

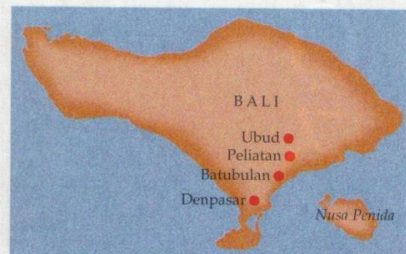
Dancing Is In The Blood

Writer Kathryn Davis and photographer Wendy Chan put on their soft shoes to get this story of the dancing girls of Bali in Indonesia. Despite their young age, they are as professional as they are cute

Bidani is eight years old and very shy. She smiles carefully, mindful of her glossy red lipstick, but we can't get a word out of her. Supartini, on the other hand, with all the confidence of a 10-year-old professional, puts the finishing touches to her costume, and comes over to pose for photographs.

Yes, she says, she loves to dance, but it's very hard work. After a day at school it is very tiring to go to lessons and to perform, but at least it doesn't hurt any more. When she first started to dance her body used to ache terribly, but she never wanted to give up.

"Dancing makes me happy," Supartini says. She moves away gracefully, a shimmering tube of red and gold brocade, and goes to help Bidani with her



costume. It is the younger girl's debut and she is visibly nervous, so Supartini gives a few words of encouragement and advice as she fastens the rabbit ears on Bidani's golden headdress.

On stage the gamelan orchestra plays an overture. The audience, all guests of the five-star hotel where the performance is held, have been well fed and now sit back expectantly. They are ready for their evening dose of Balinese culture, as promised in the tourist brochures and, no doubt, included in the cost of their package holiday.

The dance companies of Bali are expert at understanding just what it is

Left: a class in progress at Tirta Sari dance group, which is based in Peliatan near Ubud, Bali; top: traditionally, the legong dancers of Bali were young, for only virgins could perform for the gods

that the tourists want and, at hotels all over the island, performances are tailor-made to satisfy the market.

So what is it that the average tourist wants to see? "Performances must not be too long," explains Mr Oka of the highly respected Tirta Sari dance group of Peliatan, near Ubud. "Our traditional village and temple dances can go on all night. I do not think the tourists want that," he laughs. "They are usually happy for about one hour, and they like especially to see our very young dancers. They like it very cute."

Cute it certainly is. Little Bidani and her friends perform the rabbit dance for all their worth, all nervousness gone and each concentrated movement made as if they were dancing for the gods rather than the tourists. These little girls are as professional as they are cute, and they take their part-time careers very seriously indeed.

"It is best if they start young, at maybe six or seven years old," says Mr Oka. "The lessons are free of charge and usually take place every day for the first year or so. That is how long it takes to pick up the basic movements."

"First we show them the different steps, without music. The teacher stands behind the child and literally pulls his or her body into the correct position. They become very fit and very supple. If they are good they will learn to "feel" the dance. It will get inside their hearts.

"After six months, we will add music from a cassette recorder, and then, after one year, we decide if the child should continue. If they show no promise at all, we encourage them to leave. Sometimes that is not so easy."

Tirta Sari also offers lessons to tourists. "Many Westerners and Japanese come to take classes with us," says Mr Oka. "They see us perform and they want to have a go themselves. Some are so keen that they decide to stay for a few months!"

After the first painful year, learning to contort their supple bodies into seemingly impossible positions, the dancers of Tirta Sari attend class two or three times a week, now accompanied by gamelan music. They learn a very specific repertoire, usually beginning with the legong—the most typical of Balinese dances.

Traditionally, legong dancers were very young, for it was said that only virgins could perform for the gods. Many would retire by the time they



entered their teens. These days, legong dancers may be a little older, perhaps because the tourists are not such an exacting audience.

Most Tirta Sari students perform in public, at hotels and official functions, sometimes as often as eight or nine

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times a month. The pay is carefully graded, according to a dancer's skill and experience, but even the best of performers can never afford to give up his or her day job.

