



Cultural Communication through Gambuh Dance : A Historical Performing Art from Bali

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important factors driving artists to engage in the performing arts is the environment: artistic traditions within the family and the local community. In connection to the environment, there are three reasons why artists get involved in the arts: being appointed or requested, sometimes even 'forced' by the community, encouragement or a family calling, and personal willingness. Regarding the life and development of Gambuh and its instruments, it significantly influences other gamelan devices in terms of instrument usage, beat arrangement, song structure, motifs, and the names of some songs for various gamelan devices and specific types of compositions such as *Semar Pegulingan*, *Pelegongan*, *Bebarongan*, *Joged Pingitan*, *Gong Gede*, and *Kebyar*. In this study, a semiotic approach is used to analyze the elements of Gambuh Bali dance and reveal the messages contained within. First and foremost, in the semiotic study of Gambuh Bali, body movements become the primary focus. These movements can be seen as visual signs that carry implied meanings. Through the analysis of movements, messages related to character, emotions, and narratives in the dance can be uncovered. In the semiotic study of Gambuh Bali dance, the singing or chanting performed by the dancers can also be an object of analysis. Chants in Gambuh Bali dance play a crucial role in conveying cultural messages and expressing emotional nuances in the dance. By employing a semiotic approach, theoretical studies of Gambuh Bali dance can provide richer insights into the symbolism, cultural meanings, and messages embedded in this dance.

Keywords: Gambuh, Bali, Dance.

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BACKGROUND

One of the most important factors driving artists to engage in the performing arts is the environment: artistic traditions within the family and the local community. In connection to the environment, there are three reasons why artists get involved in the arts: being appointed or requested, sometimes even 'forced' by the community, encouragement or a family calling, and personal willingness.¹ Regarding the life and development of Gambuh and its instruments, it significantly influences other gamelan devices in terms of instrument usage, beat arrangement, song structure, motifs, and the names of some songs for various gamelan devices and specific types of compositions such as *Semar Pegulingan*, *Pelegongan*, *Bebarongan*, *Joged Pingitan*, *Gong Gede*, and *Kebyar*.²

Although, on the one hand, the musical structure of *Gambuh* gamelan can influence other gamelans, its existence now seems to receive less attention from the younger

generation. Its life can be considered static (without development), and as a result, the number of Gambuh gamelan sets in Bali is very limited. The influence of Pegambuhan on other gamelans, such as in the case of *Semar Pegulingan Saih Pitu*, is highly influenced by Pegambuhan in terms of repertoire. The repertoire of *Semar Pegulingan Saih Pitu* mostly or entirely comes from Pegambuhan. This is possible because *Semar Pegulingan Saih Pitu* uses a *Pelog* seven-tone scale.³

Looking at the current number of Gambuh gamelan sets in Bali, it is relatively small compared to other types of gamelans. Based on information from the Education and Culture Department of Bali Province in 1995/1996, there were 17 sets of Gambuh gamelan, distributed in various regions of regencies and municipalities as follows: a) Denpasar City: 1 set b) Badung Regency: 1 set c) Buleleng Regency: 1 set d) Gianyar Regency: 5 sets e) Klungkung Regency: 4 sets f) Karangasem Regency: 5 sets. Pegambuhan gamelan is one of the Balinese gamelan devices that form a

small ensemble (*barungan*) in terms of the number of instrument types, players, and sounds produced by the Gambuh gamelan. The Gambuh gamelan ensemble uses a *Pelog* seven-tone scale with five types of *patet*: *patet tembung*, *selisir*, *sundaren/sunaren*, *baro*, and *lebeng*.^{4,5}

Supporting Instruments in Gambuh Art

The types of instruments used in the Gambuh ensemble primarily involve those that handle rhythm, while those handling melody include the flute and rebab. This gamelan ensemble is known as the Pegambuhan gamelan because it is specifically designed for the Gambuh dance drama. Pegambuhan is characterized by several features, namely the use of specific instruments and *patet*. In the Bali Gambuh gamelan ensemble, only the Pegambuhan gamelan employs the large-sized flute, often called the Gambuh flute, which is exclusively used for the Gambuh gamelan ensemble. Additionally, it features the use of instruments like *ricik*, *kenyir*, *gumanak*,



Figure 1.⁶ A Gambuh Performance.



Figure 2.¹² The types of instruments used in the Gambuh ensemble primarily involve those that handle rhythm, while those handling melody include the flute and rebab.

and *kangsi*. Another distinctive aspect is the use of the *baro* and *lebeng patet*. In the presentation of accompanying music for the Gambuh dance, combined with vocals (*tembang*), the tandak execution is perceived as more solid in creating various moods such as sadness, joy, humor, anger, and more.⁷

Tandak is performed by two individuals: one delivers the vocal part using Kawi language poetry, while the other serves as an interpreter using high Balinese language. Generally, Gambuh

compositions often accompanied by *tandak* or *sesendon* are found in the music accompanying dance pieces with slow tempos, including *Lasem*, *Sumambang*, *Lengker*, *Sumeradas*, *Brahmara*, and other compositions.⁸

Meaning of Symbols in Gambuh Dance

The Bali Gambuh dance is one of the traditional dances' rich in symbolism and cultural meaning. In this study, a semiotic approach is used to analyze elements of the Bali Gambuh dance and uncover the

messages contained within it. Roland Barthes, a renowned semiotician, provides a useful framework for analyzing dance as a sign system.⁹

