

In the Court of Yogyakarta

Karen Greenspan

A loud cry from the back of the theater announced the entrance of Hamengkubuwono X, the Sultan of Yogyakarta. (Located in Central Java, Yogyakarta is one of the two main Javanese sultanates in Indonesia.) The sultan walked down the aisle and took his front row seat for the performance of the court dancers and musicians of Yogyakarta at Asia Society in New York City.

The *kraton* (palace) gamelan orchestra combined forces with the local ensemble Gamelan Kusuma Laras. All were ceremonially dressed and coiffed in the set *kraton* attire – batik sarongs and navy blue jackets, with the men wearing a matching head wrap and the women's hair arranged in the fancy, pulled-back, prescribed hairstyle.

The musicians sat on the floor in several upstage rows behind their cast bronze instruments – metallophones, gongs, inverted kettle gongs, and xylophones. The mellow, vibrating instrumental tones blended with gentle choral singing in cyclic patterns creating a wash of hypnotic, twilight music that shimmered like the golden sequins gleaming on their costumes. The classical music played on the Javanese gamelan is the essence of all Javanese performing arts.

The musicians were cued with several knocks on the *keprak* (hardwood block percussion instrument), and the ensemble and chorus introduced a couple of “fragments” (excerpts) from the Javanese dance-drama repertory. The first excerpt was an example of *golek Menak* – a dance form derived from *wayang golek* (wooden puppet theater). In this mode, the dancers’ movements imitate the angular wooden motions of the three-dimensional rod puppets as they perform stories from the *Sérat Menak* (accounts of the Prophet Mohammad’s uncle). The *golek Menak* dance,

first performed in 1943, was the creation of the current sultan’s father, Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX (r. 1940–1988).

In the performed excerpt, the two male dancers demonstrated amazing ability at replicating the stiff, jerky movements of the wooden puppets. Even their traveling sequences stopped and started abruptly as the two male characters moved toward and away from each other in wide-stance moves. Of course, they engaged in a fighting sequence, which is a major part of Javanese male dancing. The slapstick buffoonery in this humorous segment packed with bodyslapping, head butting, leg grabbing, and bottom bumping drew chuckles from the audience.

A fragment from the *wayang wong* dance-drama *Klana Sewandana Gandrung* provided another example of the strong influence of puppet culture on other Javanese performing arts. *Wayang wong* is derived from *wayang kulit* (shadowpuppet theater). Attributed to Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwono I in 1750, the large-scale court spectacles with casts of more than fifty dancers originally lasted from dawn until dusk for three days. The great Indian epics were frequently the subject matter of these demonstrations of grandeur and prestige of the court. Now *wayang wong* is presented in condensed fragments of a few hours.

The fragment presented at Asia Society introduced the typical solo male and female roles and their associated traits:

Klana - the preening male character who is always readying himself for an encounter with his beloved

Golek - the beautiful, demure female; object of the *klana*’s affections

The enacted drama included a duet with King Prabu Klana Sewandana (the *klana*) and his servant Sembunglangu. In the scene, the king is so completely obsessed by his attraction to Dewi Sekartaji (who is, of course, in love with another – Raden Panji Inu Kertapati) that he imagines his male servant to be her. The comedic interplay between the king and his servant is underscored by the eternal-

ly startled expression frozen onto the red mask of the servant. The two male characters dance with forceful, emphatic movements in a very wide stance, which is characteristic of the male *gagah* (coarse, exaggerated) style.

The red-pantalooned servant dances an imitation of the refined female (*putri*) movements with narrow stance and shy, indirect mannerisms to indicate the king's deluded thinking. The king attempts to seduce his manservant, who desperately tries to dispel the king of his mistaken affections. And thus the scene's raucous humor climaxes.

The female character Dewi Sekartaji wears a green mask with a placid expression and the typical attire of female court dancers – batik sarong and fitted bodice – with the essential movement prop: the long, silk dance sash, or *selendang*. She glides demurely about the stage until King Prabu Klana Sewandana comes upon her and gets too close and frisky. She whips her sash at him and moves away, with the delicate quality of a China doll. This maneuver is repeated until, suddenly, the king catches the end of her sash and begins a

tense tug-of-war using the silky dance prop.

At this intense moment of conflict, Raden Panji shows up for a “good versus evil” fight with the king. The two face off using typical male fighting moves – bourrées in wide plié stance punctuated with a sideward, raised knee – all with dorsiflexed feet. Their mimed blows are accompanied by vocal groans from the chorus. The servant attends the king, handing him weapons for the encounter, while Dewi Sekartaji provides the more lethal bow and arrow to her beloved Raden Panji (who also wears a matching refined, green mask). His arrow hits its mark and in the end, evil is defeated. The two green-masked lovers dance a final victory duet driving home the message that only true love is the source of eternal happiness.

Much like Javanese culture and religion in general, the dance forms are a syncretic amalgamation of beliefs, mystical practices, and artistic conventions from Javanese indigenous animism, Hindu-Buddhist traditions, Islamic principles, Sufi mysticism, and even some European influences. Nowhere is



(Photo: E. H. Wallop, Asia Society)



(Photo: E. H. Wallop, AS)

this more evident than in the *bedhaya*, a court dance of paramount grace and control.

