

The Indian Element in Balinese Barong Masks : Some Reflections

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Abstract

An art historical study of the Indian element in the Art of Bali, particularly of the Barong mask used for ritualistic and theatrical performances reveals several layers of socio-religious absorptions of Indian beliefs in Balinese religious-mythical practices. India is known to have been the wellspring of the various cultures which evolved in Asia from the earliest stages of evolution. These interactions also took with them the small but significant nuances of ancient Indian religious and art practices, which transformed into extremely popular but apparently different looking traditions. In this study, we specifically analyze the *Barong ket* mask and its historical, cultural, religious and metaphysical affinities to the *kīrttimukha*, the "Face of Glory".

Key words: Barong; masks; Bhairava; *Nāṭyaśāstra*; *kīrttimukha*.

Dissemination of Art has been an inherent part of human evolution in India and the world surrounding it. India has been the fountainhead of the Culture and Art of other parts of Asia since the earliest times. The people of India visited these parts of the Eastern world for trade, religious activities and even political conquests by way of land and sea from the earliest recorded times in history. Records of immigrations abound in the chronicles and stories written from the early historical times.

While discussing the all-encompassing similitude of the social customs, cultures and religions of the Asiatic countries, we generally focus on the

transmission of concepts from India as the fountainhead, to other countries from the earliest recorded times. Yet, the people of every country of Asia, more so of the Orient, at the nascent stage, flourished in their own land, space and *habitat*. This formed the basis of their aboriginal ethos which consequently helped them draw specific elements from the more widespread spirit and philosophy of the Indian sub-continent. We may thus say that, "The study of various local cultures is, in my opinion, where the field of earlier Southeast Asian history is properly situated, and the study has to begin with the assumption that no two local cultures were similar in every respect" (O.W. Wolters 1982, 46). However, the quest of Man to explore unknown lands brought in a diffusion of beliefs which gave a sense of commonality of culture, especially among Asian countries.

The area of our study here is especially the islands of Java and Bali. The fairs, festivals and carnivals of this land carry in them an entire collection of stories, myths and legends which bespeak of its long standing association with India. The island of Bali, which has been predominantly under the cultural influence of India for more than a millennium, provides a very captivating area of research on cultural diffusion, which varies from village to village. Most of the art practices prevalent there reflect close stylistic and cultural affiliations with the Indian sub-continent. The specific study of the Barong mask not only displays an amalgam of Indian and Balinese cultures, but is also an admixture of the various regional art elements existing in and around India.

The recorded history of migrations of Indians to the island of Bali may be traceable to CE 100. By CE 400, Bali came under the influence of Indian, or rather majorly Hindu and Buddhist influences and has remained so since then. Archaeological evidences however indicate that Bali was influenced by Indian merchants and migrants, by way of close trade relations from its earliest stages of state formation. During this process of interaction the pre-existing religious beliefs in Bali seem to have transformed into a unique set of socio-religious etiquettes which may be considered as the identity of Balinese religion. The Buddhist Sutras along with the Puranic legends and religious instructions were the major resources which amalgamated with the primitive practices existing in Bali to evolve its unique religious traditions. These practices continue to exist till present times.

An analytical study of the Balinese masked dances aims to understand its inter-cultural syntheses ranging from sublime philosophy to magical beliefs, interpreted in iconographic forms and art objects. The discussion, starting from the Indian backdrop, traces its path up to Java and Bali, from prehistoric and proto historic times with an aim to understand the common practices of using masks for magical beliefs in these countries. Some attempts have been made here to cite parallel examples from both the countries with a view to illustrate the commonality existing in their art forms from earliest times.

Prehistoric Period

To begin with, we may consider the actual evidences of the use of masks in India in the prehistoric times. The earliest example of masked dance; one with a bison horn mask, one with a feathered head-dress and yet another with a wolf mask have been mentioned by V.S. Wakankar.¹ An example of a man wearing an elephant mask, from Bhimbetka, may also be cited here.² Over the years, extensive researches have brought to light more and more examples of rock paintings depicting masked men engaged in various kinds of activities from different regions of India. They seem to be most probably linked to shamanism³ (Fig.1).

