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A. A. M. Djelantik

**"Is there a shift taking place in
Balinese aesthetics?"**

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"IS THERE A SHIFT TAKING PLACE IN BALINESE AESTHETICS?"

by: Dr.A.A.M.Djelantik

In the absence of authentic studies or treatises on Balinese aesthetics it is admittedly a tricky undertaking to talk about such subject matter, and more so when questioning whether a shift is taking place in this area of intellectual discipline. There is, nevertheless, a strong reason for me to venture on this slippery path, because of being almost daily confronted with this kind of challenging problems.

To find the right approach to the this kind of problems one has to be careful as not to be drawn straight away into a quicksand of intangible philosophical speculations, but be pragmatic, letting practical considerations of access and suitability prevail over theoretical discourse. Available resources supporting such approach are the practicing artists themselves, writers, priests and art lovers among the Balinese nobility.

In the past kings and the nobility were the patrons of the arts. Nowadays, kings are no longer there and due to their declining wealth and prestige, only a few of the old nobility can still function as such. Interviews with these people as well as with the artists themselves, supplemented by observation of trends in the styles of art products and following articles in newspapers and magazines can still supply enough information from which changes in the perception of the arts among the Balinese public could be deducted. Also the influence of newly emerging patrons of the arts such as local government, tourism, art galleries and art collectors should not be overlooked.

Observations and interviews alone cannot sufficiently touch upon the philosophical aspects of aesthetics. The theoretical and the practical approaches

toward the understanding of aesthetics can be regarded as separate aspects which supplement each other.

About the theoretical aspect I mentioned already that no writings about **aesthetics specifically as a discipline** exist in Bali. From the small amount of knowledge that I have been able to gather haphazardly I can tentatively conclude that treatises about beauty, perception and artistic creativity in the Balinese literature mainly deal with symbolic, cosmological phylosophical concepts or with transcendental mystical experiences. (Agastia, Bali Post 20.6.92) Most of it refers to old Hindu scriptures. In this context I like to quote Kapila Malik Vatsyayan who, referring to those scriptures, stated that *"the fundamental beliefs of the people gave rise to a theory of aesthetics: a theory which could have resulted only if the aesthetician shared the visions of the seer and beliefs of the philosophers. The traditional Indian artist considered artistic creation as the supreme means of realizing the universal being. Art was thus considered a unique discipline, a "yoga" and a "sacrifice" through which the artist was to seek salvation here and now in this world."*

Similarly in Bali, according to Agastia, the great poet and priest Pedanda Made Sidemen who was also an architect, sculptor, and mask carver, considered his manyfaced artistic creativity as a devotion, a prayer and "yoga" by which his soul found the unision with the Almighty. He was an extremely prolific writer, who during his long lifespan of 126 years -(he died on 10 September 1984)- expressed in hundreds of lontar writings his thoughts on philosophy, religion and also on artistic creation. If we may consider these writings as an example of aesthetic theory, we immediately feel the influence of his priesthood with its **philosophical background** of Hindu Vedas and other old Indian scriptures.

On the other hand he was also too much of a **practical Balinese**. He never forgot that he lived in this world together **with and in the midst of the community** and that his literary works, his architectural achievements, masks, sculpture, were all dedicated for practical purposes, for daily use by the community. Quite remarkable are his later writings "Selampah laku" and "Patitip" telling about his life experiences and his ideas about the latest developments in the modern world. He envisaged the increasing dominance of materialism in the Balinese community, even among the priests, the emergence of what he called "wiku raksasa" or the demonic priest. (Agastia: Bali Post 14.9.94)

It is clear from the above that a great philosopher and artist as Pedanda Made Sidemen did not dwell in an ivory tower. He was not only mentally but -like all the other villagers- also physically involved in community life. It is very well conceivable that by his close contact with the community at large his remarkable personality greatly impressed the people around him and that unconsciously they have been influenced by his ideas. The same can be said of the relationship of thousands of other Balinese artists of lesser calibre with their environment. It may therefore be assumed that by participating in communal activities the Balinese philosophers and artists traditionally share their taste and ideas of beauty with the common people. This sharing of concepts and attitudes takes place without thorough philosophical discussions or intellectual analysis, but as a subconscious transfer of common feelings of satisfaction and happiness in the perception of objects regarded as beautiful.

