson she took highlighted how little she had embodied; she says “[t]he notes sketch out the magnitude of the skill unlearned and possibly unlearnable realms of knowledge embodied in the technique” (Ness 1996, 151n46). Ness here suggests that embodied aspects of Balinese performance might be “unlearnable,” while she does not discuss this matter further in this writing, it is these “unlearnable” aspects that we might understand as the vibrant spiritual/cognitive aspect at the core of performance that prevents full embodiment by a cultural outsider, a mental lacunae that determines the practice “unlearnable” beyond the technical incorporation.

“To say simply that one has ‘embodied knowledge’ doesn’t take a reader very far in comprehending a specific lived experience of embodiment” (Ness 1996, 136). The term embodiment is understood as a particular aspect of knowledge that tacitly includes lived experiences that go beyond the everyday. Zarrilli’s work on performer training and research into Asian theatre in particular has led to what he calls the psychophysical or psychospiritual score (1990, 132). Current research partnerships between arts and science focus on a neurological engagement; what Puttke calls a “cognitive architecture” (2010,

108) and Laughlin calls transpersonal anthropology (1991). Alternatively, embodiment might be understood as a particular aspect of sensory engagement, what Sklar discusses as a “sensory profile,” an aspect of proprioception (2008). Such accounts, although informative, are either the emically informed account of a cultural outsider or generalised accounts of learned physical behaviours¹⁶. Sklar states that what is being experienced by the performer, in either his/her inculturated or acculturated practice, varies considerably across different cultural communities. It follows then that what constitutes knowledge is different in different cultures and concurs with the idea that an axiological approach is required. Csordas points to two ways in which the body phenomenologically can be experienced: “individuation of the psychological self and the instantiation of dualism in the conceptualisation of human being” (1995, 7). Within western culture we often assume that the body is objectified and individual, and as a consequence do not acknowledge the possibility of the body being perceived as both individual and part of a collective: “diffused with other persons and things in a unitary, sociomythic domain” (ibid.).¹⁷

In Bali performance coheres with the dominant Balinese Hindu belief system. The practice of Hinduism in Bali retains aspects of earlier animistic beliefs and also retains aspects of early Javanese court practices. The performers, whether performing in hotels for tourists or at temple *Odalans*, are part of a sociomythic domain because their first audience are spirits and gods. Prior to performing a performer will pray at a shrine for *taksu*¹⁸, a spiritual energy conferred by the gods; this is especially important when the

¹⁶Emic/etic – emic denotes an account of cultural behaviour from an agent within the culture; whereas etic is an account of observed behaviour from an outsider and initially was considered to offer a “neutral” perspective; however, this potential has since been questioned.

¹⁷Bakhtin’s conception of the carnival body is arguably an example of this notion of “diffusion.” See Holquist 2002.

¹⁸See Bandem and deBoer 1995.

performer needs to communicate with spiritual forces as a part of the performance. Such occasions are evident in *Topeng Pejegan*, where the final masked character, *Sida Karya*, ensures the efficacy of the performance and temple ceremony. According to Eiseman, *Sida Karya* translates as “he who can get work done” (1989, 284). Similarly, performers taking on the roles of the magical figures of *Barong* and *Ranga* also need to have considerable spiritual strength to withstand the potency of these figures. The *Rangda* mask is kept in the *Pura Dalam* when not in use, such is its spiritual power. Performers are required to have a spiritual strength to take on these roles. In addition, it is interesting to note that it is not uncommon in Bali for villages to have a “trance club”; such a club has members who demonstrate a proclivity for succumbing to trance. Members perform as followers of *Barong* at temple *Odalans* where the confrontation between *Barong* and *Rangda* is re-enacted. The confrontation and ensuing battle does not result in a winner but a reinstatement of the balance between good and evil. Thus the followers of *Barong*, armed with *krisses* to fight off *Rangda*, are put into a trance by *Rangda* and finally re-awoken from the trance by blessings from local priests.