Bedhaya Sang Amurwabhumi, choreographed by the current sultan, Hamengkubuwono X, comprised the second half of the program. The initial performance of this choreography in 1990, a couple of years after the choreographer was crowned, was both a dedication of love to and commemoration of his father, the previous sultan, as well as a celebration of his own accession to the throne. Through the movements and floor plan, the dance carries an esoteric message: in this case, the throne is to be used to bring about harmony in the world for the welfare of the people and the country.

The *bedhaya* (pronounced *bedoyo*) is the highest, most idealized Javanese court form and is performed by nine female dancers. With an aura of elegant ceremony, the nine dancers and two elder teacher-attendants (usually former dancers – one stationed in front and one behind) moved out into the performance space in a procession of the stately, slow-motion *bedhaya* walk. In this memorable walking movement, the leg swings for-

ward and then rotates outward as the dancer steps onto it, always keeping the toes lifted in a flexed position.

The *bedhaya* dancers wear dazzling costumes of royal bridal attire – batik sarong; fitted, dark, velvet bodice; lavish golden adornments; and specified hairstyle with decorative headdress. In the past, the *bedhaya* dancers wore sparkly, bridal, hair decorations. For this performance a single, yellow ostrich feather attached to a headband was added to the glittering hair arrangement. This costume innovation was introduced by Hamengkubuwono VIII (r. 1921-1939), who was evidently inspired by the French *cancan* costume.

Once the dancers complete their procession into the dance space, they kneel to the floor and sit cross-legged in a contemplative pose with hands folded on the lap. This reverential posture is called the *sembah*, or salutation, and is directed toward the sultan, the Divine, and the noble guests. It is offered again at the end of the dance ritual, before the exit procession.

The dancers rise to the lulling gamelan chimes and sung sacred poetry and dance as

if in a dream. They use one hand to softly manipulate the loose ends of their red, white, and black print dance sashes in a myriad of motions – caressing, flipping, pulling, lifting, dropping, spreading, flicking, casting away, and more. Concurrently, the other hand forms flowing gestures that assume the silky quality of the fabric.

The subtle, slow-motion shifts of weight and level, inclination of the torso and head, direction changes, and distinctly inward gaze have a deeply meditative quality. In bedhaya dances, the gaze is directed toward a spot on the floor about two feet in front of the performer. Dancers are instructed not to show any emotion through their face as the bedhaya is a meditation. Emotion is only to be used internally.

The dance evolves into an endless series of group configurations and floor patterns that are imbued with mystical symbolism. The formations correspond specifically with spiritual concepts and mental processes within the Javanese-Muslim belief system. The dancers form symbolic configurations – predominantly linear designs, although this particular choreography included a circular formation – in which the dancers linger for a period of time while shifting directional facing or modulating level. They then hasten on tiptoe to reposition themselves in a new formation.

The number nine has significance within the traditional Javanese mystical system and is part of the ritual formula for this symbolic expression of the sultan's power. Each of the nine dancers has a specific name and role that corresponds with a part of the whole human being. For instance, the lead dancer, called the *batak*, symbolizes the head, or the mind. The second dancer, the *èndhèl*, signifies the heart, or desire. The fifth dancer, or *bunthil*, represents the rear, and so on.

The formations symbolize mental processes, or struggle, along the path of spiritual progress as expounded by Islamic mystics. The opening configuration represents the entire human body with all elements in har-

monious balance. The formation changes as dancers leave the line and create other configurations. This signifies inner conflict, or disunity. The final formation of three lines of three dancers is a metaphor for reconciliation and unification. This final arrangement of the dancers illustrates the resolution of the soul's inner striving to overcome human passions and attain a unification of mind and heart.

Opening Formation	Final Formation
x x	x x x
x x x x x	x x x
x x	x x x

Finally, the dancers drop into a creeping walk performed in a deep squat. They walk in this position continuously nudging the long sash out of the way. The dance concludes with another *sembah* and processional departure leaving the audience entranced by the power, beauty, and hypnotic control embodied in the dance.

The original bedhaya dance, *Bedhaya Ketawang*, which is the prototype from which the others have been created, is attributed to Sultan Agung (1613-1645), the most powerful ruler of the Muslim Mataram Sultanate (late sixteenth century to mid-eighteenth century). It is believed that the sultan envisioned the *Bedhaya Ketawang* through inspiration from the Goddess of the Southern Ocean, Ratu Loro Kidul, the most esteemed deity in Javanese mythology.

The story is told that one night while the sultan was absorbed in worship, the goddess came to him singing her sublime song of love for him and dancing the heavenly bedhaya. The next morning the sultan related the composition from this nocturnal visit to his music and dance masters and commissioned the bedhaya. The dance was considered to be a gift from God. There are even legendary accounts that assert heavenly origins for the overall creation of female dancing and gamelan music.

