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**BALINESE GONG KEBYAR DANCES:
GENDER-SWITCHING AS NORMALITY**

On the island of Bali countless different forms of music and dance coexist. Amongst them, a relatively modern but very prominent form is a style known as *gong kebyar*: "[T]he kebyar enthusiasm has already been strong for more than fifty years and shows no sign of weakening. Kebyar has become *the* established style of dance and music; its influence can be felt in every corner of the Balinese performing arts" [Bandem; deBoer 1981:83]. *Kebyar* came into being at the very beginning of the twentieth century, a time of major political and social upheaval in Bali. The need to adjust to the colonial system, the breakdown of royal houses, which in turn caused major changes in social hierarchies and economic instability and the influence of tourism and western artists permanently living in Bali found its expression in this new musical style [Seebass 1996:71]. The most significant characteristic of *gong kebyar* is that for the first time on Bali an art form emerged in which both music and dance could be performed without any ritual, religious, sexual or dramatic context. Again, this must be regarded in the context of the historical circumstances, and the enormous changes that took place on Bali.¹

The term *kebyar* can be translated as "explosion" or "outburst", and this is exactly what *gong kebyar* sounds like. Compared to earlier Balinese *gamelan* forms, the *kebyar* emphasizes quick changes in tempo, dynamics and emotions. The same applies to *kebyar* dances, where dancers have to adjust to the energetic sounds of the *gong kebyar*, simultaneously express abstract emotions and be able to follow the rapid changes of the musicians. *Kebyar* dances are choreographed down to the finest detail and usually present parts of myths in a very abstract way. Both male and female dancers can dance in *kebyar* style, and although not the basic feature of *kebyar*, gender-switching is considered normal in certain *kebyar* dances. The term generally used in Balinese for gender-switching is "*bebancihan*", a term that can be translated as "something incomplete" or "compromised", anything "in between", and in case of gender, "hermaphroditic" [Emigh; Hunt 1992:202] or "neuter" [Bandem; deBoer 1998:83]. *Bebancihan* in *kebyar* generally expresses dances with mixed-up gender-roles, resulting in the term *kebyar bebancihan*, defined by Bandem; deBoer as: "[M]odern kebyar compositions which may be performed by either male or female dancers." [Bandem; deBoer 1981: 159] and even more specifically by the famous Balinese dancer A.A. Ayu Kusuma Arini as "[...] tarian Bali yang memiliki karakter antara laki dan perempuan [...]" [A Balinese dance with a character between man and woman] [Arini 2004:17].

Kebyar bebancihan today is a specific performance style; gender-switching in *kebyar* is without any ritualistic, religious or spiritual connotation. Basically, the restricted but generally permitted gender-switching seems to be nothing more than a part of the aesthetic concept of *kebyar bebancihan* dances.

For an initial impression of the *kebyar bebancihan* dance style as performed today have a look at Video 1 (Panji Semirang). You will see a short excerpt from a dance called Panji Semirang. This dance was choreographed in 1933 and is the first choreography ever created for a female *kebyar* dancer [Bandem; deBoer 1981:83]. The story centers around princess Candra Kirana /Candrakirana who is searching for prince Panji / Kertapati, her beloved. In order not to be discovered she cross-dresses as a man [Arini 2004:19]. This choreographic idea results in the manifestation of a female dancer representing a female character who is pretending to be a male.

[See Video No 1: Panji Semirang]

The dancers in *kebyar* most often present certain stereotyped characters, and from just watching the performance it would be impossible, even for a Balinese expert, to understand what story or character is shown, if the compositions were not titled. The choreographies are abstract character-studies and do not develop or convey a storyline. As mentioned earlier, the *kebyar* developed in times of major social and political changes, but no new music or dance style manifests itself just like that, there are always people behind it. In the case of *kebyar* this is the famous dancer and choreographer I Maria, who combined the new *kebyar* music style from

northern Bali with his own ideas of movement expression, although it is said he was influenced or at least inspired by dances created in the villages of Bungkulan and Jagarara.² In 1925 Maria developed the dance Kebyar Duduk – together with Kebyar Trompong the very first dance created and performed in the new *kebyar* style [Bandem; deBoer 1981:82].