Birdwhistell (quoted in Schechner 1990, 29) refers to “kinemes”: a linguistic/semiotic term used to distinguish gestures and behaviours that are not usually consciously controlled. Such behaviours and/or expressions are usually culturally specific and could be understood as having been inculturated - or embodied. As a western student learning *Topeng* in Bali I wanted to understand the internal focus, the inculturated kinemes, or sociomythic domain, as well as the physical actions, but such questions concerning the mental focus or internal focus caused both me and my teacher much consternation. He told me that I would understand by observing performers in

performance. The response challenged my sense of learning: had he misunderstood my question? Was I making cultural assumptions by suggesting a separation of mind from body? Was I assuming the mind to be the object and the body subject – or vice versa? The mind can also be understood as both object and subject according to different philosophical/critical perspectives as can the body. The body in dance, as Hughes-Freeland points out, is “about lived experience and being-in-the-world, but it is also representational: it is seen-in-the-world” (2011, 19). However, in Bali, the body is also seen and experienced as a vessel or channel for spiritual communication and/or possession. The concepts of *Sekala* and *Niskala* pertain to the performer as a part of the cosmos and construct a particular ontological sensibility.

The term “deep acting”, is a term used by Hochschild (quoted in Schechner 1990, 30) to designate the “trained imagination.” Although Hochschild initially sees the term as an “as if,” and not an embedded cultural behaviour such as *taksu*, the term is expanded to incorporate everyday life. He says that when the learned affect is forgotten the deep acting can continue to produce the affect, so, in relation to the Balinese example, the experiential energy produced becomes associated with *taksu*. Such an experience may be argued to be the result of the performer being in a state of what they consider to be spiritual rapture or, similarly, a state of absorption, beyond conscious knowing: “flow.”¹⁹ Hochschild’s notion of deep acting is itself similar to what Hastrup refers to as incorporated knowledge: that knowledge which is absorbed by the body (Hastrup 1995). She in turn draws on Bourdieu (1990, 56) and his notion of habitus an “embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history.” This knowledge we might consider to be tacit or inculturated, but what of the ethnographer’s knowledge and lived

¹⁹See Csikszentmihalyi 1996

experience? Can we attain such a level of internalization or rapture? Hastrup advocates the participant observer position: a lived experience acquired from inhabiting the culture through bodily experience that again will lead to knowledge but a different knowledge in comparison to that acquired from observing culture and making judgements based on observation alone. However, both participant observation and observation strategies are still prone to neglect the cognitive-spiritual experience in relation to the ethnographer's own experience and emerging knowledge. Commentaries on the bringing together of mind and body and the problematic of sustaining western epistemological frameworks such as the Cartesian divide are evident in much recent ethnographic and anthropological fieldwork writing from the west. What is also needed in discussions of acculturated practices is an acknowledgement of, and consideration of, the mind space as well as the bodily space, or mental and axiological lacunae. As Michael Williams points out in his discussion of standpoint epistemologies, "social differentiation... gives rise to distinct 'ways of knowing'" (2001, 10). It follows that the linguistic systems that we work with to make coherent our "unruly experiences" do not always allow us to communicate belief, feeling, and experience; thus, these concepts are vulnerable to discreditation in terms of constituting knowledge. Shifts in interest to what Nelson terms "insider practitioner perspectives" (2006, 107) are, according to Nelson, challenging normative structures of knowledge and beginning to give credence to notions such as embodied knowledge.

The process of acquiring knowledge as an ethnographer working through participation privileges practice and engages with feeling rather than thought. My intention in Bali was to learn *Topeng* roles: not to become a *Topeng* dancer but to gain an understanding of performance practice by feeling what it is like. Csordas states that,

“[c]ulture is grounded in the body” (Csordas 1994, 6) and as an “outsider” I am able to infiltrate the “body” of the cultural other by physically experiencing the movement patterning. Sklar (2008) observes that such a “migration” of gesture has the potential to lead to an embodied, sensory, cultural understanding; however, my experience demonstrated more evidently the impossibility of embodying the form.

Schechner discusses the process by which training penetrates the brain from the outside (1990, 36) and argues that it is necessary to assimilate the “full language” of the performance into the body. His approach here engages with brain activity: ANS²⁰ and the relationship between the experience of knowing and the experience of feeling. Similarly, Puttke talks about the “cognitive architecture of dance movement.” Movement, he argues, must be “understood” and “absorbed” by the dancer: “[h]e or she must know, prior to the beginning of the movement why the movement is executed, otherwise it may easily be meaningless” (Puttke 2010, 108). He points to a necessary interrelationship between cognition and biomechanics. Similarly research in neuroscience has been undertaken exploring altered states of consciousness in, for example, trance performance. Research undertaken in the field of neuroscience and anthropology, by people such as Charles Laughlin, is a welcome contribution to understanding what it is to be human, as it is able to scientifically explain and measure the brain’s responses to stimulus. Being able to measure brain activity during altered states of consciousness has opened up particular modes of cultural understanding. However, the concern remains that the credibility and potency of effects caused by spiritual phenomena are diminished by rational explanation, whereby a western value judgement is imposed on a phenomena such as *taksu* in order to