To the Javanese people, the dance represents the mystical union between the Goddess of the Southern Ocean and their respective



(Photo: E. H. Wallop, AS)

ruler and is therefore a symbol of the sultan's mythical power by virtue of his union with the divine goddess. The dance's sacred nature was such that in earlier times during ceremonial occasions, the guests in attendance would turn their backs when the bedhaya was performed, as it was for the eyes of the sultan alone.

The *Bedhaya Ketawang* was performed for Sultan Agung's coronation and accession to the throne of Surakarta (the original court of Central Java) and each year on the anniversary, as well as for each successive ruler to the present time. Likewise, the court of Yogyakarta also has sacred bedhaya dances, which were bequeathed by the Surakarta court to the kraton of Yogyakarta in the division of artistic assets when, after much contention, the Mataram kingdom divided in 1755 into two principalities. These bedhaya dances are also linked to the mythical encounter between Ratu Loro Kidul and Sultan Agung.

All of the seminal bedhaya dances are considered to be *pusaka*, or sacred heirlooms. Both

courts continue to perform *pusaka bedhaya* dances as well as foster new bedhaya choreographies. Over time, the Yogyakarta court developed its own distinctive dance style and traditions, which some consider to be more militaristic in quality.

The Javanese (specifically the Yogyakarta school) also have a philosophy called *Jogèd Mataram* that links their dance practices to notions of ideal Javanese moral character. The philosophy theorizes about four aspects of dance – concentration tempered with awareness, dynamic spirit or inner fire, self-confidence without pridefulness, fearless dedication and discipline. These qualities are to be applied beyond dance to the challenges of life in general. *Jogèd Mataram* concepts underlie the performing art form and emphasize the interdependence of the dancer's physical movement and inner spirit in the creation of the ultimate artistic expression.

Although today the bedhaya is performed outside of the ceremonial context, in earlier times and on special occasions it still is just that – a ceremonial event that spans many

hours. In preparation for the ritual performance, stipulated offerings of flowers, various foods, money, and incense are made to Ratu Loro Kidul, who is believed to be present whenever the dance is performed.

When performed as a court ceremony, the bedhaya cannot be performed just anywhere; it must take place in the *pendopo* (pillared, marble dance hall) of the kraton. For the event, the dancers purify themselves by fasting, showering, praying, and making offerings before performing and wearing the dazzling, prescribed costume.

The accompanying music (meter and tuning system) and poetry (lyrics) sung by a mixed chorus with a female soloist are specified and of primary importance in terms of the compositions' supernatural powers. Interestingly, the gamelan music for this bedhaya included a brass horn section and a snare drum – a likely holdover from Dutch rule and influence from 1670 to 1949.

There are even Javanese texts that claim that the sacred sounds of the bedhaya music may be used as a protective charm against destructive forces. But this idea of the bedhaya's protective influence may extend beyond magical power to the existence of a contingent of female dancer-soldiers, as reported by some seventeenth-century Dutch envoys that described royal dancers who were armed and trained as soldiers and protected the king during audience sessions. The dancers wear a dagger tucked into their waistband. In some choreographies, they pull it out and engage in a dainty combat sequence.

The dancers themselves are called *bedhaya*. In earlier times, the bedhaya were *abdidalem* (retainers of the court) who lived within its boundaries. Court dancers have always been recruited from all levels of society and locales, although many in the royal family have filled the ranks of performing dancers. In fact, the royalty are involved at the highest levels.

The royal court has always provided the space and support for the practice of the traditional Javanese cultural expressions, al-

though performing arts institutions outside the court began to emerge in the early 1900s, along with nascent nationalist sentiments. After Indonesia's independence from the Dutch in 1949, the state moved quickly to establish public/private conservatories at high school and college levels to insure the preservation of the performing arts traditions.

But even today, the kraton provides some of the best training and performing opportunities. Crown princes, royal uncles, and sultans have been court choreographers and served as the Palace Performance Director. In this performance at Asia Society, two of the sultan's daughters performed the bedhaya. As the chief patrons of the arts, the sultans have been active international ambassadors historically using the performing arts as a means of cultural diplomacy and now as outreach to inspire intercultural understanding and generate tourism to Indonesia.

Dance at the Yogyakarta court is still a considerable operation with a large pool of dancers to accommodate productions with as many as fifty dancers. The court dancers and musicians hold public rehearsals every Sunday at the Yogyakarta kraton and perform the *pusaka bedhaya* annually in honor of the anniversary of the sultan's accession.

The teaching staff consists of five senior teachers and ten junior teachers for the female dances alone, and more for the men's dances. This does not include the gamelan musicians and chorus, which are integral and coequal elements of Javanese dance composition. These numbers are greatly reduced from what they were during the heyday of court performance during the reign of Hamengkubuwono VIII. But, to the people of Java, dance is a highly treasured legacy that defines what it means to be Javanese.

Within the arts community in Central Java there is a credo of perpetuation along with meaningful adaptation and enrichment of artistic traditions. In this way, the bedhaya dance and the performing arts in general are empowered to assert timeless values.