Similarly, the prehistoric parallels from Bali also evince shamanic practices from the prehistoric times. An example of some prehistoric rock paintings from Indonesia, interpreted and published recently and prevalent in prehistoric Indonesia, may be cited here⁴ (Fig.2). Evidently, the purpose of these prehistoric masks was also to serve as a means for enacting a specific role by a shaman.

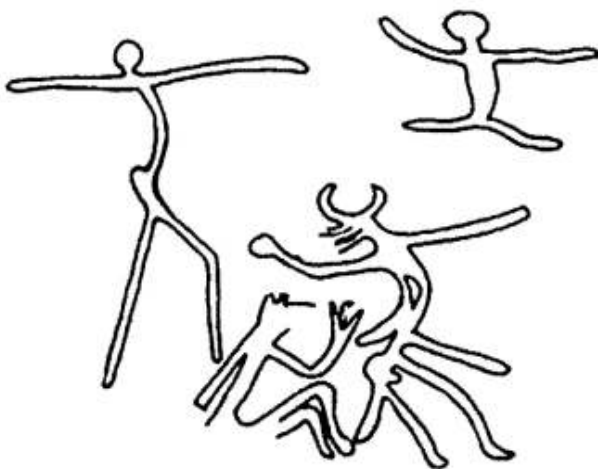


Fig.1 : Rock Paintings Depicting Masked Men, India

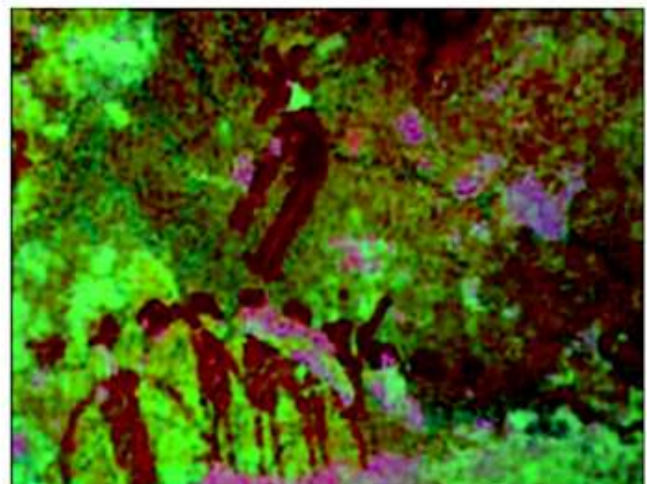


Fig.2 : Prehistoric Rock Paintings from Indonesia



Fig.3 : Terracotta mask

a western mountain village in Kintamani, named Manikliyu in Bali. The unearthing of a burial here revealed a bronze kettledrum, called *nekārā* in Bali, containing human bones. "This kettledrum is decorated with eight stars on the tympanum and human masks on the body."⁶ An Ethno-archaeological understanding of the primitive people of the Indonesian archipelago reveals prevalence of the use of masks for ancestor worship.⁷ The design of these kettledrums typically bears an arrangement of masks on the neck portion, probably for commemorating ancestors. The most significant example

Proto-historic Period

In India, during the proto-historic period, material evidences from the excavations at Mohenjo-Daro, obtained in 1931 (Figs.3 and 4), have brought to light small masks made by pressing soft clay into a mould. The faces have horns and a beard.⁵

The use of masks among Balinese people also goes back to the proto-historic (prehistoric Bronze Age in Bali) times. It would be relevant to cite examples of pre-Buddhist and Hindu archaeology of Bali. I refer here to a research article published on the excavation of a Megalithic burial site in



Fig.4 : Terracotta mask

of these is the well known Moon of Pejeng from Bali. Considered the largest in the world, it has eight masks carved on its body (Figs.5 and 6).⁸ Interestingly, the *ḍamarū* of Śiva is similar in shape to the kettledrum.

