

Trance and Dance in Bali

By Kate Pourshariati

Watching the film *Trance and Dance in Bali* again, I was struck anew with the odd disconnect between the corpus of visual anthropology by Mead and her writings, or perhaps, the intended research and the actual outcome. What you can see in the final film is essentially Mead's voice-over narration, calmly explaining one day's performance of Balinese classical temple theater art. It is only by reading the opening credits that one might learn that the research was funded by an organization dedicated to research on schizophrenia. It is therefore possible to be familiar with the film without perceiving any of the controversial aspects of the research that led to its creation.

Here are the bare bones facts about the film *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1952) and the original field work, photography and filming, which took place between 1936-1939 by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. Their innovative plan of work was to do the fieldwork chiefly with film and photography, using note-taking to document these recordings, in the end presenting a huge body of work to be integrated and poured over later. (Presciently, or against ordinary practice, Mead notes that the team showed the footage to the participants for feedback, in 1939 in Bali). No project of its scale was taken up again for at least 50 years. When Mead and Bateson arrived as newlyweds in Bali in 1936, they joined a group of expatriates including Jane Belo, her

husband the composer Colin McPhee, the German artist Walter Spies, and many others who were taken with the elaborate arts and intricate cultural expression of the Balinese. Belo in particular had learned much spoken Balinese, and had befriended many in the town of Pagoetan [Pagutan]. According to Belo, Spies was directly responsible for the promotion of Pagutan as a place for Europeans to go and see trance performance; this is one example of his culture curation which had the effect of molding the traditions locally by favoring certain groups of artists and their styles. It needs to be noted that this all took place in the oppressive Dutch colonial period, something which is not presented as context in the body of the work. The question of agency on the part of the peoples studied and filmed is contentious in critical views of the project.

Mead and Bateson's field work was funded mostly by the Committee for Research in Dementia Praecox, based on their research proposal that posited that trance in Bali was essentially an expression of schizophrenia. In her book on *Trance in Bali*, Jane Belo shows disagreement with the basic premises of the research. Belo's understanding was more aligned with the understanding of trance as a religious phenomenon, rather than laying a theoretical framework on what she observed, or what we could call a pathologizing of religious practice. She relied upon Balinese friends and local experts to give her deeper understanding of the religion, arts and culture of the place.

To satisfy her own thinking, she notes that she brought in a European psychiatrist with experience in mental hospitals to observe ordinary Balinese people at work and in religious trance, and he affirmed that the people he observed and tested were in no way schizophrenic. It is admirable that Mead wrote the introduction to Belo's book, despite Belo's clear critique of the project.

As an accurate representation, it is well documented, initially by Mead and Bateson, that *Trance and Dance* itself is flawed. We know that the footage is of a staged dance performance of the Calonarang, featuring the Rangda witch, her sisya assistants, the Barong dragon and his kris dancers. This performance, commissioned by Bateson for Mead's 36th birthday, December 16, 1937, is set in daytime rather than at night, as it was normally enacted, to make filming possible. Belo notes that the young women in the film who perform the kris dance were specifically asked to do so by the research team, though it had never been done in Bali by women before. In the comments recorded by Belo from the Balinese before the performance, we can see that the younger women who are about to perform are nervous, this was their very first performance of the kris dance and ngoerek, a ritual self-attack with these kris knives, which were known to not cut the skin in a person actually in trance. Sequences of dance and ritual were filmed by Bateson, but the trance sequences were all taken by Belo. Bateson was not involved with the editing of any of the produced films, many years later.

The music track (added in 1952) which was recorded by Colin McPhee on other occasions is of course non-synchronous, and the matching of the music to the dance is spotty in places according to ethnomusicologist Andy McGraw and the Balinese music scholar Ida Bagus Made Widnyana. They note that the music for the primary section was possibly recorded in the village of Binoh, rather than Pagutan. At 18:22 there is music associated with a temple procession, not heard in this form of dance, and there are other mismatches. Though to general western audiences these dissonances might pass unnoticed, to a Balinese audience it would be significant. We can see that some of the issues were technological (no sync sound recording, no lights or way to film at night), and other issues were partially an outcome of the filming in a town in which Mead and Bateson were not living or working. The rest of the edited Bali films are quite different in that they depict child development issues and are made in Bajoeng Gede [Bajoeng Gd], where they lived.