Interviews with artists and the common people supplemented by artful observation and intuitive empathy may therefore be validated as means of research to arrive at an

understanding of aesthetics, especially of its practical aspects.

The most traditional of Balinese aesthetics is to be found in **architecture**, because it is the human habitat in which man finds his basic need of protection, not only against the rigors of nature but also against invisible forces which are believed to threaten his existence and wellbeing. We don't know of the existence of prehistoric cave paintings in Bali such as have been found in Europe and in Africa. Therefore, as far as we are concerned with aesthetics, we have to be content with the principles of Balinese traditional architecture as they are laid down in the old lontars (palm leaf books) such as Hasta Kosala, Hasta Kosali, Hasta Bumi and others, which are believed to have been introduced in Bali by Empu Kuturan and Dang Hyang Nirartha in the 14th century during the reign of Dalem Waturenggong.

The most striking element among these principles is to be found in the **sense of unity between man and nature**, expressed in the desire of man to conform with and to seek harmony between man as "Buwana alit" and his environment "Buwana agung." Man had found in the rhythm and cosmic order of nature the beauty and peace which assured him of the continuity of his existence. As traditional measurements for the building of Balinese houses the bodily parts of the occupant are used: feet, forearm, fist, span of arms and fingers, step, reach of height, etc., each having its distinct term. (see fig.) In this way the traditional architect ensures that there is harmony of the occupant with his house and with his environment, which harmony is experienced as aesthetic satisfaction. Here aesthetics is not only a visual or accoustic experience but also and more so a physical sense of peace and harmony.

The next step required for the cosmological harmony between man and nature is the spatial arrangement of his house as well as of its furniture and fixtures. The buildings which form the components of a living compound are arranged according to function and to the different meanings attached to the directions of the compass. Elaborating in detail on the many rules and symbolic meanings pertaining to this spatial orientation would lead us too far away from the principles of aesthetics. It may suffice to mention a few examples. The head end of the bed e.g. should never be to the South or West, the house temple should be at the North-East corner of the compound, the kitchen should be nearest to the entrance. (see fig.). For the traditional architect (*undagi*) being in a compound or a house not in accordance with the traditional lay-out is an affront to his aesthetic feeling. (We, modern citizens, may compare it with our feeling when seeing somebody spitting on the floor. Something that we feel as not right or not good, for whatever reason it may be, can also be felt as unaesthetic!)

The conquest of Bali by the Dutch at the beginning of the century and the introduction of colonial government brought with it the construction by the Public Works Department of offices and houses of a different kind, which gradually became standard for the upper classes and in smaller sizes penetrated into the Balinese living compounds, especially in the towns. Traditional Balinese architecture remained for temples and the construction of ceremonial buildings in private compounds. For the common people, however, the cosmopolitan standard imposed by the Public Works Department became dominant.

After independence and later starting in the sixties and the seventies changes took place. In Indonesia and also in Bali, due to the intensified contact with the

outside world, a compelling urge to search for own identity was growing. In architecture in Bali this urge found its expression at first in the application of Balinese decorations of stone and wood carving on the otherwise standardized cosmopolitan buildings, often resulting in ugly and disharmonious combinations. Gradually however, our architects with academic schooling became aware of the ugliness of such constructions and have tried to find a more balanced modern Balinese style of architecture, thereby paying attention to the building in its entirety instead of being obsessed by application of Balinese decorations. The upcoming tourist industry was a stimulating factor in this holistic approach. Foreigners wanted to experience something different, to be in a different atmosphere than what they were used to in the cosmopolitan world. In Bali a guide, **Jimmy Pandy**, who ran an art gallery in Sanur, was the "avant garde" in this venture. After his model the newer hotels, bungalows and restaurants started to be built in a style which tried to show as much as possible its Balineseness by featuring thatch roofs, bamboo or red-brick walls, traditional type of doors and windows, proper placement of stone carvings and sculpture and Balinese interiors. A most successful "Balinization" of modern buildings, at the same time containing the most modern facilities was in the Nusa Dua Beach Hotel which opened in 1985, the aesthetics of which was praised by Balinese and foreigners alike.