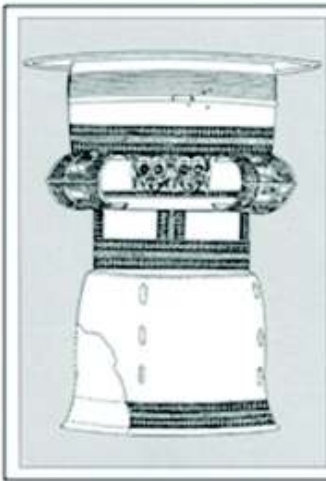


Fig.5 : The Moon of Pejeng



Fig.6 : Masks on the Pejeng Moon Kettledrum

Historical Period

During the historical period we may notice that while the mask continued to be a part of the religious and cultural ethos of India and Bali, its usage underwent a great change. This may be understood by examining the Indian and Balinese concepts of the mask in theatrical performances, alongwith the evolution of its illustrative elements and usage. It is well known that Bali was strongly and significantly influenced by Buddhism and Hinduism from the early centuries of the Christian era. In fact, the heroes of the great epics of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* were considered to be the ancestors of the local people.⁹

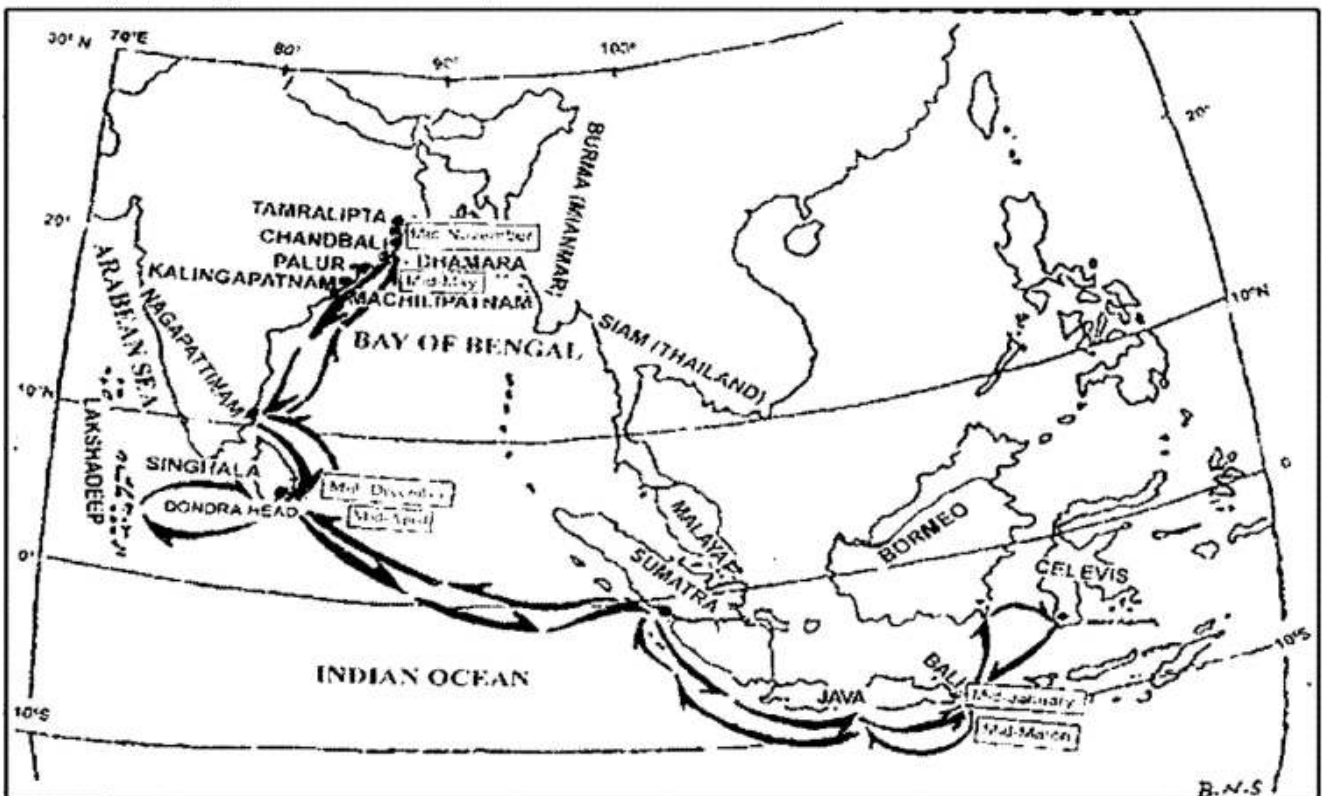
In the Barong masked dance performances of Bali, the origin of the characters of Barong and Rangda lie in a collection of several folkloric, magical and religious traditions existing in every village in Bali. In fact, there are six types of Barong dances, each having a mask representing a specific animal. However, the focus of our study here is the *Barong ket* or the leonine mask and its suggested affinities with the *kīrttimukha*, the beastly form created by Śiva.