In *kebyar bebancihan* as performed today, it is possible to differentiate between two categories of gender-switching. In the first instance, the choreography implies that the dancer should represent the opposite gender; I will denote this category as gender-switching within choreography. All *kebyar bebancihan* dances belong to this category. In the second instance, dances are choreographed for a certain gender but danced by the opposite gender, this I will call gender-switching within performance. Dances in this category can be both "plain" *kebyar* and *kebyar bebancihan*. To clarify I will present you with two examples for both of these *kebyar* categories.

The *kebyar bebancihan* dance Panji Semirang as seen in Video 1 belongs to the first category, gender-switching within choreography. What you see there is a dance choreographed for and danced by a female dancer. The gender-switching appears within the choreography, since the choreography implies that the female dancer should act as a young princess disguised as a prince.

Another case can be seen in Video 2. This is a short excerpt from a dance called Taruna Jaya, created by I Gede Manik. Just as Panji Semirang, this dance was originally choreographed for a female dancer representing a young man demonstrating his strength and youth. But in this special case Taruna Jaya is danced by the male dancer Made Jelada, widely known for his skill in representing both male and female characters. Thus, this dance belongs to the first and second category, it is a *kebyar bebancihan* dance implying gender-switching within choreography and within performance. By dancing a female role Made Jelada causes the mixed-up gender reality of a male dancer dancing a female dance featuring a male character.

[See Video 2: Taruna Jaya]

What then is so unique about *kebyar bebancihan*, what makes it a genre where gender-switching on different levels is so simply possible? The very exceptional and new characteristic of *kebyar*, and the most significant difference as compared to every other Balinese dance genre is the simultaneous use of features symbolizing both male and female characters. The term "*bebancihan*" here actually refers to the hermaphroditic state of a dancer.

Dibia states: "[T]he main types of dance in Balinese tradition, *igel mwani* (male dance) and *igel eluh* (female dance), are identified not based on the sexual types of the performers, but rather, on a set of symbols and codifications embodied within the dance." [Dibia 1989:13]. In order to apply this statement to the *kebyar bebancihan* it is necessary to look at the "symbols and codifications", the symbolic representation of male and female in Balinese dance. Dibia asserts that these symbols are found in costume, movement, music and paraphernalia [Dibia 1989:10].³ It can clearly be seen that both costumes and movements in *kebyar bebancihan* are a mixture of male and female symbols; many details of the costume and movements have originally been taken, for example, from female *legong* and male *gambuh* [Arini 2004:18]. But for *kebyar bebancihan* all these elements have been arranged in new ways and combined with new ideas.

It is impossible to be aware of this incredible mixture of styles merely by watching and if one is not accustomed to Balinese aesthetics and symbols of gender in dance. In order to make this distinction possible for the reader, I will use two examples of solely male (*baris*) and female (*legong*) dance types to illustrate some basic features in *kebyar bebancihan*.

[Insert photograph 1, 2 and 3 here, if possible in a row]

1. Costume

The typical costumes for female and male dancers differ significantly. First, in the *baris* and other dances purely for men, the costume allows large movements both with legs and arms, the dancers usually wear white, loose-fitting trousers (see picture 1). On the other hand, female dancers lower bodies are customarily tightly bound with a piece of printed cloth (*kain prada*), allowing only small steps and movements (see picture 3). In *kebyar bebancihan* the lower body is wrapped with a *kain*, but very loosely bound, allowing for much bigger steps and freer

movements. The way it is bound is inspired by the way men in Bali wrap their *kain* or *kamben* when wearing their traditional costume (*pakaian adat*). And again, this male way to wrap the lower body is combined with a female counterpart – the upper body's clothing (see picture 2). Here a *sabuk prada*, a body-binding cloth eight meters in length is used to wrap the dancers upper body very tightly from the hips to beneath the arms, as is depicted in picture 2 and 3. This combination of male and female costume is worn by both men and women when dancing *kebyar bebancihan*.

