Pasupati

At midnight in the place of the dead, a ceremony of transformation

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAREN GREENSPAN

We sat in silence, in the darkness, on the damp cemetery ground. We remained there, sitting cross-legged, for an hour and a half. The endless drizzle of the rainy season had stopped and the clouds dispersed to reveal the full, pearly-white Moon. In the absence of any man-made light source—no flashlights, no cellphones, no cigarettes—our eyes eventually adjusted and the midnight sky brightened enough to illuminate the dark contours of the foliage of the trees of the surrounding woods. One's auditory sense is sharpened in the absence of visual stimuli, so the distant howling of dogs and the strange call of a bird drew my intense interest.

The people of the inland Balinese community of Abiansemal had turned out by the thousands for the *pasupati*—a ceremony of empowerment for the newly made dance masks and other ritual objects. This village community, or *desa*, comprised of thirteen *banjars* (districts) with an average 1500 villagers in each, had gathered at the grounds of the Pura Dalem—the temple that is dedicated to Shiva, the Destroyer, and always located next to the cemetery. Every desa in Bali has at least three main temples with one dedicated to each god of the Bali-Hindu trinity: Brahma—the

Above: A Rangda mask wrapped in a white cloth with protective symbols and other objects will be empowered in a pasupati ceremony in the Balinese community of Abiansemal.

Creator, Vishnu—the Preserver, and Shiva—the Dissolver, or Destroyer.

The temple grounds were festooned with bounteous *penjor* (tall, curved bamboo poles decorated with palm leaves and fabric); *umbulumbul* (curved, colorful banners); ceremonial silk parasols; and offerings of flowers, plaited palm leaves, fruit, and rice cakes inserted with incense. Everyone was dressed in their finest ceremonial attire—women in colorful, long sarongs; white or yellow *kebaya* (long-waisted, fitted, lace jacket); and long, colorful tied sashes; the men in sarongs; white shirt-jackets; and *udeng* (ceremonial head wrap tied in the design of the syllable, *OM*.)

Before heading off to the nighttime event, I had spent the afternoon and evening at my guide's family compound—most people in Bali live with members of their extended family in a compound of open and enclosed buildings surrounding the family temple. His three children, niece, and nephews entertained me by doing what they normally do to entertain themselves—play *gamelan* (the traditional Indonesian music ensemble that consists of percussion instruments featuring chimes, gongs, and wooden xylophones) and perform their many different types of dances. While my guide, Rai, played the drum and his older nephew played the *gender* (metallophone), his younger nephew danced several of the men's dances—*Baris* and various *Topeng* (sacred masked dance-dramas). Rai's thirteen-year-old daughter took to the stage to dance *Legong* (the elegant Balinese dance form for young girls and women). Meanwhile, his gregarious, toddling, two-year-old daughter danced along with everyone, replicating the men's moves as easily as she mimicked her older sister's movements.

Members of the marching gamelan look on as the high priest ministers a ritual over the masks and objects to be empowered.

Rai is a *wali* (sacred dance) performer. He began learning to play gamelan music and to perform the basic men's warrior dance, *Baris*, when he was in elementary school. By the time he was ten, he pursued more focused study with a teacher from the Academy for the Arts. Eventually, Rai was mentored by a village priest who sponsored his training with one of the country's master Topeng artists. Rai now fulfills his *yadnya* (spiritual service, or duty) by regularly performing sacred dances—an essential component of Balinese temple ceremony.

Balinese life revolves around a continuum of activities performed to balance the positive and negative energies of the cosmos to maintain a state of harmony. The relationship between the *microcosmos* (human beings) and the *macrocosmos* (greater universe) is a common topic of conversation among performing artists. The balance of energies is sustained through prayer, performance, and offerings. Dance is a basic form of offering to the spiritual realm; it pleases the gods and placates the demons. To this end, most village temples have a set of sacred dance masks for the ritual performance of Topeng and other sacred forms. These various dance-dramas are performed for *odalan* (annual temple festivals) and other events in the ceremonial life of the community.