To draw a *raison d'être* for this amalgamation of local pre-existing beliefs with the Hindu and Buddhist elements is probably hidden in the fascinating study of diffusion of the Tantric Buddhist and Bhairava (the Balinese spelling for Bhairava) cults of Bali and the Indian Śaivite philosophy. This helps in drawing

certain discerning conclusions relating to the Indian element in the Balinese *Barong ket* mask. According to some, Barong is derived from the Sanskrit word Bhairava, (Zoetmulder, PJ, old Javanese-Indonesian dictionary) which means the terrible form of Śiva. However, Bhairava in Bali also denotes a sect given to black magic and the worship of death.¹⁰ While Rangda, the witch, is considered by some to portray the evil queen Mahendradatta. However, the spirit of this popular dance drama is albeit reflective of the essentially magico-religious perceptions of the Balinese people of the very strong elements of Śaivism in India.

The Geographical Backdrop

The religious ideologies of the Historical period probably travelled from India to the Indonesian archipelago via Nepal or Sri Lanka during ancient times, as may be inferred from the path of the festival of Bali *Jatra* celebrated in Odisha till present times. The maritime and cultural connections specifically between the ancient kingdom of Kalinga and Bali is traceable to the period between 7th and 9th centuries CE. According to the historical accounts of the Tang dynasty of China, 20,000 families from Kalinga settled in Central Java and established the Ho-ling (Kalinga) kingdom of Central Java.¹¹



Map : Source - <http://kalingacalling.blogspot.com>

Comparative Traditions of Usage of Masks in Indian & Balinese Performing Arts

Mask in the Indian Context : The Indian treatise of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the fifth Veda¹² is essentially a manual for theatrical performances, giving specific guidelines towards bringing about public education by way of theatre, stagecraft and drama. It aims to entice and persuade the laity to follow the path of good conduct or *Dharma*. It is used as a potential medium to cultivate a sense of inquisitiveness in the *śāstras* by relating mythological stories, semi-historical tales and traditional maxims through their dramatic enactment. In this treatise the basic principles of performance, Bharatmuni explains that, of all the known media of Art expression, the concept of theatre grew out of the basic imitative instinct of man to emulate nature and people. In the same way, dance is an advance form of mimetic action. This representational behavior of humans has been termed as *karmasanśrayam* by Bharatmuni.¹³ On the basis of this evolved the various forms of performing arts; drama, theatre, music and dance. Drama is termed as *lokavṛṭṭānmukaraṇam*, mimicry of actions and conduct of people. In enactments involving masks, called the *pratiśīra*, it should be worn to acquire a persona and portray the different Gods and their qualities. The science and method of portrayal, costumes, stagecraft and theatre evolved on this basic concept of emulation. Therefore, the dramatis personae should be portrayed by their costumes, make-up, specific gestures and masks. On the basis of this, masks and costumes are to be used to bring about the desired effect on the audience.

