



## Balinese: Topeng



Bali is a small island in southeast Asia, with sparkling oceans and volcanic mountains, rural rice fields and bustling urban centers. Malay people are the vast majority in Bali, and a local form of Hinduism predominates, shaping Balinese life and art since long before the island became part of Indonesia.

Balinese music and dance is many centuries old, but continues to develop as a living tradition. In Bali, dance is always closely allied to music, not only in the fact that many gamelan [gong-chime orchestra or ensemble] performances include dance as a major component, but also because the details of choreography and dance gesture are tightly synchronized with the music's accents and textures. The traditions evolved primarily in the context of the highly ornate, multi-faceted ceremonies of Balinese Hindu culture. In these dances, the performance is seen as an offering to the Hindu deities, who

are invited down from the heavens to visit the temples during temple anniversaries and other auspicious ritual occasions. Topeng (masked dance) is frequently performed in this context.

### Topeng: Balinese Masked Dance

Topeng has existed in Bali for at least 300 years, and remains enormously popular throughout Bali.

**People Like Me 2002: Face to Face!** features master dancer I Nyoman Sumandhi performing an abbreviated excerpt from *Topeng Pajegan*, a form specifically performed by a solo dancer playing several masked characters. In both *Topeng Pajegan* and *Topeng Panca* (performed by a troupe of five dancers) a story from Balinese history is presented through a series of masked dances.

Traditionally, the first two or three characters to come out are the opening, non-speaking characters, which are only vaguely (if at all) related to the story that follows. With the entrance of the speaking *penasar*, servant to the king, the story begins to be revealed. Other masks advance the story in one way or another -- by singing in the lofty language of kings and princes, by interpreting and commenting on that language for the audience, by cracking jokes, and, at moments when the music stops, through sparkling banter and dialogue with other characters.

The masks that are used in Topeng, as with all other Balinese masks, are carved out of a light wood, by revered maskmakers. Maskmakers have a special respected place in Balinese society, and those who carve ceremonial masks do so out of live trees.

Some of the masks danced in topeng include the Old Man, Clown characters, and Kings. Topeng dancers hold a special role among performing artists, in that they must be literate in history and religion, and be aware of local, national, and international developments. The topeng characters not only explicate the story, but also make a connection between that story and the event at hand, which might be a religious ceremony such as a temple anniversary, a human rite of passage such as a funeral, or even a political rally. The character not only reveals the traditional meaning of the ceremony, but also makes comments on politics, morality, and the modern function of the ceremony.

The music for Topeng underscores the topeng's character, reflecting refinement, strength, or humor. Music for the refined characters will have longer "gong cycles" or rhythmic patterns, while the funnier and coarser character are accompanied by shorter gong cycles. As the dancer goes through his characteristic movements within a certain musical structure, the sequence and pacing of the movements is improvised, though they are mostly based on a well-known repertoire which is familiar to the musicians. At particular moments within the metric framework of the gong cycle, the dancer gives cues for *angsel*, or rhythmic breaks in the musical flow which are reflected in the choreography. The drummer communicates the *angsel* to the other musicians through split-second reactions. Ideally, the drummer and dancer are in perfect sympathetic coordination, as they communicate not only through choreographic cues, but also through changes of voice and dramatic development as the story unfolds.

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