

## **Balinese Performing Arts through Walter Spies: A Collaborative Journey to Exploring Culture and Economic Value**

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### **Abstract**

This study embarks on an enthralling exploration of the intersection of culture and creative industries in the context of Balinese performing arts. While grounded in the culture and creative industries perspectives, this study delves into the multifaceted relationship between the preservation of Balinese cultural traditions and their economic implications. Walter Spies, a pivotal figure in Balinese cultural history, plays a central role in this odyssey. He took part in mapping, documenting, and narrating Balinese performing arts. The article meticulously examines how Spies' collaborative efforts have resulted in a renaissance in the economic viability of Balinese performing arts. Using an interdisciplinary approach based on photography histories, cultural economics, and arts management, this study dissects the mechanisms by which cultural expressions become valuable assets in the burgeoning creative economy. This investigation goes beyond a simple historical examination, shedding light on the contemporary challenges and opportunities Balinese performing arts face in a globalised world. It emphasises the value of preserving cultural authenticity while capitalising on the untapped economic potential of these time-honoured traditions. In conclusion, this study provides a compelling narrative of the intricate interplay between culture, creativity, and economic sustainability in Balinese performing arts. This study adds significantly to the ongoing discussion about how cultural heritage can coexist peacefully within the dynamic landscape of the creative industries, providing invaluable insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

*Keywords:* Bali, culture and economic value, history, performing arts, tourism, Walter Spies

## **Introduction**

Bali is now internationally renowned as a tourist destination, it is not due solely to the charm of the Balinese or the beauty of their island, or even the extravagance of their ceremonial pageants. What appears to be Bali's touristic vocation today is the result of deliberate decisions made not by the Balinese themselves, but by others beyond their borders (Picard, 1995). Under Dutch colonial rule, Bali, a tiny Hindu community compared to the Muslims majority, was being promoted as a kind of "living museum" of what Java was like before the triumph of Islam. With the demise of the kingdom of Majapahit (AD 1293-c.1520) in Java, Bali provided sanctuary to refugees who refused to convert to a new faith, and was therefore regarded by Dutch scholars as the surviving heir of the Hindu-Buddhist civilization that had been swept away by Islam. Portrayed by the colonial authorities as a part primitive, part sophisticated paradise, where the inhabitants were artist by nature, Bali was regarded as "unspoiled," though many visitors feared that it would not long remain so (Hitchcock & Norris, 1995; Vickers, 2012).

In the 1920s, Bali was firmly under Dutch control, despite the fierce battles from 1906-1908 that the Dutch needed to subdue the island. Holland's image abroad was tarnished by protests against this brutality, and in order to atone for their behaviour, the Dutch began to present a more positive image of their colonial policy based on the preservation of Balinese culture and the development of tourism. In this spirit, the colonial government organised the community and Balinese culture, which became known as the "Baliseering policy." Vickers (2012) described how the Dutch colonial government redefined the image of Bali from its image as a wildly uncivilised place into the image of an island paradise. The imagery encouraged the arrival of many photographers, artists, anthropologists, filmmakers, and writers. In the absence of commodities suitable for colonial enterprises, tourism seemed to be one of the few viable industries.

The tourism industry then took off by 1924 when regular steamship service from Java brings painters, musicologist, and social scientists to witness the rejuvenation of Balinese culture, which arose partly in response to the growth of tourism in the 1920s, and which continued into the 1930s, despite the world-wide recession. There is a strong tendency in modern society to combine culture and economy. Culture not only becomes a brand, but also a symbol. The main sources of inspiration and idea to develop the cultural goods is based on local knowledge (Kong et al., 2006) meanwhile willingness to participate are being impacted most significantly by indigenous/local knowledge (Saraswati et al., 2021). Li and Li (2011) stated that the cultural and creative industry is both the external performance of culture and an important economic driving force. However, the development of the cultural and creative industries is not solely dependent on traditional culture. In essence, culture is a form of creation and innovation.