Thus, the mask was basically considered an important part of *abhinaya*. When it was used for portraying Gods, spirits or ancestors, it became an object of veneration, kept in sanctified places with prayers being offered daily. Rituals to invoke the deity or spirit before wearing the mask for a performance were also commonly practiced. Such practices of worshipping masks used in mythological plays are still common in many parts of India and the world.¹⁴ In India, for instance, prior to the performance of the masked dance of Pottan Theyyam, the dancer through the ritual of invoking the deity with his sickle and *nell upakaraṇam*, a farming tool, lights a lamp and performs the *mukha-pūjā* to acquire the God's persona, while chanting the *mantra* 'so. . .ham' or 'I am He'. This ritual has also been

explained by Abhinavagupta (11th century CE) and is still practiced in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.¹⁵

Mask in the Balinese Context : We find similar practices, ideologies and approaches associated with the masked Balinese dances. While drawing heavily on the conventional dance forms of India, the traditional Barong and Rangda dances of Bali, or the Tāri Barong are also thematically based on re-living godly stories of the triumph of good over evil. The Balinese also believed in appeasing the Evil and not putting an end to it, for maintaining balance in the world. The Barong mask is not only an object through which the Spirit is given a tangible form but also a medium to restrain its energy. In accordance with this belief, the mask is stored in a sacred space and brought out on special occasions to bestow blessings on the community or restore the balance of cosmic forces. Before the performance, Barong is invoked by any two persons from the community, portraying the characters of Barong and Rangda, by putting on the mask and costume, and dance till any one person enters into a trance. These practices are similar to the Pottan Theyyam performances mentioned above. The pre-performance invocation followed by an intense, spirited enactment of appeasing Rangda, the witch, culminates in bringing the performers or the audience into a trance. The repetition, time and again, of such events, help in establishing the equation between good and evil, an essential part of the Balinese magico-religious beliefs.

Such performances, when understood in the context of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, thus employ all the theatrical qualities of *karmasanśrayam*, *lokavṛṭṭānukaraṇam*, etc. associated with masked performances, mentioned in it. The performer thus imbibes in him the qualities of the divinity whose mask or *pratiśīra* he is wearing.

The Significance of the Kīrttimukha in Barong Ket Performances

At this point in our discussion, the *kīrttimukha*, an essential component of Indian iconography, would be of particular interest. Its perceptible association with the Barong ket masks is not only related to the arts, but also brings out the subliminal nuances of the transcendental reasoning of the Indian ethos and the mystical beliefs of the Balinese people.

The *kīrttimukha* is known to be the manifestation of *Śiva* - the creator of the beast from his third eye. We may refer here the Pauranic story of *Jālandhara*, who sent *Rāhū* to demand the hand of *Pārvatī* from *Śiva* himself.¹⁶ The symbolism of the *kīrttimukha* or the "Face of Glory" as a symbol of good luck to ward off 'the impious and to protect the devotee', underwent multifarious changes in its iconographic and architectural usages in India. Much the same, the art and architecture of Bali and Java abound with depictions of the *kīrttimukha* in images, on walls and even on the entrances to sacred spaces. But none express the intangible spirit of the *kīrttimukha* as comprehensively as the soulful performance of Barong and Rangda masked dances. The Barong ket, with his leonine mask, virtually indistinguishable with the lion faced *kīrttimukha*, makes efforts to conquer, appease and exorcise the evil spirit of Rangda. In fact, the *kīrttimukha* is omniscient in Balinese Art and has been used in a variety of ways and spaces. It was used as the *Bhomā* (or the *kīrttimukha* in Bali). Napier, in fact calls it the prototype of the Barong.¹⁷ The "good spirit" *Banaspatī Rājā* is also identified with the *Barong ket*. Emigh correlates the *kīrttimukha* with *Batārā Kālā* or *Kāla* (an aspect of *Śiva* as the Eternal Time Keeper). This 'voracious demonic' form is usually seen carved on entrances of caves or temples in Bali and Java.¹⁸