What about its aesthetics in the perception of the Balinese themselves? When the Bali Beach Hotel was opened in 1962 the Balinese flocked to Sanur to admire the new skyscraper. That novelty was a real attraction, which they found not only impressive but also beautiful (!) For the Balinese its cleanness, the smoothness of its lines, and the perfection of its execution were in conformity with their concept of "becik" (good, beautiful). It did not change this

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traditional aesthetic concept! What did **affront** their idea of beauty was the use of structures similar to "sanggah"s (offering shrines) as lamps along the road. What they **missed** was the clear distinction between upper, middle and lower spheres of the building. There was no "character", no "personality".

Closely related to Balinese architecture are **carving and sculpture**. Like in every society, after the fulfilment of its basic needs for food and protection the availability of leisure time gave rise to cultural activities. The compelling desire to be one with nature made the Balinese to use his hands to decorate his dwelling with artefacts derived from nature. Flowers and leaves that impressed him by its symmetry, rhythm and harmony found expression in decorative stone and wood carving in houses, on walls and entrances of compounds. Its practice through the ages has established the general propensity of the Balinese artist towards decorative art, prevailing until the present day. It is in decorative art that the Balinese had found his deep satisfaction, not only as a creative artist, but also as a useful member of the community. The socioreligious character of the Balinese village required and is still requiring its citizens to spend part of their time in the service of the community, building temples, making paintings, sculptures, carving decorations, and last but not least making offerings for endlessly recurring ceremonies, such as weddings, cremations, and the production of ephemeral artefacts like penjors, cremation towers, shrines, ogoh-ogoh etcetera.

At the aesthetic level this being part of the cosmos and of the community in particular have given the traditional artist the specific Balinese attitude towards his art. His aim is not to express in his work his personal

concepts or aspirations, but to execute what is expected from him. His satisfaction lies in the devotion which he can put into his activity and to achieve the highest perfection in his product. His aesthetic ideal is not only the conformity with the norms but also the achievement of perfection, in which he aims at the unision with God the Almighty as the symbol of the ultimate perfection. The inherent tendency in the Balinese people to compete against each other in any kind of public performance stimulates this strive for perfection and once the artist has acquired fame as one of the best, he will be proud when other artists try to copy his work or imitate his style, because it means a confirmation of his standing. It may be argued that such a practice can stifle creativity. In fact in his strive for perfection and beauty the Balinese artist often tends to be led by exaltation during his work to new discoveries, inspiring him for original creativity.

Speaking of norms of beauty in painting and sculpture the most exact codification is to be found in the classical Wayang style as it had been developed by the artisans in Kamasan at the order of the Kings of Klungkung since the sixteenth century. These aesthetic norms had its origin in the classical Hindu epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabarata which inspired the puppet makers and the puppeteers to shape their figures according to the ideals expressed in these stories and in Hindu mythology. Until now the many guildlike painting communities in the village of Kamasan, especially the school of Nyoman Mandera, have preserved the classical Wayang style. This style is based on a strict codification for the shapes, colours, and attributes attached to each of the Wayang figures. It is for the classical Wayang painter an aesthetic affront to see a drawing of a Wayang figure not exactly according to codification. In his perception such deviation is just ugly,

not beautiful notwithstanding the perfection of skill and handwork by which it has been done.