2. Movement

One example for typical dance movements is the walking (*Jalan*). In Balinese dance, the typical female way of walking is to have the legs parallel, lifting the feet only as high as absolutely necessary for moving forward. Most of the energy to move comes from the swinging hips, and simultaneously with the hips moving sideways the head is moved to the side. Which means for example; the left foot moves forward, the dancer's weight is shifted to the left foot at the same time as the hips are swung to the left and the head is jerked slightly to the left.

[see Video 3: Legong]

A *baris* dancer would never tilt his head nor swing his hips. The male's method of walking is just straight, no head or hip movement, the legs are turned outwards and lifted quite high with every step taken (*malpal*).

[see Video 4: Baris]

In *kebyar bebancihan* the manner of walking is like this: The head moves to the side as in *legong*, but the hips do not move as in *baris* or move only very slightly. The legs are lifted high as in *baris* but parallel as in *legong*. Therefore the style of walking in *kebyar bebancihan* is the precise combination of the male and female way of walking, as seen in the first video of Panji Semirang.

3. Pose (*Agum*)

A prominent example of a basic male feature is the *agum / agem* (Balinese for "pose"), especially the positioning of legs in *agum*; the legs are more than one foot length apart and bent outwards in an angle of more than 90 degrees, and the body is in no way bent (see picture 1). On the other hand, a typical female *agum* would feature the legs turned outwards less than 90 degrees, and most noticeably, the feet close to each other with less than half a foot space between them. The body is bent almost in an S-shape, with emphasis on the protruding buttocks and the chest. Dibia describes the female *agum* such: "While the torso is slightly bent at the waist area, the spine will be hyperextended, and the hip tilted forward" [Dibia 1989:11]. (See picture 3.)

In *agum kebyar bebancihan* (picture 2) we again see a mix of both the male and female *agum*. First, the legs are about one foot apart, somewhere in between male and female styles, as with the feet and leg angle, which is less than male *agum* and more than female, ideally exactly 90 degrees. The body is very slightly bent with no emphasis on the female shape as explained above, instead merely giving the male, straight pose a touch of female softness. This *agum* is probably derived from *halus* (refined) male characters as can be seen in *gambuh* or *arja* [Emigh; Hunt 1992:203]. As a result of the aforementioned facts one question arises: Why is gender-switching regarded as a normality in Balinese *kebyar bebancihan* dances whereas this is not at all the case in everyday life?

In Balinese society the aesthetic *bebancihan* concept is far from the Balinese reality of strict gender definition. As Natalie Kellar pointed out in her work on gender-switching in *arja*, the Balinese dance-theater tradition, the Balinese concept of gender implies a strict differentiation between appropriate behavior, character traits and the social role of male and female members of the community. It can be generalized that on Bali the appropriate gender-role for males is to be head of the family, earn the money and make decisions. Males are associated with traits such as courage, strength, but also violence and sometimes rude or unsophisticated behavior. On the other hand a female's typical role is to give birth, raise children and organize the household, ideally with a quiet, restrained, modest, in short, a refined character. This stark distinction was

even enforced by the authoritarian regime under Suharto from 1966 to 1998 and is just now gradually and very slowly developing in a more liberal direction [Kellar 1996: 89]. The liberation process has suffered backlashes from the Indonesian government under the influence of Muslim and traditionalist groups within the country. Still, at least in an economically improved and western-oriented region such as Bali both sexes are provided with more and more opportunities to escape from their pre-defined gender-roles.