In-depth researches on the origin and significance of the *kīrttimukha* or *pañcavakra*, by several Indologists (V.S. Agrawala, A.K. Coomaraswamy, Gouriswar Bhattacharya, *et.al.*) have brought forth various concepts and ideologies which may have lead to the evolution of its iconography. The study of these theories unveils the spiritual, ideological and magical amalgam which served as the vital force behind the *transmogrification* of the *kīrttimukha* in diverse media. The antecedents of the various changes that the *kīrttimukha* underwent may be traced back to the Upaniṣads. Some remarkable examples are illustrated here from Bodhgaya, 3rd century CE (Fig.7)¹⁹; Ajanta, cave 19, 5th century CE (Fig.8); Kathmandu, 7th century CE (Fig.9) and Java, 13th century CE (Fig.10). Some of the conclusions drawn by Vajracharya²⁰ are quoted thus; "*Kīrttimukha* was also known as *pañcavakra* . . . is also a word for lion. In Indic art, atmosphere is regularly represented by a grotesque face or head, preferably that of a lion. . .".



Fig.7 : *Kirttimukha*, Bodhgaya railing, c. 3rd century CE



Fig.8 : Ajanta, Cave 19, CE 462-480



Fig.9 : *Kirttimukha* above the portals of Śaivite temples
Kathmand probably 7th century CE



Fig.10 : *Kirttimukha*, Java, c. 13th century CE

Ethologically also, the Barong and Rangda masks of Bali exhibit conspicuous similarities with this concept of the *kīrttimukha*.²¹ The origin of *Barong ket* lies in the word 'baroṅg'; the Malay word for 'bear'.²²

All in all, the philosophical (subliminal) concept of the *kīrttimukha* as a symbol of devouring the Evil or insatiable hunger, lust, anger, etc. seem to have been translated into the varied aspects of *Banaspatī Rājā*, *Bhomā* and the *Barong ket* in Balinese Art.

Parallel Traditions of Mask Making in India and Bali

The making of the Barong and Rangda masks is also marked with several rituals, similar to those practiced in making the traditional wooden masks prevalent across the various regions of India. The *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* states that the images of *Jagannātha*, *Balabhadra* and *Subhadrā*, be carved out of Neem tree wood (*Azadirachta Indica*) or *Daru Brahma*, as it is auspicious. It also retains its purity, as it resists termites and other pests and therefore considered fit for making the idol of Viṣṇu.

Similarly, since the Barong masks are made for the invocation and blessings of ancestors, demons, evil forces, etc., the wood of the Pule tree is considered appropriate. Commonly called the Devil's tree or Pule (*alstonia scholaris*), its Sanskrit name is *Saptaparṇa*. "Barong masks . . . are traditionally made from the wood of the Pule tree. It is one of the sacred trees that, because of its milky sap. . . possesses so much of powerful life force that it may, as may the other milky trees in both Bali and India, become the residence of a demonic spirit."²³



Barong Ket Mask

The above discussions on the Indian influence on the Art of Bali, with special reference to the Barong masks leads to several conclusions regarding the multi-dimensional influences among ancient cultures which shape the personality of a country or a region. A unique feature of the art and iconography of Asiatic countries is its fascinating preoccupation with symbolism. Continuous interaction with popular art and religious motifs has diluted their visual perceptive subtleties of the symbolism in every art object. A micro level study to understand the depiction of a certain motif made in the context of architecture and art is important for documentation of facts for future generations. The study of popular and omnipresent motifs like the *kīrttimukha* and other innumerable abstract symbols helps in interpreting their rationale and usage to serve multiple important functions in human evolution. Hence, the above study hopes to present the *philosophy* of the *kīrttimukha* and its significant relationship with Man's Ethnological evolution in the physical worlds of India and Bali.

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