

# Ni Wayan Sekariani and Cristina Wistari

## Beauty Behind a Mask

Interview by Julia Varley

*I like conflict in dance, but in life, I prefer to keep quiet and peaceful. I can get cross, but if I react openly the problem becomes bigger, since I am considered almost as I Made Djimat's daughter. I don't want to do anything wrong in the family. I go to the ocean and I scream at the waves.*

*Sekar, how did you start dancing?*

SEKAR: At first I was just doing the Frog Dance. At the age of nine I learnt Margapati, a modern dance. My uncle, I Made Djimat, started to teach me seriously when I was ten. I would practice dance with him every evening, because during the day I had to work and help my mother in her little store. In the beginning my uncle wanted me to study Djauk, a demon mask character, but I didn't want to, because wearing a mask would not allow me to show my beauty. I Made Djimat was angry, because he thought my body and face were strong, *keras*. He would say *cocok*, which means the body is suitable for that role. In order to avoid a conflict with him, I learnt the Djauk dance, but not from my heart. In the end I studied what I wanted: I continued Margapati and then all the Legong style dances.

When I was at high school I started to learn Gambuh, which I did not like at first because its music is very slow. Growing older and regularly listening to the music, I started to like and understand it. Then I stopped dancing Legong and learnt Calonarang - the dance of magic.

In the beginning I didn't really know if I liked dancing or not. I did it because I should. Around the age of twenty or twenty-five I understood that dance was my profession. I started teaching younger girls and, later on, foreigners. This is what I really enjoy. The most important thing for a dancer is to enjoy the dance. It doesn't matter how many problems I have in my life, when I dance I forget about them, as my grandmother did.

*I have heard that your grandmother, I Made Djimat's mother, Ibu Cenik, is a famous dancer. How did she start?*

SEKAR: When Ibu Cenik was young she did not learn dance because she was a maid and she took care of the goats in the village. She would always forget about the animals when listening to the gamelan, the orchestra of metal or

bamboo percussion instruments which accompanies all Balinese traditional performance. Ibu Cenik would watch how the dancers taught and followed the rhythm of the music.

One day the teacher changed the way of teaching and Ibu Cenik asked: "Yesterday you taught in a different way, how come?" The teacher got angry: "You are just a small girl and also very poor, what do you know about dance? If you really know something, try to dance!" Ibu Cenik danced and her way of dancing was interesting, so she started to learn the Joged Pingitan Dance, a solo form which tells the story of Calonarang, accompanied by the bamboo gamelan.

She travelled with the gamelan troupe to different villages to dance and, in this way, she could earn some money for her poor family. The Joged troupe, being smaller than a full Calonarang, would be called to play in different villages for ceremonies, because at the time it was too expensive to have a full orchestra.

I would like to dance like my grandmother.

CRISTINA: When Ibu Cenik was young she was attractive and her dance teacher, already an old man, became interested in her. She had a talent for dance. Even today at the age of more or less seventy-five, dance is her life. When she can dance she is lively, she becomes a much younger woman.

She says she never had a real master, a teacher, she would just look at how the other people danced. One day she was kidnapped, as is the Balinese custom, and married. Her husband, besides being a dance teacher, was a painter and an artist who carved masks and made funeral decorations. Marrying him, Ibu Cenik had more opportunities to dance than before. I Made Djimat, her son, started teaching with her when he was about 12 years old. She also played the role of

Limur, a character from the Arja, the Balinese opera. Mainly she became famous for the role of Larung and for the Joged Pingitan. In Bali, dancers specialise in very precise roles and dance styles. She is a *keras*, a vigorous or strong dancer, not a *manis*, a refined or soft dancer, and she is appreciated for the strong roles.

I think she was a kind of rebel and went against convention, but she is also a very egocentric woman. When her husband decided to take her elder sister as the third wife, she rebelled and left. She became the second wife in another village and therefore had to leave her children. I Made Djimat was only five years old. For a mother it is a big decision to leave her children, with no food, just because it is hard for her to stay.