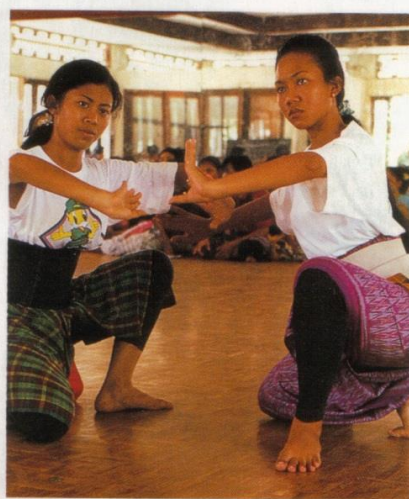
An eight-year-old like Bidani will be lucky if she earns 10,000 rupiah for one tourist show. The most she could

Legong dancers' costumes are elaborate

ever hope for would be 50,000 rupiah—approximately US\$22.

Mr Oka is an architect but he still finds time to teach and perform dance, not just in Bali but overseas as well. In 1994 he led the group to Moscow, but Tirta Sari has also performed in the USA and Japan. In the past the Peliatan group appeared in the old movie "On the Road to Bali" with Bob Hope, Bing Crosby and Dorothy Lamour, while an 11-year-old boy from Tirta Sari, Ketut Parajaya, has recently performed the baris dance in Dick Lee's production "Fantasia" in Japan. Are there opportunities for fame and fortune as a Balinese dancer, after all?

"No, I don't think so," laughs 17-



Above: pupils at Bali's many dance schools have in common a serious attitude towards their studies and great awareness of their cultural heritage

year-old Yovita, as she wraps a brightly coloured sarong around her tight fitting jeans. Her T-shirt extols the virtues of a well known Hong Kong pop star and her favourite group is Guns 'n Roses. Each day she travels to school on the back of her boyfriend's motorbike, and each weekend she goes shopping with her friends. As she walks into the centre of the room she jokes with her friends just like any other teenager.

Then the music starts. The eerie sound of the gamelan echoes through the room and, as if by magic, Yovita is transformed. Her hands take on a dance of their own as her body twists and turns in the highly stylised movements that characterise Balinese dance. Each gesture has the name of an equivalent

movement in nature and a dancer is judged on how well she portrays that image. One minute she is a raven jumping sideways, the next a tiger defending itself against mosquitoes. Yovita glances upwards, as a monkey searching for fruit, and her hands move like two birds fluttering on a branch.

It is not surprising to find that she is considered one of the best in her class—

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and this is no ordinary class. The Sekolah Menengah Karawitan Indonesia (SMKI) is a high school of performing arts.

It was originally known as Kokar and was set up in 1960 to preserve and develop the best traditions of Balinese

culture. SMKI has a spacious campus at Batubulan, near Denpasar. There are about 500 students, male and female, in the three departments of Dance, Traditional Music and Puppetry.

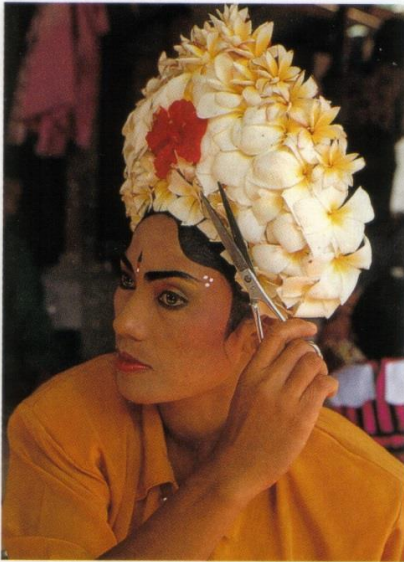
They begin their four-year course at the age of 16 or 17 and, although there is an audition and interview selection process, students are rarely rejected. "That is because we have more places than we have students," says the school's principal, Nyoman Sumandhi.

He is an "old boy" of the school, graduating in Puppetry in 1964, and has seen many changes. "When SMKI was started in 1960 it was not so much a building as an idea. Equipment was borrowed from the village and our teachers were a few well known performers who conducted the lessons in their homes. Now we have a staff of 70 and all these facilities," he said, indicating the landscaped three-hectare site outside of his office window. "Of course we are not better than a regular high school," he added, "just more artistic. It is important that students learn to continue our Balinese heritage, especially if they come from an artistic family. But they must also pass their exams!"