It may be interesting to analyse WHY the wayang figure has such an appeal on the general public and on the artist in particular. Already at first sight the proportional discrepancy of the body of the Wayang figures compared with the human body is obvious. The shape of the head, nose and eyes, the length of the neck and arms and the width of the shoulders, are not realistic. And yet, due perhaps to the fact that in the Wayang the personalities are considered to be superhuman, the surrealistic forms seem to evoke spirituality, the belief in something beyond daily experience on this earth. These surrealistic forms are accepted as normal, and even more that , they became codified as norms of beauty. These aesthetical norms transcended into the other forms of arts: sculpture and woodcarving, although in sculpture the proportional measurements of limbs and body tend to become more realistic. This might be attributed to the fact that the old stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata had gradually found their expression in the classical theatre, in which dance was a basic element. Dance performances became prominent among the arts because of the intensive sponsorship by the courts. In sculpture the positions of the body are supposed to meet aesthetic requirements if they conform with the poses of the dance. This has become such strong a rule that many dancers are using sculptural postures as examples in their training.

Traditionally the ideals of human character and behaviour find its expression in the form of the Wayang. The measure of conformity between the product of art and its underlying idea forms an important part of aesthetic

evakuaton besides the skill and perfection by which the object is produced.

Starting in the twenties when modern schooling was introduced and the artists Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet came to settle in Bali, modern ideas and technologies penetrated into the daily life of the Balinese people. Roads and bridges, modern means of transport, telephone and electricity brought about great changes in the society. Eager for progress the Balinese made readily use of the new facilities.

In the visual arts the introduction of perspective and the influence of Bonnet in the perception of the human body gave birth to a new style, known as PITA MAHA after the name of the artists' cooperative set up in Ubud by the late Cokorda Gde Agung and the two European painters Spies and Bonnet. .

The PITA MAHA painting style can be regarded as result of the introduction of new aesthetics by Western artists because in some way it has definitively fixed a norm among the Balinese painters and formed a yardstick by which a certain judgement of their products was applied. One may however question if by this new element a shift had really taken place in Balinese aesthetics at that time. In my interviews with painters of that period their evaluation of their contemporaries was mainly based on the traditional judgements of conformity with codification in case of Wayang figures shown. Harmony of colours and proportion, skill and perfection in the execution of paintings, came into consideration both regarding Wayang paintings and those dealing with subjects derived from daily life and from nature. One is compelled to conclude that despite the formative stylistic changes introduced by Spies and Bonnet, there has not any change taken place in their concept of art

as mere pursuit of beauty, nor in their attitude towards their creative activity.

An interesting phenomenon that had taken place already many decades earlier in architecture in Bali was the use of Chinese porcelain plates as decoration on walls and temple gates. Later plain glass bottles and even discarded electric bulbs found their place on top of walls and entrances. Asked about the use of such decorations on Balinese structures, their answers were generally positive: they liked it, they find it "becik" (good, pretty), not offensive or sacrilegious. They didn't understand my term "Kitch" for it. In their perception there is no disharmony with the environment. In other words the use of Chinese plates do not pose an aesthetic problem for the traditional Balinese architect. Even as recently as Nov.1994 an "undagi" while building a temple gate in our garden confided to me how he wished that he had those plates at his disposal, "*mangda pateh ring sane sampun-sampun!*" (= to be conform with old tradition).

Old Pita Maha painters shown paintings by contemporary artists like Gunarsa or Wyanta have no opinion. Gunarsa's Wayang paintings were found strange, funny, evoking goodhumored smiles. They recognize them as Wayang but couldn't identify them. Apparently there has no shift taken place in their aesthetics. Other contemporary paintings usually leave them unaffected.

New technologies.

