

Shi-Shi and Barong: Kin or Coincidence?

獅子舞はアジア全体でみられ、中国が発祥の地とされているが、日本の獅子とバリ島のバロンは明らかに中国の獅子とは違っており、共通の類似点を持っている——。

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Introduction

Variations on the so-called ‘Lion Dance’ exist throughout Asia and are generally assumed to derive from the Chinese Lion Dance performed at Lunar New Year celebrations in Asia and in Chinatowns throughout the world. However, my research indicates that the Japanese Shi-Shi and the Balinese Barong are tangibly different from the Chinese, Korean and Tibetan variants from which they are often supposed to have derived. Moreover, there is evidence to indicate that some of those things that distinguish them from the Chinese model also demonstrate a link between these geographically separate but spiritually similar traditions. In this paper I will examine the case for kinship between Shi-Shi and Barong and seek to find points of contact that might help to explain how two such similar practices can have evolved thousands of miles apart. My research has examined shared elements of culture and found some tantalising possibilities of contact and cross-fertilisation that might indicate that the masks are related and that their similarities indicate not coincidence, but kinship.

Apart from my own article on iconographic simi-

larities between Japanese and Balinese ritual masks,¹⁾ there is not a great deal of literature comparing Shi-Shi and Barong. However Jane Belo’s 1949 study of the exorcistic ritual drama *Rangda and Barong* suggests:

“It is a possibility, presented here only tentatively for lack of supporting evidence, that the masked figure of the Rangda was elaborated out of the Durga worship belonging to the Sivaite tradition, while that of the Barong developed in a parallel line from some form of the Buddhist worship. This hypothesis is not belied by the existence in China and in Japan of dragon [sic] masks, closely resembling the Balinese Barong in structure, function, and behaviour—playing in the villages at New Year’s, for example—for it might have been on a wave of Buddhism that the idea of the Barong reached all three countries. The lion-like mask, the body animated by two or more players, the function of the performance as an exorcism for the protection of the village, the giving of food and coins to him in return for his protection, these are com-



mon elements found in China and Japan as well. It is quite conceivable that the mask play, travelling with Buddhism, was diffused over this wide area. [. . .] The antagonism, then, of Rangda and Barong when they meet and match their supernatural powers in the Balinese play could contain the deeper symbolic meaning of the rivalry of the Sivaite faith with the earlier entrenched Buddhism.” (Belo 1949: 32-3)

So here is our first hint of a connection—the association of Barong with Buddhism. Belo goes on to mention comments made by a Japanese anthropology student who, having seen Belo’s films of Barong, remarked on the similarity of the dance to the Shi-Shi Mai performed in his own village in Japan, and Belo herself notes the iconographic similarities between the two masks. She points to “contact between Indonesia and China. . . established in Han times” (Belo 1949: 33) and the well-known connection between China and Japan as a possible explanation for the similarity. In this, she appears to assume that the Barong and Shi-Shi both derive from Chinese sources. Unfortunately, this is as far as the dis-

cussion goes, but a number of other sources point to a possible link between Japan and Bali through Buddhism and my research indicates that there are similarities in form, function and spiritual significance that link Shi-Shi and Barong.

Syncretism

In popular literature Bali is generally identified as an enclave of Hinduism in the vast sea of Islam that is the rest of Indonesia, but this rather sloppy description ignores the extraordinary complexity of religious and cultural practice in Indonesia in general and Bali in particular. Balinese religion is a syncretic blend of Hinduism, Buddhism and local animist practices that makes any simple comparison with practices elsewhere very difficult. The myths, stories and archaeological evidence that have come down to us from the earliest known history of Bali demonstrate the powerful influence of both Hindu and Buddhist rulers in shaping the culture of this island and it is here that we may find some connections between Shi-Shi and Barong.

One important coincidence in the two cultures is



the syncretic nature of religious practice. Therefore, just as Barong performance is situated in the liminal space between animism and Hindu-Buddhist practice in Bali, so *Shi-Shi Kagura* functions within the liminal space between Shinto and Buddhist practice and is especially associated with the syncretic *Shugendō* sect. (Kárpáthy 2000: 110) This is a point I will return to later.