A different perspective on Bali began to emerge with Walter Spies as the main catalyst. Spies was invited by Ubud's nobleman Cokorda Raka Sukawati in 1927 (Stowell, 2011). Spies and his social set opposed the more lurid aspects of Bali's tourist image, and offered in its place their own vision of a vibrant folk culture, and what they saw as the authentic face of Bali. Pramana (2019) mentioned that before

the arrival of Spies, sacred art in Bali had its own space in people's lives. Especially in religious rituals in temples or rites in certain places.

Spies then acted as an intermediary and a source of knowledge for a wide range of specialists working in Bali given his multi-talented foray in painting, photography, and performing arts including music and theatre. In particular, he provided social scientists with their first point of entry into Balinese culture. Spies not only won the respect of certain members of the Dutch administration, but also befriended other local Balinese and foreign residents in Bali. In her *Art in Indonesia*, Holt (1967) argues that Balinese art had become stagnant and that Spies arrival on the island acted as a catalyst for the evolution of modern Balinese art.

With keen appreciation of the link between economics and culture, Spies saw a niche in which he could operate. He was motivated by what he considered as honourable intentions and did not cynically manipulate Bali's performing arts in the service of tourism, though he did have the blessing of the tourism authorities. Instead, he tried to enhance Bali's reputation and draw attention to what he perceived to be the finer points of Balinese culture.

Spies interest in performing arts especially dance and drama, found a match from his experience of the *Sanghyang Dedari* performance held in the *puri* (palace) of the Sukawatis in Ubud (Stowell, 2011). This trance-dance of heavenly nymphs is carefully described with the addition of the "infinitely sinuous winding melody" that accompanies the performance. What especially impressed Spies was the combination of sacred and profane, the harmony of childlike and fanciful, the traditional ritual form and the sense of investment by a higher power. Spies was deeply interested in Balinese society and conducted a great deal of original research, but he never entirely managed to suspend judgement and shake off his European heritage. Spies was well versed in the traditions of Western performing arts, and was moreover a product of cultural upheavals of the dynamic 1920s, the "Glorreichen Zwanziger" as they were known in Germany. The Balinese performing arts were seen as having much in common with the ritual theatre that had flourished in Europe the advent of the age of reason, Bali was thus a living museum of world theatre. Furthermore, Spies carried out documentation of performing arts in Bali, after which he recreated new performances by incorporating European elements as strengthening elements for Balinese performing arts, one of which was created in the *Cak* dance with I Wayan Limbak in 1937, which later became the iconic performing arts of Bali (Pramana, 2019).

Spies' collaborative journey in performing arts with his Balinese counterpart eventually created a new wave that became an entry point to the development of cultural and creative industries in Bali. This study embarks on an enthralling exploration of the intersection of culture and creative industries in the context of Balinese performing arts. While grounded in the culture and creative industries perspectives, this study delves into the multifaceted relationship between the preservation of Balinese cultural traditions and their economic implications.

### **Result and Discussion**

In 1924 Walter Spies, a German artist met for the first time with Tjokorda Gede Raka Soekawati, a former Punggawa of Ubud, Bali, who at that time was a member of the *Volksrad* in Batavia. Tjokorda invited Spies to come to Bali and stay in Ubud in 1927. Tjokorda Gede Raka Soekawati had assigned his younger brother Tjokorda Gede Agung Soekawati, Head of Ubud District, to prepare accommodation for Spies' arrival. Tjokorda Soekawati introduced Balinese culture with an offer, if He wants to know Balinese culture, Spies must come directly to Bali to see how Balinese sacred dances and arts work (Ardhana, 2015). After deciding to settle in Ubud in 1928, the Ubud nobles allowed Spies to build a house in front of the *Puri* to support his mobility. Apart from Spies, the King of Ubud has actually invited many artists and painters to come, but Spies is one of the most influential and provides a touch of collaboration in many areas of art in Bali.