A remarkable development took place during the thirties in the field of architecture and sculpture in which **cement** became a substitute for stone. Impressed by gypsum casts of statues he saw in a museum in Java, the late Rajah of Karangasem decided to try making casts of Balinese stone and woodcarvings. During renovation of a part of his Puri he

provided the massive main gate- in itself a remarkable product of his own fantasy- with a series of large Wayang figures in the classical style, cast in cement. As a boy I followed closely how he vigorously and endlessly experimented until he got the right technique. He had a host of artisans carving out for him in deep relief the moulds to be used for casting. Wax was used to check how the hollow forms would appear after casting and several oils were tried out to find the most suitable one for the smooth separation of the wooden mould from the cement. In succession at first geometric and flowery patterns, wayang figures and later battle scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata appeared on walls in cement cast. Pedestals supporting wooden pillars in houses, previously carved from stone were now produced more quickly as cement casts. Flower pots with decorations of wayang figures and tens of statues were produced, functioning as fountains spouting water into fish ponds at Ujung Water Palace, Sekuta Park and Tirtaganga Water Gardens.

The other Rajahs of Bali were enchanted by the new products and not unlike what happened in old medieval times when the court of Klungkung was the centre of the arts in Bali, they now requested from the Puri of Karangasem those cast products they found suitable as decorations in their own Puris.

Activities stopped during the Japanese occupation and until much later. In the seventies a man named Lasia of Kapal village near Denpasar who as an apprentice in the thirties had learned the technique from the Rajah in Karangasem, started to produce cement casts for building shrines and temple gates and decorative "stone carvings" in great quantities. His initiative appeared to meet a general need of the population for cheap readymade traditionally "carved" building material. Due to his commercial successes he soon found many followers. At present the whole town of

Kapal consists of rows and rows of workshops producing traditionally shaped cement casts of every kind, providing a cheap substitute for expensive manually produced carvings of stone or brick.

Many people start questioning whether such mass production of cement casts would not kill the arts by putting many artists and artisans out of work. It is unfortunately true that the industry needs a relatively small number of carvers to make the deep relief carvings. It cannot be assumed that it will kill the art of woodcarving. The producer needs to select and employ the best artists and for the rest he has to rely on technicians.

From the aesthetic point of view it appears that the Balinese and the Balinese artists in general do not feel the use of cement casts as building materials as an affront against their aesthetics. The overwhelming extent in which this new element has found application is witness of their tolerance for what we with Western trained eyes would call **Kitsch**. When asked about it the Balinese would reply first of all that it is practical and cheap, accessible for the average budget. Then they would consider if it is in harmony with the environment and when asked to comment specifically to its aesthetics they would fall back to the evaluation of the artist's skill and the perfection by which the work has been executed. Their aesthetics refer to the traditional requirements of good artisanship and in this kind of novelty to its technology: the quality of the sand and the cement used, the right proportional mixture. They will look at the texture of the surface, its coarseness or smoothness. Therefore, in regard to Balinese aesthetics the introduction of the new technology of cement casts has not changed anything fundamentally.

Quite different is the case with the upcoming of the YOUNG ARTIST paintings catalysed by Arie Smit and later with the generation of academic artists. The youngsters entered a new area never explored before: the complete freedom of expression in their naiveness without instructions from older artists. Their naive spontaneity gave a new dimension to Balinese aesthetics, the absence of a prescribed concept or any codification. What Arie Smit called "the rhythm of life" found spontaneously its outlet in the rhythm of lines and forms, the harmony and boldness of sometimes contrasting colours. In a remarkably surprising manner these naive paintings -without consciously aiming at it- comprise the three basic aesthetic elements: unity, complexity and intensity. When these youngsters grew older their boldness gave way to more sophisticated and careful handling of colours and forms. Gradually their art became more and more decorative. Under Dewa Nyoman Batuan's leadership in Pengosekan a new branch of painting developed, naming itself the **Community Artists** after their communal way of activities. The care and finesse emanating from their products bear testimony to their Balinese artistry and artisanship. These paintings are the most popular products for the past twenty years, and are to be seen in all hotels, offices, banks, restaurant and private houses, not only in Bali, but over the whole world. Their beauty and the atmosphere of serenity and tranquility emanating from these paintings seem to fulfill the general need of man for relaxation in this hectic modern world.