Iconography

Let us begin by looking at the masks themselves to see whether they have any ‘family resemblance.’ Neither the Shi-Shi nor the Barong look much like lions, and certainly not at all like the popular images of the African lion. Since there are no lions in either Bali or Japan it is hardly surprising that the species of animal is somewhat ambiguous. However, they do look like some kind of wild animal. *Shi-Shi Mai* is generally translated into English as “Lion Dance,” but in ancient Japanese the term *shi-shi* “designated edible wild animals, such as wild boars or deer. [. . .] Shishi dances of various types—native deer or wild boar dances, imported lion dances, and a combination of them are among the oldest in recorded history.” (Ortoloni 1990: 26; Sakurai 1988: 138) Thus,

it is possible that the *Shi-Shi Mai* and *Shi-Shi Kagura* may pre-date any contact with the Chinese lion dance.²⁾ Both the Shi-Shi and the Barong can come in various shapes and, before mass tourism turned the dances into sightseeing attractions, there was abundant evidence of a variety of creatures classed as Shi-Shi or Barong. The *Shi-Shi Kaikan* in Hida-Takayama has over 200 examples of *Shi-Shi gashira* shaped like lions, dogs, pigs and even some with horns that might be taken for a particularly fierce deer. Beryl de Zoete and Walter Spies in their seminal study of *Dance and Drama in Bali* mention several types of Barong including *Lembu* (cow), *Macan* (tiger), *Gajah* (elephant) and *Bangkal* (wild boar) as well as the best-known *Barong Ket*, which is held to be “magically powerful to a very high degree” but does not resemble any known animal. (de Zoete and Spies 1938: 91) In addition to this diversity of forms, the masks have a number of other things in common:

- The predominant colours are red, black and gold.³⁾
- They have prominent, bulging eyes and large teeth or tusks.
- The masks’ expression, while fierce, is also friendly.
- Both Shi-Shi and Barong have a moveable jaw

or a loose wooden tongue that allows the mask to make a very expressive ‘clacking’ sound during performance.

Circumstances of Performance and Ritual Function

Both Shi-Shi and Barong performances are associated with seasonal folk and religious rituals. The creature goes from house to house, often accompanied by a small musical ensemble, and performs for householders to chase away demons and bring good luck. The *Shinzei kogakuzu* features illustrations of Shi-Shi Mai “which depict a man leading a lion by a rope and accompanied by two children and musicians.” (Nishikawa 1978: 94). The Balinese Barong processions that take place during the Galungan period (when the deified ancestors are welcomed) are remarkably similar with children, sometimes in masks, going from house to house with their small Barong, playing gongs and drums to accompany the dance.

There are, of course, more formal performances such as the Barong dances held in conjunction with temple ceremonies and the *Shi-Shi Kagura* that is performed at shrines and temples. The appearance of Barong or Shi-Shi in these circumstances is both auspicious and exorcistic and the mask itself is regarded as the seat of the deity and revered as the god incarnate. These sacred masks are usually kept in the temple or shrine and brought out to dance only on important and auspicious occasions. (Kárpáthy 2000: 116; Sakurai 1988: 141; Hobart 2003: 131-2) They may also be used for exorcism and healing. (Neumann 2008; Ortolani 1990: 26; Hobart 2003: 157).

Buddhism

While it is possible that both Shi-Shi and Barong may derive from indigenous exorcistic practices that predate the arrival of Buddhism in these two cultures, it seems more than coincidence that these masks have

strong associations with Buddhism. Most historians tell us that Buddhism came to Japan via China and the Korean peninsula from around the 7th century CE, but did not really begin to take hold until the 8th or 9th century (Tazawa et. al 1973: 21-26) with the arrival of the *Shingon* and *Tendai* esoteric sects. At about the same time the first evidence appears of Mahayana Buddhism being officially established in Bali (Pringle 2004: 44-45). In both cases it was esoteric or Tantric Buddhism that exerted the most powerful attraction for the local populations.