Considering scholars like Ted Polhemus, who makes the argument that dance is a manifestation of the social reality, with culture and gender being represented through dance [Polhemus 1993:9], one wonders how the *kebyar bebancihan* with its liberal use of gender roles could develop. Polhemus states: "Dance – the distillation of culture into its most metaphysical form – always embodies and identifies [the] gender-generated division of cultural realities." [Polhemus 1993:11]. This seems not to be the case in Balinese *kebyar bebancihan*. Moreover, one is tempted to claim just the opposite: That in the Balinese *kebyar bebancihan*, people are free to represent what they are not allowed to express in everyday life. Natalie Kellar makes similar assertions: "[...] within it [the theater] one may find innovative deviations from mainstream gender ideology – particularly so at a time of political crisis and cultural change." [Kellar 2003: 86]. Emigh; Hunt even more explicitly state that the Balinese actively make use of dance performances to play with their ever-changing reality [Emigh; Hunt 1992:196]. Considering this, I would like to further focus on more Bali-specific historical circumstances and Balinese concepts of character categorization that seem to have led to the present manifestation of *kebyar bebancihan* dances in opposition to the manifestation of gender roles in Balinese everyday life.

As explained earlier, *kebyar* was invented by the male dancer I Maria. Therefore, the original way to dance *kebyar* was in a male dancing style. With the increased popularity of the new musical fashion the need arose to develop a dancing style suitable for women. This occurred ten years later in the form of new choreographed dances for women, such as Panji Semirang which you saw earlier.

This dance uses a gender-bending trick; I already mentioned that the female dancer portrays a princess who is disguised as a young man. It is therefore appropriate for the female dancer to be dressed as and act like a man while dancing in *kebyar* style. At this point *kebyar* became accepted as a dance in which both men and women could dance as male characters. The reason why *kebyar* was considered suitable for women at all must definitely be Maria's inclusion of female elements in his *kebyar* movements and costume as mentioned earlier.

But even more important for understanding the rules behind *kebyar bebancihan* is to regard the social aspects of Balinese gender classification in dance. In Balinese dance and drama there is a basic distinction between refined and strong characters. Refined characters are termed "*halus*", strong characters are known as "*keras*" or "*kasar*".⁴ This distinction is found in every genre involving dramatic aspects. At least since the end of the nineteenth century both male and female characters have been classified as *halus* and *keras*, which means the categories refined – strong are not linked to the gender of the role, but to the gender of the performer. Females, with their aforementioned typical behavior classified as refined are, in Balinese terms, the ideal dancers to represent both male and female refined roles, whereas Balinese gender classification for males (being strong and brave) fits male and female characters considered to be *keras*: "The *halus/kasar* axis thus helps establish parameters for gender-switching in the Balinese theatre that intertwine the portrayal of refinement and crudity with assumptions about gender" [Emigh; Hunt 1992:205]. As can be seen, *kebyar* was not the first time female or male characters were allowed to cross-dress and switch gender in performance. For example, in masked dances called *topeng prembon* or the younger dance drama *arja*, females usually play the refined roles of *galuh* or *mantri manis*, regardless of whether they are male or female, whereas males will play the strong and wicked male and female characters [Dibia 2005:82]. This classification has existed at least since the beginning of the twentieth century and has even become more stringent over the years [Kellar 2003:91]. To get a better overview of the several possibilities of gender-switching connected to *halus* or *keras* categories, please look at the following table:⁵

Types of gender-switching in Balinese dance

Dance Category	Gender of Performer	Gender of Role	Character Classification	Social Connotation
<i>gambuh</i> <i>arja</i>	♀	♂	halus	appropriate gender-switching: man with refined character best represented by
	♂	♀	keras / kasar	appropriate gender-switching: woman with male behavior best represented by male dancer
<i>kebyar</i> <i>baris</i> <i>legong</i>	♀	♂	keras	inappropriate gender-switching: comedy / parody through dancer's behavior in 'wrong' gender role
	♂	♀	halus	
<i>kebyar</i> <i>bebancihan</i>	♀	♀ and / or ♂	halus	appropriate gender-switching: aesthetic concept, showcase of dancer's skill, hermaphroditic features as ideal combination of male and female
	♂	♀ and / or ♂	halus	