*Figure 1.* Walter Spies on his House in Ubud, Bali. (Source: Stowell, 2011)



*Figure 2.* Walter Spies portrait. (Source: Morley Kennerley, 1930s)

Spies' interest in Bali's performing arts scene, began during his stay in Ubud. He intensely witnessed various musical arts, Gamelan, traditional dance, and classical Balinese theatre which complement every important ritual of Balinese society. Balinese art has enormous potential if it is developed more seriously as sustainable cultural and economic capital. He was challenged to straighten out the negative views and images of Westerners towards Bali, together with British writer and performing arts critic Beryl de Zoete. As known before, in the mid to late 1920s, Bali began to be known in international publications as an exotic island with a predominantly topless female. This was due to Gregor Krause's photographs in 1912 which recorded hundreds of Balinese people's daily lives in his book which sold well in Europe and America. In the period, photos showing *Bade* or cremation towers, natural views and cockfighting have become very popular in the tourist world which the colonial government in Bali has begun to develop. The Balinese performing arts have not been looked at in any serious research. This inspired Spies to carry out a search.

They began their collaboration with Balinese artists through documentation and mapping to find hidden pearls in the richness of Balinese art. Beryl de Zoete, then helped him to write the narrative and analysis. They explored village after village throughout Bali to find traditional performances, including those that are rarely shown to the public. Spies and Zoete's exploration of Balinese performing arts in photographic documentation spawned an important book entitled *Dance and Drama in Bali*. The first book to present various types of Balinese music, theatre, dance, and gamelan in a complete and in-depth manner. In fact, to this day this book is one of the most important references for conducting research on Balinese performing arts. After the publication of the book, Spies became an important informant that must be sought by foreign researchers who come to Bali. Even as a key informant in the making of many films about Bali.

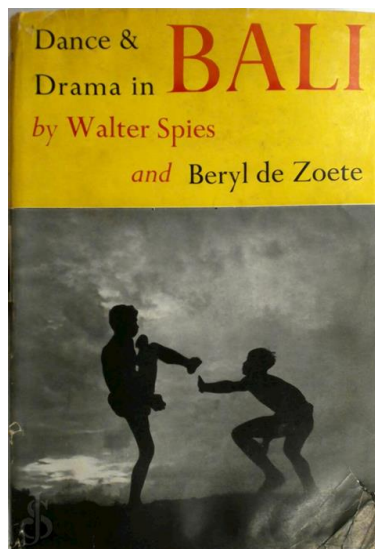


Figure 3. *Dance & Drama in Bali*, a most important book by Spies and Zoete for documenting Balinese performing arts. (Source: Author's Collection)

Spies then arranged all the dancers' performances, which are usually carried out in the afternoon to evening, but were shifted to the morning due to the need for lighting. The morning light emerging from the east caught Spies' attention in optimising camera exposure. The use of white cloth as a light reflector was also introduced to control the light contrast in shooting Spies. Due to the need for documentation and photography on a traditional stage, Spies started arranging performance times which tended to be uncertain, shifting them to morning with consideration of the best use of sunlight to get perfect photographic lighting exposure (Pramana, 2019). Optimal light regulation is also strengthened by the use of large sheets of white cloth which function as light reflectors in order to reduce light contrast in Bali's tropical climate. So that almost all of Spies' photos have perfect lighting sharpness and detail.

Previously, in sacred Balinese arts performances, such settings were never or even not permitted. However, when it comes to lighting, Spies succeeded in including it as an important element in photography. Apart from utilising reflector elements, Spies also includes artistic smoke to give a mystical feel to the lighting nuances of his photos. The fog effect usually always appears in the visuals of Spies' paintings. In the smoke effect, the use of back light as a silhouette nuance also appears as a mystical reinforcement in the unity of Walter Spies' photo. In terms of the shooting position, Spies also made important considerations, taking an angle from above, collaborating and planning carefully to build a tower at the shooting location so that he could get a different angle. This shooting position is very different from the position of Balinese people who usually have to sit, in a kneeling or cross-legged position in appearance. Especially when the *barong* scene appears on stage.