She always was a fighter and her person always comes first. She is very similar to her son in behaviour, seductive when she thinks it can be useful, but, being a woman, she is also warm and motherly, kind and generous. If she does not like you, it is better to keep at a distance. She was my teacher and I always found her at my side fighting like a tiger to defend my rights. She fights all the time; she never does anything just to please.

*Sekar, you were telling about how you learnt from I Made Djimat. Today would you teach in the same way?*

SEKAR: I would teach in the same way as my uncle, saying to a pupil you will do this dance and you will do that other dance.

CRISTINA: In Bali, a dance or the character in it is chosen according to the morphology of the dancer. For example, Sekar is clearly *keras* and she will not be chosen to do a princess. Only if there is no one else, Sekar could be asked to dance the

princess.

SEKAR: My body doesn't allow me to do those dances. I always watch, so I can do them. But I don't like to do them.

*And when you teach, do the pupils pay you?*

SEKAR: With the Balinese it is never certain. You never ask for something per hour, it is up to them whether they want to pay or not, but for me it is not so important. It is important to have friends. But foreigners pay a very precise amount per hour.

*Gambuh is the oldest dance form, but in Bali many new dances are created. What do you think of the traditional forms and the new creations?*

SEKAR: For the time being, it is good that there are the two choices. I would like to work with both the ancient and the new form. I am somehow obliged to learn all the new modern forms because there are a lot of Japanese students who come to learn them. I must be able to offer them those dances, but within myself I prefer the ancient traditional dance. I have to learn the new ones to earn my living. Now that I am getting a little bit older, I like to dance Gambuh since the melody goes deeper inside.

CRISTINA: I have dedicated a lot of my time to keeping the old traditional Gambuh Dance Drama alive because I come from a country - Italy - where tradition has disappeared, eaten up by tourists. This is exactly what I am witnessing in Bali. The old beauty is being destroyed by tourism, mass media and television. I love Bali and I believe that all the secrets of the dance lie in the old tradition. It is only through experiencing these movements that the dancers can have a deeper understanding of their

art. The new dances activate in a different way. They are fast and not so committed. I prefer to stick to tradition. I believe that knowing your tradition is like having the roots of a tree from which you can expand towards other forms, with a better understanding of yourself and of your movements. Gambuh somehow is like the alphabet of Balinese dance. In Bali they say that if you can dance Gambuh, you can dance everything. You must learn it and then you can go on to something new.

*Sekar, you mostly dance with I Made Djimat's group. Have you ever thought that you would like to make a group of your own?*

SEKAR: I have thought about it, but I do not have the money to do it and it is very difficult, because I am not famous and people would not follow me. It is hard to start something.

*When you travel with I Made Djimat's group, the men tend to stick together and so do the women. The women are often helping and serving the men. Is this something you would like to change?*

SEKAR: I sometimes think I would like to change this, but it is very difficult. It is part of the tradition, of the culture. I am part of a small group and I don't want to create a problem within it. It is important that my uncle and all the men are happy. I choose to lose. Also, within the family, I choose to lose, because I don't like fights. I like conflict in dance, but in life, I prefer to keep quiet and peaceful. I can get cross, but if I react openly the problem becomes bigger, since I am considered almost as I Made Djimat's daughter. I don't want to do anything wrong in the family. I go to the ocean and I scream at the waves. I don't want to fight. I dare to



Ni Wayan Sekariani with Torgeir Wethal in *Four Poems for Sanjukta*.  
Photo: Fiora Bemporad

get angry with other people, like my daughter and my brother.

My respect for I Made Djimat is for three equally important reasons: he is my teacher, he is my uncle and if I answer back he will get even angrier, and the reaction would be out of proportion.

*Does it help you to share your experience with the other women?*

SEKAR: Yes.

CRISTINA: I am making a group of Topeng dance with only women. For a while I have been thinking that the women in Bali never had a real chance to talk about themselves. Not as feminists, but just as women who can say how they see things, how they feel and how they want to relate to situations, to men and to other women. I think that dance is a good way to do this and the choice of a dance that is done generally by the men is even more appropriate.

I chose the Topeng mask dance not because we want to compete with men, but to use the comic characters that can talk about everyday life, the gods, or how a woman who is the third wife experiences this tradition.

Women need to talk. With social changes, with tourism and materialism, also male mentality has to change. They cannot just monopolise all situations.