Although the generally agreed upon classification is female – *halus* and male – *keras*, there can be exceptions. If there is a dancer whose movements and sometimes even personal character fits into a category other than that which his or her gender implies, he or she may also dance characters of the category not associated with his or her gender. Kellar for instance mentions that in dance dramas like *gambuh* men and women were not limited to their corresponding gender or refined / strong characters but could dance all characters that fit their abilities [Kellar 1996: 90]. For example if a male dancer, like Made Jelada whom you saw in the Taruna Jaya (video 3), is a very skilled performer of refined roles, he might dance female parts as well.

Kebyar bebancihan with its unisex features was the only way to dance *kebyar* until the 1950s. Only then did choreographers start to develop new dances, now with strictly separated gender representations. The first to choreograph a courtship dance in *kebyar* style was, once more, the famous I Maria. He was asked to do so by the English expatriate John Coast who organized a tour by Balinese musicians and dancers to the USA: "Accessibility for foreign audiences was already a factor in the development of Balinese dance by this time, but the new form was accepted with enthusiasm by Balinese audiences and dancers [...], and the duet has established a secure place in the Balinese repertoire" [Bandem; deBoer 1981:84].⁶ The dance was called Oleg Tumulilingan, or Bumblebee Dance. When watching the video Oleg please note the use of distinct male and female features as explained above, especially the walking (*jalan*) of the male and female character.

[See Video No 5: Oleg]

Continuing this trend, recent choreographies make use of a strict gender division of styles in *kebyar*, apart from *bebancihan*. An example is Puspa Wresti by I Wayan Dibia, where the males' movements have many more *baris* features than the smooth, male *kebyar* dance

movements, and the female movements are directly taken from the purely female dance style as in *pendet* or *legong*. Still, there are always new choreographies of *kebyar bebancihan*, one famous example of the last years would be Garuda Wisnu by I Nyoman Cerita, where three male and three female dancers dance together in almost identical costumes, and the same *bebancihan* movements are used for both genders in this choreography.

Before concluding, I would like to present one more example of the second form of gender-switching, (gender-switching within performance), where dancers perform as if they were of the opposite gender. Video 6 Panyembrama shows three male students from the ISI performing the Panyembrama, which is a group dance created in 1967 for three to seven female dancers. The choreography utilizes only female movements, gestures and poses, and the dancers wear a head to toe female costume. Panyembrama is based on the offering dance Rejang, an all-female dance, but belongs to the category of *kebyar* dances because it was choreographed in *kebyar* style in 1967 by I Gusti Raka Saba [Bandem; deBoer 1981:94], and it has always been performed together with *gamelan gong kebyar*. Thus, the Panyembrama does not belong to the *bebancihan* category because the choreography only deploys female *kebyar* movements and costumes.

[See Video No 6: Panyembrama]

Please have a second look at the video, especially the scene starting from minute 1:15, shortly before the end of the dance. You will notice the crowd suddenly bursting into laughter. This is due to one particular movement by the right dancer in the front row. On the last *angsel* (Balinese for break or sudden accent) in the music, he suddenly switches from refined female poses and gestures to strong male ones. Notice the sudden widening of the eyes and hardening facial features, combined with the accentuated movement of his straightened, left arm. His movements, expression and pose of the upper body is obviously male, whereas his lower body still rests in the female pose with bent body, sideways protruding hips and closed legs. Since all three dancers during the whole dance perform with female characteristics, pretending to be female dancers, this sudden outburst of masculinity takes the audience at unawares, causing them to laugh.