What, then, is the connection between esoteric Buddhism and these dances? In the course of my researches I had a look at the Nô play *Shakkyo*, known in English as *The Stone Bridge*. This play is performed by all five schools of Nô and, while there are some slight variations between the schools, the story basically runs like this:

“A priest goes to China to visit famous Buddhist places. One day, he is about to cross a stone bridge across a ravine when a child [or a woodcutter] appears. He hears from him that the land on the other side of the bridge is the Paradise of the deity Monju Bosatsu; even famous priests in olden times could only cross it after long and severe religious training. Telling the priest that if he waits by the bridge he will see something wonderful, the child disappears. After a while, a lion emerges and gambols and dances among the peony flowers.” (O’Neill 1953: 158-9)

This dancing lion is a manifestation or incarnation of Monju, also known as Manjusri—the bodhisattva of wisdom—and is generally depicted in art as a handsome young man whose mount is a lion. This depiction demonstrates the triumph of wisdom in training the mind. Monju is one of the sixteen great bodhisattvas of the Shingon sect of Buddhism in Japan. As Manjusri, he was also particularly revered by the Sailendra rulers of 8th century Java who reigned over the seas of Southeast Asia. There is evidence



that the influence of the Sailendra Dynasty spread as far north as Cambodia, and they regularly sent trade embassies to the Chinese emperor's court. (Zakharov 2012: 20) They also built the Sewu temple near Prambanan in Central Java, which is dedicated to Manjusri.

Around the year 914 CE, the Sailendra king, Sri Kesari Warmadewa led a military expedition to Bali to establish Mahayana Buddhism on the island, and we know this because he had a pillar erected to tell of his success. The revered Belanjong Pillar, with inscriptions in Sanskrit and Old Balinese, stands in an enclosure here in Sanur, about five minutes' drive from the Bali Beach Hotel. Historians take the pillar as evidence of a society on Bali that was already practicing Saivite Hinduism alongside esoteric Buddhism. (Hobart et. al. 1996: 141; Pringle 2004: 44-46) It is not difficult to imagine that the new Buddhist rulers of Bali, devotees of Manjusri, might organise propitious and purificatory performances of a 'lion dance' to celebrate setting the island of Bali on the path to wisdom and enlightenment.

Since there are no lions in either Bali or Japan it is hardly surprising that the species of animal is somewhat ambiguous. In any case, the mask is not meant to literally represent a lion, but rather to be

a manifestation of the attributes represented by the bodhisattva. Indeed, in both Balinese and Japanese practice the mask is not just a costume, but is the actual deity incarnate. The *Shi-Shi Kagura*, mask is not just a *gashira* or 'head', but *gongen*, that is a manifestation or incarnation of the deity. In Bali 'Barong' is a generic term for the mask or the performance genre, but an individual mask is referred to as *Bhatara*, given an individual name and revered as the embodiment of the deity possessed of great spiritual power.

The Construction of the Beast: Mask and Costume

The creation of the body and mask of the Balinese Barong happens on sacred ground, in the village temple, and is extremely complex and detailed. At every stage, from harvesting the wood for the mask to the final stages of painting and adding exterior decorations, many offerings are given to propitiate negative spirits that might disturb the work and to honour the powerful spirit who will inhabit the Barong. Both mask and body display symbols and ornaments that are designed to indicate and impart great spiritual power. The *kembang bajra* (flower trident) that sits

atop the mask's head, "signifies Siwa's trident" but also represents the *vajra* or thunderbolt of enlightenment in esoteric Buddhism; between the eyebrows is the "two-petalled lotus. . . [that] signifies spiritual insight that can be used as an outward galvanising force." (Hobart 2003: 146) The body of the Barong is made from a rattan-mesh and bamboo frame over which is hung a red cloth and, eventually, a string mesh to which is attached a shaggy coat made of the fibres of pandanus leaves, heron feathers or (rarely) horsehair. The head and coat are then decorated with gilded leather ornaments "embellished with small pieces of mirror and coloured glass." (Hobart 2003: 138-147) Importantly, the Barong Ket is also given a beard made of human hair, donated voluntarily by a pre-pubescent girl. This powerful element of the mask is used for purification, healing and to bring people out of trance in exorcistic ceremonies. Once the mask and body have been separately assembled, there are further ceremonies for charging the mask with supernatural power, which take place in the cremation grounds—a favourite locale for Tantric rites. There are additional ceremonies for bringing the mask and the body of the Barong together and, finally, the complete Barong becomes *Banaspati Raja*—the king of the forest.