In contrast to the changes occurring with the PITA MAHA artists, the YOUNG ARTISTS and later the COMMUNITY ARTISTS the developments in the artworld effected by the ART ACADEMIES during the past three decades are of a fundamental character. Indonesian Nationalism, advanced schooling in

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general, communication with foreign artists and knowledge of art developments in the West and in the rest of Asia have opened the eyes of our younger generation to a thousandfold of potentialities never dreamed of before. The most striking difference with the previous generation of artists is their **consciousness** of the existence of the problem of art and the artists.

In a compelling search for identity in their art they try all means of expression which they got knowledge of and mastered during their studies. Feeling the need to include something from their own culture in their work the Balinese painters have found in **abstract expressionism** a readily adaptable vehicle to express their Balinese-ness. Traditional Balinese forms like Wayang figures were the first to be transmuted into expressionist-decorative modern art, and magic symbols have found its way into a wide variety of compositions, ranging from realistic, geometric, decorative, impressionist, and abstract-expressionist to bizarre surrealist painting and sculpture and fantastic installations.

Questions which now have to be addressed are:

- a. what aesthetics is coming into play in such transmutations
- b. what is the position of the artist in modern Bali?
- c. what prospect is there for Balinese art in future?

These questions are dealt with just briefly, leaving them rather open for further discussion.

ad a. In this respect we have to know about their most fundamental aspirations, which may not be the same among all artists from the academies. It might be useful to review their different aims. These can be:

a.1. Traditional aims as has been discussed in an earlier paragraph, referring to the incorporation of traditional shapes and symbols, now in transmuted forms, into their works of art.

a.2. Nationalistic aims, of those who strive towards the creation of National Indonesian Art. These artists try to make an amalgam of the artistic principles of the various parts of the country. They try to combine what is felt as beautiful in one area with that in other areas and come in some way to a kind of mixture which appeals to all. It seems that there is a way of coming towards an "Indonesian standard of taste in beauty." This is happening already in the dance. By regular artistic exchanges between groups of artists, giving performances before each other, the artists have come to appreciate the beauty of movements and forms of each other's areas and have been able to absorb and further develop elements of dance previously unknown. This kind of amalgam is taking place in the field of what Thomas Monroe calls "morphological aesthetics" (1964)

a.3. International ambitions. There are artists who want to incorporate elements from abroad and apply aesthetic principles from there. In modern dances performed at the STSI in Bali for the past few years many Western ballet movements have been introduced. Our dancers have been able to create a mixture of Balinese and Western dance movements in a responsible manner. I think that in a considerable way this is facilitated by the complete freedom of movements cultivated in modern Western ballet. In painting and sculpture, as we have seen, not only Western techniques, but also Western styles have been adopted.

a.4. Personal ambitions. There are Balinese artists who in their search for identity and truth in their art have come to a completely personal style as is the case with the painter Made Wianta. His latest geometric creations contain

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mystic symbolism and have come very close to handicraft of a simultaneously minute and reamarkably monumental character.

b. There is nowadays a lively discussion going on among artists and public alike about the position of the Balinese artist in the community. Changes in the artists' position are inevitable in view of the technical, economical and social developments in the country. Overpopulation and the sudden shift from an agraric into a semi-industrial society has its impact in the lives of the artists. While in the past art was produced in the service of the community, commerce has given it the character of a **commodity**, often the only means of income for the artists and art products have become objects for trade and in the art circuit subjected to speculation among art collectors.

c. Future prospects.

The changes now taking place in Balinese art and thus in Balinese aesthetics will continue. Growing tourism will need increased numbers and greater variety of Balinese art products and will continue to stimulate creativity among the artists. Fortunately, as result of the recent deepening of religious consciousness and upsurge of religious activities in Bali the need for traditional (= non-touristic) art products is steadily growing in the Balinese community itself. Because of this increased cultural activity Bali will remain an important centre of the so-called "cultural tourism." The authorities should be aware that in the interest of Bali and for the benefit of the world at large these cultural activities should remain genuine and not be degraded to an engineered show for foreigners.

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Denpasar, April 1995

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