What you have seen of course is gender-switching, but of a very different sort than *kebyar bebancihan*. This kind of gender-switching within performance obviously plays with gender roles, using the "tension between the gender of the role and the gender of the role player [...] for parodic purposes" [Emigh; Hunt 1992:196]. Performances like this are more of a persiflage, spoof or comedy than serious dance. Balinese themselves differentiate between *kebyar bebancihan* and performances like this, which probably would be called *bencong*, an Indonesian term that can be translated both as "transvestism" or "travesty". Only because the male dancers are dancing a female dance, thus pretending to be of the opposite gender, does the dance assume a gender-switching persona. Performances like this are valued and popular because of their comic value, not due to the skill of the performers.

In conclusion it can be said that, since its very invention by I Maria, in the 1920s *kebyar* was originally a male *halus* dance that only 10 years later morphed into a unisex dance with *bebancihan* character for men and women. The reason why *kebyar bebancihan* is *halus* and the only dance genre that is both male and female is quite simple; the inventor of *kebyar* dance style was a very skilled dancer of refined roles. Therefore, from the beginning *kebyar* has been a *halus* dance, suitable for both female and male dancers able to fit a *halus* character.

The last fifty years have seen the development of *kebyar* dances that are no longer *bebancihan*. Costumes changed to either male or female, as did the movements. Still, *kebyar bebancihan* did not die out. Nowadays we have *kebyar bebancihan* dances where gender-switching is a fundamental part of the dance aesthetic and other *kebyar* dances where any sort of gender-switching would be inappropriate or blatantly amusing as in the last example.

In any case, the Balinese audience today usually does not mind whether the *kebyar bebancihan* dancers they see fit with the gender they represent or not. Much more important is the quality of the performance.⁷

This code of practice is undermined by the professional dance-education that students receive at the Institute for Indonesian Arts (ISI) in Denpasar. There, both male and female students have to take lessons in both gender dance types, and moreover *kebyar* dance teachers can be male or female and will teach all roles, eventually becoming an example for future generations

of students specializing in dance characteristics of the opposite gender.

Of course, as everywhere, on Bali clear notions of the ideal male and female behavior and appearance exist and are applied accordingly in Balinese dance. Still, through the *halus* and *keras* classification and gender-switching, dancers enjoy greater freedom in representing gender concepts than in real-life. As has been shown, gender-switching in Balinese dance can take place at several levels, in both directions and with very different social connotations. Martin Stokes once said: "Music and more particularly dance provides an arena for pushing back boundaries, exploring the border zones that separate male from female." and "[...] [D]ance is not 'normal' behaviour: the rules which apply outside dance do not necessarily apply inside" [Stokes 1997:22]. But the dancers' freedom in most Balinese dance lies only in presenting *halus* or *keras*, not in being free to choose between presenting a male or female character. *Kebyar bebancihan* is the great exception since it offers the opportunity to be *halus* and simultaneously male and female, a case in which the boundary zones between male and female roles are straddled.

Endnotes

1. For further information see Vickers 1996:167 and Bandem; deBoer 1981:80.
2. See Bandem; deBoer 1981: 81 for further elaboration.
3. Dibia extensively describes typical musical patterns for male and female dance. This indeed is a very interesting and important aspect but too broad to refer to in this article. The same is true for the meaning of male and female paraphernalia Dibia mentions.
4. The term "kasar" denotes generally rude, inappropriate behavior, whereas "keras" can be strong but still appropriate, like warriors or ministers on the side of the good characters in a play.
5. This table is a schematic outline and does not contain all details. Dance categories mentioned here are only those referred to in this article and represent, of course, only a small selection of all Balinese dances.
6. For a detailed description of this tour, its planning and sometimes difficult execution, see John Coast *Dancers of Bali*, first edition New York 1953, new edition *Dancing out of Bali*. Singapore 2004 with foreword by Sir David Attenborough.
7. Quite often, for example, the Kebyar Trompong for male dancers and respectively the Taruna Jaya for females is used as a basis for judging dance competitions or traditional contests on an artistic level between two villages (*barungan*).

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