Outside of issues of verisimilitude, why is *Trance and Dance in Bali* and the entire Mead Bateson corpus from Bali still sought after today, and why is it on the National Film Registry? To begin, *Trance and Dance* had innovative aspects which made it appealing to artists and others across disciplines. It was likely the first time many people had a chance to see people enter a trance state on film, particularly in a non-fiction format. The use of slow motion in editing is particularly compelling, giving a dreamy feeling and yet still working well with the slightly blurry gamelan track.

For this we can thank Mead herself and her editor Josef Bohmer, who created the produced films in 1952, together with her narration and addition of the aforementioned music tracks. Second, the voice of Mead as a narrator is likely one of the first female narrators of a documentary film. In this documentary, unlike many others that she narrated, Mead uses a calm, firm and slightly softer tone. Mead was of course a lightning rod for all sorts of criticism, and as such her voice of authority at times makes one think of the glass ceiling she was acutely aware of, at the American Museum of Natural History and for women at the time in general.

The grander project of Mead and Bateson, with their innovative note taking system and incredible degree of photographic documentation also is cause for great interest. The 25,000 photographs and 30,000 plus feet of 16mm film taken is cause for wistful sighs among scholars; and regrets by Mead and Bateson when they were alive. The intention to be able to link the notes with the pictures and film is now more doable than it ever has been in the past; the photos are now all scanned, the films soon could be too, and the notes have been scanned (with OCR). Because of the interruption of World War II and then their subsequent separation, these works were never united, and we will not have a thorough understanding of what Mead and Bateson recorded until they are.

In one of their last interviews together, Bateson and Mead had a fundamental disagreement on whether it was possible to have any objectivity at all in the making of such a film. Essentially, Mead maintained

that the camera if mounted on a tripod, set to a wide angle view, and left to run, was a scientific device, which Bateson (at least in 1976) found absurd. During this famous conversation, Bateson is clearly exasperated with Mead's position and makes it clear that he no longer has any illusion that anything scientific or objective can be gleaned from such experiments. *Trance and Dance* was one of seven films made out of the footage that was taken at the time, in both Bali and Papua New Guinea, which made up a series called *Character Formation in Different Cultures*. Other than these seven short films edited by Mead and Bohmer in the 1950s, no other films have been made out of this footage, nor has the footage been released or seen in any substantive way. Given such a huge body of work, it is tantalizing to imagine creative and documentary uses if the footage could be shared back with the people of Bajoeng Gd and Pagutan, as well as the Iatmul people filmed in Tambunam Village, PNG, none of whom have seen the unedited footage in 80 years. If Faye Ginsburg is correct in her assessment that Mead (the futurist) anticipated such reworking of the archive with pleasure, she would be delighted as well with such a project, enhancing the project's legacy by technological means even she may have been amazed to see.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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Special thanks for their contributions to:

Dr. Andrew McGraw, University of Richmond

Ida Bagus Made Widnyana.

Alessandro Pezzati

Fatimah Tobing Rony

See also:

Belo, Jane. *Trance in Bali*

Belo, Jane. *Traditional Balinese Culture*

Brand, Stewart "[For God's Sake, Margaret](#)"

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Ginsburg, Faye "[Now Watch this Very Carefully . . .](#)" *The Ironies and Afterlife of Margaret Mead's Visual Anthropology,*

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[Margaret Mead papers and South Pacific Ethnographic Archives,](#)

[Margaret Mead Audiovisual Collections, Library of Congress](#)

[South Pacific Ethnographic Collections, Library of Congress](#)

Tobing Rony, Fatimah The photogenic cannot be tamed. Margaret Mead and Greg Bateson's Trance and Dance in Bali. *Discourse*, 28:1, Winter 2006 pp.5-27.