All students are obliged to take courses in Religion, State Ideology, National History, Indonesian language, Sport and Hygiene. Basic vocational subjects such as Maths, English and Business Management are available as well as such options as Stage Production and Performance Skills to complement the student's major of Dance, Music or Puppetry.

"Our students must all be able to earn a living," says Mr Sumandhi. "To be a full-time dancer is very rare. In Bali dance is not for money but to make our culture live, and for religious ceremonies. Of course, the temple dancing is most important and that is performed free of charge. But even the tourist shows are a good thing, because they introduce our culture to foreigners."

Foreigners are welcome at SMKI, both as visitors and as students. "For a small donation we are happy to give lessons to visitors," says Mr Sumandhi, "and a few years ago we even had a Canadian and an Australian enrolled for one year. Travel agents can arrange a half-day programme at our school, and once a year the Japanese school in



Left and top left: getting dressed for a performance is an art in itself; above: very young girls perform a rabbit dance

Jakarta sends us 100 students for a day so that they may learn about Balinese arts. For culture to live it is important that we have these links with the outside world."

The students at SMKI keep up those links by performing in public. "It's good to do the shows because we get experience," says 18-year-old Sari. "I've performed many times at the Hilton, the Bali Beach Hotel and the Kartika Plaza, and sometimes at official government functions. Each performance is for one hour and we get 10,000 rupiah. I also perform in my village, but that is much harder. People expect so much of me because I study here, and every Balinese is an expert on dance!"

Another way to earn money is to teach. Just as Singapore school children have private tuition in English or Chinese, so Balinese children have private dance lessons. "We first noticed that our daughter had a talent for dance

when she was four years old," says Mr Ketut Buana, sales manager at the Santika Beach Hotel. "We have been employing a student from SMKI to come to our house twice a week for the past four years. My daughter is now eight years old and she is doing well."


Sari and her friends are happy to be dancing now but they are not yet sure what they will do when they graduate from SMKI. Many of them will probably go on to university to study other subjects. Some hope to continue with their dance studies at the nearby college of Indonesian Arts, Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia, or STSI. Here the emphasis is different, largely due to the college's highly influential director, Made Bandem.

The son of a rice farmer, Bandem graduated in dance from SMKI and went on to set up an arts festival, to initiate a master's programme in Balinese performing arts and to ensure that ancient dramas and dances are revived with the same energy as new ones are created. Fearful of the effects of television on traditional culture, the man famous for his performances as the monkey god Hanuman has worked all-out to encourage the renaissance of Balinese arts while resisting the pressures of commercialisation.

STSI currently has more than 500 students, 120 masters of the performing arts and 57 full-time faculty members. Classes examine and emphasise the relationship between the arts,

religion and village life. "It is important that the arts do not become too intellectual," said one teacher at STSI. "The traditional power of Balinese dance is spiritual above all else. If we carry on shortening our dances for the tourists, soon there will be nothing left." Older members of staff remember what happened when a pendet dance was performed to welcome US President Reagan in 1986. "It went from 10 to seven minutes, but the White House said that even that was too long. In the end the President saw a two-minute pendet!"

However short the tourist performances become, the Balinese will never stop dancing. Wander away from the big hotels and into the villages of this magical island and you will have no doubt that this is an art form that is alive and strong, even without the culture shows. Dance classes are filled with little girls learning the legong and little boys studying the baris. The ethereal sounds of the gamelan can be heard in village temples far from the five star hotels of Nusa Dua and Sanur beach, and there is no shortage of dancers to perform for the Balinese gods.

Bidani, Supartini, Yovita and their friends may not know what the future holds for them, but all are sure of one thing. "We will never stop dancing," says Yovita. "It is in our blood." 

Kathryn Davis is a British travel writer and Wendy Chan is a photographer based in Singapore

Garuda Indonesia operates regular flights via the international gateway of Bali