Two of the most popular dance characters, considered to be deities and village protectors, are the *Barong* and *Rangda*. There is a specific repertoire of three Barong and

Rangda dance-dramas. The most common Barong mask is a beloved, lion-like, four-legged, furry creature (requiring two dancers), although there are other types. There is a Barong tiger, dog, serpent, boar, sow, elephant, lion, cow, and the three-meter-high Barong couple—the black-faced male Jero Gede and his Chinese princess wife Jero Luh. The Barong's counterpart is Rangda, the witch-widow who transacts in black magic. Her frightening mask features large white fangs, bulging eyeballs, pendulous breasts, a long red tongue—dripping with fire that symbolizes an insatiable hunger, and long tresses made of goat hair that hang down to her knees. She is believed to have fierce magical powers. Any dancer who plays her must be able to withstand the intense power she possesses and the extreme reactions some audience members have toward her (especially when in trance). These two deities manifest opposing energies and are used in temple performances to restore balance within the community. During the annual *Galungan* (Balinese New Year) celebrations, the Barong parade through the village, dancing forth blessings and curing illness.

Villagers attend the pasupati ceremony bearing offerings such as sculpted leaves, flowers, fruit, rice cakes, and incense.

Before these special dance masks can be effective in this sacred context, they must be purified and empowered. Because the masks have been held between the spiritually unclean feet of the mask maker for months as he carves them, they must first be cleansed. The *melaspas* (purification ceremony) is performed at the beach and, interestingly, the sea breezes and salt water make the wood stronger. However, the masks are still considered "empty" until they are empowered through the pasupati ritual. This is always performed at midnight in the cemetery, the place of the dead, since the god Shiva must be present for empowerment to take place.

A dancer who will wear one of the masks to be empowered in the ceremony is assisted in donning his costume.

Abiansemal had suffered a devastating fire in June of 2016, in which all but three of the *balé* (pavilion platforms) and their sacred and costly contents were destroyed. For the restoration of the temple, a new set of dance masks and other sacred objects were commissioned and financed with donations from the community. Today, 85 percent of the temple has been restored, and Rai surmises that the community will hold a huge ceremony at the completion of the project by the end of the year.

At about 9:30 P.M., we headed over to the Pura Dalem (temple). The grounds were already packed with people and activity. Villagers arrived bearing offerings on their heads and in their arms. They placed them on the various balé and congregated before one of the many priestesses and bowed in prayer, holding a burning stick of incense. In Bali, the heady fragrance of incense made from the cempaka and frangipani flowers was ever-present. Once sprinkled with holy water by a priestess, the attendees rose to mingle with family and friends from the community.

The gamelan musicians sat in their pavilion and played energetically. The festive atmosphere was enhanced by the brisk, metallic, struck tones that created the sound of "delicious confusion," as composer Colin McPhee once described in his book, *A House in Bali*. In another pavilion, the dancers who would wear the dance masks to be empowered were donning their costumes with the help of many assistants. As I circulated amidst the crowd, suddenly a small group of community members broke into *Pependetan*—a slow, ritual dance to call and welcome the gods—commonly performed in temple ceremonies. Anyone may join the dance and they do not wear any special costume. The women and men bore flasks of holy water or baskets with offerings as they approached the newly made Barong and Rangda deities at rest in their pavilion. They spread their arms like asymmetrical wings and splayed their fingers as they performed a simple, repeated step, moving forward to deliver their offerings.

The gamelan stopped and a chanter began intoning a song expressing hopes for a successful ceremony. Once the high priest arrived, all the costumed dancers gathered in a particular area to pray in a ritual with one of the priestesses. Even though they would not be dancing that night, they would need to be empowered along with the masks. In addition, the dancers were required in order to move the

The Barong couple, Jero Luh (Chinese Princess) and her husband Jero Gede (Black-faced Male), make their appearance at a village odalan (annual temple festival).

masks in procession to the ritual location in the cemetery.