Figure 4. Balinese assistants helped Spies take photos with a light reflector. (Source: Hitchcock, 1995)





Figure 5. Using smoke effect for photo shooting process by Spies. (Source: Spies, 1937)

One of the iconic milestones in Spies' legacy is the *Cak*, (now better known as the *Kecak Dance*), this performance was created by Spies with Limbak, a skilled dancer from Bedulu, a village east of Ubud. Spies' experience in documenting Balinese performances provides a deep sensation of the combination of sounds, voices, and songs in *Sang Hyang* performances in various types. *Sang Hyang*, which was originally a repulsive sacred performance, was composed with I Wayan Limbak in terms of movement composition, and asked for a cappella musical considerations from a music scientist Jaap Kunst who at that time was also intensely researching the art of music and gamelan in Bali. Rows of Balinese men are formed in a circle wearing sarongs tied, their hands are arranged, their bodies contorted and their voices are in unison. Forming a dynamic bustling dynamic. Presenting a Balinese *wayang* story with universal value taken from the Ramayana epic, in a fragment of Ravana kidnapping the Goddess Sita. The collaboration performance was originally danced at the Samuan Tiga temple, Bedulu, around Limbak's house. Then it grew very popular in several other areas in Bali. So that it has become a Balinese icon that is currently attracting international attention and simultaneously developing economic attraction.



Figure 6. *Cak*'s performance was an important collaboration between Spies and Limbak. (Source: Stowell, 2011)

*Cak*, a collaborative creation of Spies and Limbak, hereafter become Bali's most popular and economically valuable performing arts in the current tourism era. The *Cak* (*kecak*) is a dramatic dance performance that was created and staged for a tourist audience and has since become an important part of Bali's tourism economy. It's quite possible that Spies and his colleagues had no intention of developing it as such, and were instead focused on the artistic and aesthetic qualities of performance. Nonetheless, *kecak* became a source of income for Balinese villagers and was standardised as *kecak* Ramayana in the 1970s; it is still performed in this format today—as a static, easy-to-sell performing art (Stepputat, 2012).

The iconic collaborative creation of the *Cak* furthermore indicate an effort between external and local stakeholders (Putra, 2013) also shift from mainly cultural value that Spies and Limbak depict with the majestic works of art (i.e., dance, drama, music), to mainly a product of high economic value with it standardised in the 1970s. Tourism itself promotes the movement of people, goods, cultural items, and values around the world. Tourism connects locations as well as people and cultures, where influences are unavoidable. As Salazar (2010) points out, the process of meeting external and local culture has been ongoing for a long time and has intensified during the modern and global era, in which the meeting between the two undergoes a much more complex process, a process of negotiation. The history of Walter Spies journey of arts particularly performing arts in Bali is an intriguing example of how the two forces collaborate to create cultural hybridity. This hybridity then comes with its consequences.





*Figure 7. Cak (now better known as Kecak dance), collaborative creation of Spies and Limbak, Bali's most popular and economically valuable performing arts in the current tourism era. (Source: Gerke, 2018)*

However, this impact is extremely difficult to pinpoint, let alone quantify. Individuals are influenced by a wide range of cultural activities (Frey & Briviba, 2022) from artistic experiences in performing arts, architecture, even the social networks that they uphold in local institutions and religious ritual. This influence is multidimensional and composed of many concurrent forces.

As Picard (1995) once mentioned, there is a price the Balinese must pay for their culture to become a tourist attraction: what they offer must be comparable to and distinct from what other destinations offer. In this regard, the distinction between “Balinese culture” and “heritage” and “capital” should be understood as much more than a rhetorical device. Indeed, the Balinese desire to preserve their cultural heritage is not only an admission of their desire to profit from their tourist capital, but also an attempt to root their identity, to recover the thread of a unique history handed down from their ancestors.

## Conclusion

This research aims to investigate the value of preserving cultural authenticity while capitalising on the untapped economic potential of the traditions, and shedding light on the contemporary challenges and opportunities Balinese performing arts face in the globalised world with Spies works. Walter Spies, a pivotal figure in Balinese cultural history, plays a central role in this odyssey. He took part in mapping, documenting, and narrating Balinese performing arts. This study investigation goes beyond a simple historical examination, shedding light on the contemporary challenges and opportunities Balinese performing arts face in a globalised world. It emphasises the value of preserving cultural authenticity while capitalising on the untapped economic potential of these time-honoured traditions. In conclusion, this study provides a compelling narrative of the intricate interplay between culture, creativity, and economic sustainability in Balinese performing arts. This study adds significantly to the ongoing discussion about how cultural heritage can coexist peacefully within the dynamic landscape of the creative industries, providing invaluable insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

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