I went to Pengosekan, a village near Ubud (away from Batuan where I Made Djimat lives and I have so many problems) where there already is a gamelan of women started by a courageous Balinese woman who has been abroad. After she returned to Bali she created this gamelan in order to connect with her old friends. I found this very brave. I respect this woman because she is generous and clever. I thought that we could maybe do something together and I

asked to talk to her and to the whole group of women. I explained: we women always speak in a corner and especially here in Bali there is no chance for us to express how we feel and what we think. They answered with loud applause and so we started to rehearse.

In Bali everything is slow, but we will get there even if it is not easy. Now it is just starting, it is a little seed. We will put a programme together and we will also choose different stories. The stories of Topeng are episodes taken from the Babad, the history of the kingdoms of Bali and Java, which are generally very boring and, therefore, women never watch Topeng. The story is always about a king who has not accomplished his religious duties, so everything goes wrong, and then he does the ceremony and everything goes right. If we choose a story which touches on women's daily lives, I am sure women will be interested in coming to watch and we will be able to share something.

When we rehearse we laugh a lot. It is wonderful, even when we make mistakes we laugh. It is so strong, powerful and beautiful.

I have chosen two important women to do the spoken roles, Ibu Candri and Cokorda Agung Istri. I wanted to choose famous women artists who would attract the attention of other women. We need strong women to do that; we cannot do a Topeng that has no power. Candri was my singing teacher. I've known her many years and I have a very good relationship with her. She is a famous and talented Arja singer - she will be a perfect Wijil. Cokorda Agung Istri is also a renowned Arja singer with a powerful voice, and she will be Penasar. In Topeng Penasar and Wijil are the storytellers in the roles of the two servants of the king. Candri and Cokorda are both from Singapadu and they have been dancing since they were children.

The group will be called Topeng Shakti, referring to the female energy depicted in

the Ardaniswaram, the mythological figure of the androgynous Shiva. It will be difficult to put together a Topeng played only by women, because to use the mask is not easy for a woman, and the musicians will have to learn the numerous melodies and improvisations because in Topeng the dancer leads the music.

The tradition in Bali is that the masks are played by men and are mainly male roles. To use the mask is difficult because you need a unity in the use of the body, you have to overcome the ancestral fear of darkness and you have to look for a kind of energy that usually a woman doesn't have, a male energy. I always say that if you cannot find the animal in yourself you cannot dance Topeng properly and I would never associate that animal quality with a woman's sensitivity.

When you dance without a mask, you can express moods and feelings with your face, but when you have a piece of wood on your face which has just one expression, the control has to be completely different. A woman who has always done women's dances in which the head moves a lot, in order to give life to a character with a mask, has to work in an opposite way. The body has to become like a brick, with one movement in one direction, even though there are variations.

Women can learn Topeng in Bali, but they choose not to, because there are so many different beautiful styles and a woman will never choose to put her face behind a mask. As Sekar said before, she didn't want to use a mask because she wanted to show her beauty. When I started to dance Topeng, I thought there was mystery behind the mask and I was attracted by it.

SEKAR: Women in Bali never try to dance

Topeng, because the mask is related to men. But when I saw Cristina and the other women rehearsing, I thought that maybe one day it will be good for me to follow them and become part of the group. It is nice to talk with so many friends and now I no longer believe my beauty would be hidden if it is put behind a mask.

Translated from Indonesian by Cristina Wistari

NI WAYAN SEKARIANI (Bali) is thirty years old. She started to learn dance when she was nine years old under the guidance of her uncle, the renowned master I Made Djimat. Later she studied at the Academy of Dance S.T.S.I. of Denpasar. She is a member of the Panti Pusaka Budaya group led by I Made Djimat and has been performing since her youth in temple ceremonies and in Europe.

CRISTINA WISTARI (Italy, res. Bali) was born in Italy in 1945 and has travelled in Asia since 1977. In India she studied Kathakali and in Bali Topeng dance, Gambuh and Canolarang under the guidance of I Made Djimat. Now she dances in temple ceremonies and in religious festivals in Bali as well as performing and teaching in Europe, Australia, Asia and South America.