The numerous priests, clad in all-white, surged toward the pavilion that housed the dance masks. They began lifting the heavy, gilt boxes containing smaller ritual objects (these containers needed to be empowered as well) and descended from the raised pavilion platform. The Barong dancers stepped into the ninety-pound masked costumes and moved down from the pavilion assisted by the priests. Then, the thirty-pound Rangda masks, wrapped in white cloth capes painted with protective signs and sacred syl-

A procession, with gamelan playing, marches through the streets during a village odalan.

lables to guard them from evil forces, were hoisted high onto the dancers' heads. They congregated for a ritual led by the high priest while the chanter continued his song. The villagers followed the female members of the temple ritual committee, who carried tall, elaborate, sculpted offerings on their heads and moved in to witness the ritual.

The processional gamelan players struck up their music. This ensemble included different instruments from the regular ceremonial gamelan. The instruments were suspended and carried on poles for parading. The cymbals were dressed up with red, black, and white pom-poms. Their rhythms were designed to keep everyone in step with the procession and added a sense of ceremony and anticipation.

Upon a cue from the high priest, the dancers inhabiting the Barong and Rangda masks, followed by many priests shouldering the golden boxes, the marching gamelan, women bearing tall offerings on their heads, and the men of the ritual committee upholding ceremonial parasols, set off in procession to the nearby cemetery—about a ten-minute walk. The security detail, identifiable by its uniform of sarong and head wrap made from *poleng* (the black and white checked fabric that symbolizes duality and is a reminder to maintain a balance between opposing forces), corralled the rest of the attendees. They wielded high-intensity flashlights as they directed the crowd to follow.

We moved through narrow stone gateways to exit the temple grounds and proceeded along a paved path bordered on both sides by giant palms and banyan trees of the jungle forest. As we walked, family members and friends clasped hands or put a hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them to stay together within the moving mass of people in the darkness. There was no pushing, shoving, or crushing—only the calm and orderly flow of many moving toward a common destination with a common purpose.

When we arrived at the cemetery, the priest's platform had been set up and the sacred masks (and dancers) and ritual attendants continued on to the ritual site, deeper into the cemetery. The crowd hung back following the instructions delivered through a bullhorn. We were directed to sit down on the cemetery ground according to each banjar.

The ceremonial chanting continued with the incessant gentle tinkling of the priest's *genta* bell and the ongoing beat of the gamelan. One could see a surreal vision in the distance lit by far-away floodlights—golden parasols bobbing up and down as the ritual attendants and masked dancers

Rangda in a production for tourists at the artisan village of Batubulan.

The Barong Ket is a beloved, furry, four-legged creature pictured here in the story of Dewi Kunti at a production for tourists at the artisan village of Batubalan.

circumambulated the ritual space three times. It was midnight, and just as we had been forewarned, all lights—of any kind—were extinguished. Thousands sat in the darkness—upright, silent, and attentive. The dancers, too, had placed their masks in the boxes and sat down next to them.

Our eyes adjusted, and I noticed a burst of flitting fireflies lighting up the foreground. Rai later told me that they are considered a good omen. The priest became quiet. I was in the midst of thousands of men and women, including elderly and children of all ages (they are trained to stay up quite late for their many late-night religious rituals), as we sat in spotless ceremonial garb waiting and attentive to the spirits who might convey a sign that "the power" had entered the masks.

Suddenly, after what felt like a very long time, without any sign or change that I could discern, an announcement came through the bullhorn telling everyone they could stand up. The security detail switched on their flashlights, men lit up cigarettes, and we gradually fed into the long procession behind the dance masks, priests, gamelan, and offering bearers to walk back to the temple grounds. The masks were returned to their pavilion and the priest recited more prayers of gratitude. I checked my watch—we had been sitting silently in the cemetery for an hour and a half.

Rai explained that many of the dancers would stay overnight at the temple with the dance masks as part of another ritual, to create a harmonious energy between the dancer and the mask called *mesakapsakap*—part of the wali dancer's ongoing "marriage" to the dance mask. As we proceeded to the parking lot, I noticed a large poster announcing the schedule of upcoming events at the temple. The empowerment was accomplished none too soon. These new masks had work to do; they would be dancing in sacred rituals in just two days' time.

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