Firstly, in the semiotic study of the Bali Gambuh dance, body movements become the primary focus. These movements can be seen as visual signs carrying implied meanings. Through the analysis of movements, messages related to characters, emotions, and narratives embedded in the dance can be revealed. In the semiotic study of the Bali Gambuh dance, the songs or chants sung by the dancers can also be an interesting object of analysis. Chants in the Bali Gambuh dance play a crucial role in conveying cultural messages and expressing emotional nuances in the dance.^{10,11}

In the semiotic study of the Bali Gambuh dance, it is crucial to pay attention to the cultural context of Bali and its surrounding social context. Every sign and symbol in this dance must be understood within the broader cultural context to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings and messages that this dance intends to convey. By using a semiotic approach, theoretical studies of the Bali Gambuh dance can provide richer insights into its symbolism, cultural meaning, and messages. It is hoped that this semiotic study can contribute to understanding and appreciating this valuable cultural heritage of Bali. Each main character must be able to speak Kawi or ancient Javanese, which will be translated by the *punakawan*.

Moreover, Gambuh is highly expressive as it prioritizes facial expressions and extensively uses eye movements called *nelik*, *nyureng*, *gagilehan*, and *nyerere*. Without these primary expressions, Gambuh would not appear lively. This poses a challenge for the younger generation when directed to learn this intricate art, which might not be inherently appealing to them. *Tabuh Gambuh* generally gives a formal impression due to various rules that distinguish one type of song from another, and the presence of *patet* governing the arrangement of tones. As Gambuh compositions are related to dance, most of the song compositions follow the dance patterns they accompany. Gambuh compositions are tailored to the accompanying dance; each type of dance



Figure 3.¹⁶ The aesthetic value of *Dramatari Gambuh* art may not be as abundant as contemporary art nowadays. However, when examined in detail, the aesthetic value of dance is found in the mudra movements of the dancers.

has its own specific songs, melodies, and patet according to its character.¹³

In a set of Gambuh gamelan, there are several relatively large flute instruments, a rebab, a pair of *krumpungan kendang* drums, *klenang*, *kajar*, *cengceng rincik*, and *kempur* as the final instrument. This gamelan uses the pelog sapta (7-tone) scale. Compared to other Balinese gamelans, the population of Gambuh gamelan is relatively small. Gambuh gamelan is a type of musical instrument commonly used in Bali to accompany Gambuh and *Dramatari Gambuh* dances, as mentioned earlier. Gambuh also has a gamelan set consisting of: 1) Rebab (one piece), 2) Large-sized flute (two or three pieces), 3) Kendang (a pair), 4) Kajar (one piece), 5) Klenang (one piece), 6) Ricik or small cengceng (one piece), 7) Kenyir (one piece), 8) Gentorang or ogar (one or two pieces), 9) Gumanak (two pieces) and 10) Kangsi (one piece).¹⁴

Meanwhile, The number of performers in Gambuh arts is adjusted to the number of instruments: 4 flute players, 2 rebab players, 1 klenang player, 1 kajar player, 1 cengceng ricik player, 2 kangsi players, 3 gumanak players, 1 gentorang player, 1 kempur player, 1 klenyir player, and it is supplemented with 2 dialogue presenters. There is no specific song used, However, the song adapts to the storyline and the melody of the gamelan accompaniment commonly known as *Cecantungan*.” The dialogue presenters must understand the

story content to communicate with the dancers and understand the storyline presented by the dancers. Because the task of the dialogue presenters is to interpret or emphasize the course of a story. Communication used in Gambuh dance dialogue must precisely follow the story content in each segment. The songs and dialogues performed during communication by the dancers differ for each character. In this communication, the characters use Kawi language, Sor Singgih polite language, Andap language, which will also be interpreted by each main character’s interpreter in Gambuh.¹⁵

Aesthetics in Classical Dance

The aesthetic value of *Dramatari Gambuh* art may not be as abundant as contemporary art nowadays. However, when examined in detail, the aesthetic value of dance is found in the mudra movements of the dancers. In Gambuh music, the aesthetic value is present in the bamboo-based musical instruments. This aesthetic value refers to education, especially in the field of art education that considers the beauty in each work.^{17,18,19}

It can also be said that Gambuh is a Bebal Dance from the central courtyard of the temple, performed without masks. In Gambuh, the aspects of ideal behavior of the aristocracy in the Majapahit era are preserved, as well as the musical composition, choreographic ideas, and the noble literary values of that time.

Generally, the use of instruments in different types of gamelan ensembles varies both in terms of the number and types of instruments. For example, the Gambuh group from Pedungan village and the Gambuh group from Tumbak Bayuh village have different numbers and types of instruments. Although there are differences, they do not affect the overall musical experience.²⁰ In the *Aji Gumita* manuscript, the instrumentation of Gambuh gamelan is referred to as *Meladprana* gamelan. Although the *Aji Gumita* manuscript details the types and numbers of instruments used in the Gambuh gamelan ensemble, in reality, the Gambuh groups do not adhere strictly to the specified types and numbers of instruments.^{21,22}

CONCLUSION

In this study, a semiotic approach is used to analyze the elements of Gambuh Bali dance and reveal the messages contained within. First and foremost, in the semiotic study of Gambuh Bali dance, body movements become the primary focus. These movements can be seen as visual signs that carry implied meanings. Through the analysis of movements, messages related to character, emotions, and narratives in the dance can be uncovered. In the semiotic study of Gambuh Bali dance, the singing or chanting performed by the dancers can also be an interesting object of analysis. Chants in Gambuh Bali dance play a crucial role in conveying cultural messages and expressing emotional nuances in the dance. By employing a semiotic approach, theoretical studies of Gambuh Bali dance can provide richer insights into the symbolism, cultural meanings, and messages embedded in this dance.

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