²⁰ANS: autonomic nervous system.

rationality explain the experience. Laughlin comments that such measurements of brain activity need to allow for a “zone of uncertainty” (Laughlin 1991). Williams’s comment here further underlines the importance of acknowledging cultural experience.

The very idea of reason is a snare and a delusion and that, even if we could get it, scientific or philosophical knowledge would not be what it is cracked up to be. (2001, 5)

Thus, it may be possible to measure enhanced brain activity in a performer who has received *taksu* but the phenomenological experience must also be considered.

The *Topeng* performer, however, as Coldiron records, is not necessarily conscious or aware during a performance. Coldiron states that:

[I]t is entirely possible that *taksu*, for the masked performer, may carry with it connotations of visitation or mediumship. In any case, *taksu* is clearly beyond mere individual charisma, stage “presence” or “star quality”; rather it seems to negate the individual, who becomes instead the vehicle for a greater power. (2004, 94)

The notion of *taksu* as a transformation of consciousness in performance is a key stumbling block to embodiment for a cultural “other.” Myerhoff (1990) engages with this notion of a transformation of consciousness specifically in a ritual context, but she does not address such a transformation of consciousness for the participant observer in an inter/trans cultural context. She does, however, acknowledge that the examination of subjective experiences, psychological states, and a transformation of consciousness is a weakened area of anthropological understanding (1990, 245) that is often dismissed as esoteric. Csordas, says in the introduction to his text on embodied experience, that “[t]he paradoxical truth, in fact, appears to be that if there is an essential characteristic of embodiment, it is indeterminacy” (Csordas 1994, 5).

What is useful to the case here is Myerhoff's argument that transformation is often *not* an essential contributor to the success of a performance. She says, in reference to ritual performance, that:

[t]hey must be reasonably convincing, rhetorically sound, and well-crafted, but do not require an alteration in individual belief at the deepest level, though that is often highly desirable. (1990, 246)

Myerhoff and others can all be understood as making a strong case for embodiment as a state that is attainable for performers from either inside or outside a culture. However, they are writing from a position outside of cultural specificity. Current thinking advocates an emic viewpoint as being of greater value, or authenticity. But the viability and authority of the emic voice also causes concern.

To conclude, Csordas's notion that embodiment is indeterminate could be considered to support Myerhoff's argument that the concept of embodiment is a weakness in anthropological discourse, as it appears to evade giving the term a concrete form. Many of my ethnographic experiences have been, and continue to be, "unruly" and, as such, perhaps reflect a western sensibility in theatre where the form is not a codified form and lacks a coherent discipline. Dance, although being a far more technique-based discipline, is not aligned with spiritual routes in the same way as many non-western dance forms are. As such, my experience of learning Balinese dance drama provided the capacity to surprise and disturb my sensibility in terms of its dynamic and physical challenge, but the embedded spiritual aspect of performing demanded a transformation of consciousness that evaded me. I was aware and concerned by the mental gap—my spiritual emptiness—which meant that I was not able to move beyond a technical competency of the dance dramas I had learnt. Despite the generosity of my teachers, who

without judgement encouraged me to attend their ceremonies, be blessed by their priests, and even encouraged me to perform at *Odalans*, I felt that my engagement with the culture was unintentionally superficial and disrespectful. Perhaps, ironically, I feared the wrath of the gods. As an ethnographer seeking to transcend my cultural fixity and challenge my western sensibility for individuation, and particular learning dispositions, I was and am conscious that we need to be mindful of the mental lacunae between our own axiological disposition and that of the cultural other.

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Illustrations



Figure 1: *Sidha Karya* – the final masked character in *Topeng Pajegan* performance at a temple festival in Lotunduh, 1996.
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Figure 2: *Patih*, or prime minister, a masked character performed as part of a *Topeng Pajegan* performance (Lotunduh, 1996).



Figure 3: *Odalan* or temple festival (Lotunduh, 1996).