"Barong Ket, like the servant/clown in Balinese and Javanese theatre, is composed of a weird assemblage of different parts, from varied origins. Being inherently ambiguous, he unites within his form various meanings. While male, he has female features, as evidenced by his beard made from the hair of a pre-menstruating girl. Created by humans, he is a vehicle of the supreme gods." (Hobart 2003: 149)

The ornamentation on the Barong Ket is extremely elaborate with enormous gilded leather "crowns" decorated with tiny mirrors and polished stones that catch the light which surmount the front and rear of the costume. The other commonly seen varieties of Barong, Barong Macan (tiger) and Barong Bangkal

(wild boar), do not include this ornamentation but have more 'realistic' elements that might include a striped or leopard-patterned cloth for Barong Macan or a strip of goatskin along the back for Barong Bangkal.

While not quite as elaborate as the process for making Barong mask, the making of a *Shi-Shi*, especially for ritual use, still involves a good deal of ritual and, most importantly, a spiritual sensibility that takes account of the divine *kami* nature in all things. (Roberts 2013)

The Dance

The folklorist A. W. Sadler gave an excellent account of a *dai-dai kagura* he attended in Tokyo in 1970:

"The movements of those lions is something unearthly, and supra-human. I mean: the line between representation and holy presence is blurred. . . It is as the head priest of one shrine told me: 'You mustn't worry too much about the origins and locales of the different schools of kagura. You must try to get the spirit of the dance. Kagura is one of the ways of giving pleasure to the kami at o-matsuri time; so origins do not matter, only the spirit. The spirit is essential. The atmosphere of the festival. You've got to feel it.'" (quoted in Kárpáthy 2000: 114)

There is certainly choreography involved in the dances of both Barong and Shi-Shi, including a distinct movement vocabulary that must be inculcated into the body through kinaesthetic learning, which means a great deal of repetition. Yet, in performance there is clearly an element of improvisation in which the creature might interact with audience, other actors and even musicians. It is essential that the dancers have a detailed and secure knowledge of both the choreography and the musical accompaniment, so that the interaction of movement and music can be seamless and intuitive.



Another essential element is that the dancer in the front, who manipulates the mask, is able to ‘see’ through the eyes of the mask in order to make it expressive. This requires a powerful and deeply intuitive relationship with the mask itself and a total subjugation of the dancer’s ‘self’ to the mask. Of course, the eyes are sculpted and not actually ‘open’ in a way that allows them to be seen through and, in fact, the dancer usually can see very little, while the dancer in the rear can see even less. Nonetheless, the two dancers together must seem to make the whole heavy, often ungainly costume and mask function as a single, expressive unit. They must make this sacred creature live. The successful performance of these dances requires physical strength, athletic skill, keen sensitivity of expression and perfect teamwork—all in service to the mask and the spirit that inhabits it. Is it any wonder that these two traditions are also associated with visitation, possession and trance?

Conclusion

Barong and Shi-Shi are so much alike in form and function and in other, more complex ways one feels they must be brothers, somehow. However, it is unlikely that the Hindu-Buddhist kings of maritime

Southeast Asia visited Japan, and improbable that monks from Japan strayed as far as Bali, though it is theoretically possible that they might have travelled to study at the great Buddhist schools associated with Borobudur in Java. There is no real evidence for actual contact between the Japanese Shi-Shi and the Balinese Barong before the twentieth century. Nonetheless these two great, supernaturally powerful mask performances can claim kinship of a sort: through their associations with esoteric Buddhism and the bodhisattva Manjusri. They are also linked by their iconography, their spiritual power to protect and purify and that they dance as deities. There is too much in common to be mere coincidence.

Footnotes

- 1) Coldiron, Margaret (2005) “Lions Witches and Happy Old Men: Some Parallels between Balinese and Japanese Ritual Masks” in *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 227-248.
- 2) Sakurai (1988) makes a distinction between ‘imported’ and ‘indigenous’ Shi-Shi dances but goes on to point out that “these two types of *shi-shi mai* have influenced each other and it is now difficult to make clear distinctions between them.” (p. 138)
- 3) However, a quick survey of YouTube clips shows that in folk performances today other colours may be used including brown, green and white.

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