# Bedoyo:

*Seventy-two perforated bell-shaped stupas stud the upper three tiers of the devotional path at Borobudur, a three-dimensional mandala in stone in Central Java.*

# Weapon of the Sultan

Now taught in Java performing arts schools, this sacred dance used to be for the eyes of the Sultan alone.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAREN GREENSPAN

In the historic royal court of Central Java is the epic, man-made mountain of stone: Borobudur. This three-dimensional mandala built by rulers of the Buddhist Shailendra dynasty during the ninth century has been called "an embodiment in stone of the Buddhist doctrine." Its creators understood the value and power of the mind-body connection and designed an experience in the form of a devotional path that ascends nine open terraces to the large crowning dome at the top. The lower levels act as a teaching tool in that the balustrade walls are carved with a seemingly endless sequence of narrative reliefs depicting various Sanskrit texts. As one ascends to the upper tiers, one leaves the chatter of representation and enters a realm of spaciousness. These upper terraces are studded with perforated bell-shaped *stupas* (reliquary structures), each containing a seated Buddha image.

As I walked the path, I was surrounded by scenes of ritual court dancers, confirming a long history of dance performance in the courts of Java. The wide stances and high knee lifts of the female dancers are thought to have been introduced from India along with the *Natya Shastra* (ancient Indian sacred treatise on the aesthetic norms for dance and drama) and are a distinct contrast to the restrained mode of dancing that became characteristic of the later Javanese courts. This subdued style of female dancing with its paramount grace and control of both body and mind is embodied in the sacred court dance called *bedoyo*.

The original bedoyo dance, *Bedoyo Ketawang*, which is the prototype from which others have been created, is attributed to Sultan Agung (ruled 1613-1645), the most powerful ruler of the Muslim Mataram Sultanate (late sixteenth century to mid-eighteenth century). There are even legendary accounts that have asserted heavenly origins for the conceptual creation of female dancing and gamelan music. It is believed that the sultan envisioned the *Bedoyo Ketawang* through inspiration from the Goddess of the Southern Ocean, Ratu Loro Kidul, the most esteemed deity in Javanese mythology (an incarnation of the Hindu goddess of rice, Dewi Sri). The story is told that one night while the sultan was absorbed in worship, the goddess came to him singing her sublime song of love for him and dancing the heavenly bedoyo. There are some versions in which they consummate their union in the ocean. The next morning, the sultan related the composition from this nocturnal visit to his music and dance masters and commissioned the bedoyo, which was considered a gift from God.

To the Javanese people, the dance represents the mystical union between the Goddess of the Southern Ocean and their respective ruler. The dance's sacred nature was such that in earlier times during ceremonial occasions, the guests in attendance would turn their backs when the bedoyo was performed, as it was for the eyes of the Sultan alone. The *Bedoyo Ketawang* was performed for Sultan Agung's coronation and accession to the throne of Surakarta (the original court of Central Java) and each year on the anniversary, as well as for each successive ruler to the present time. Likewise, the court of Yogyakarta also has sacred bedoyo dances, *Bedoyo Semang* and *Bedoyo Sinom*. These were bequeathed by the Surakarta court to the *kraton* (palace) of Yogyakarta in the division of artistic assets when the Mataram kingdom officially divided in 1755 into two principalities after much contention. These two bedoyo dances are also linked to the encounter between Ratu Loro Kidul and Sultan Agung. These seminal bedoyo dances are considered *pusaka*, or sacred heirlooms. Although both courts continue to perform pusaka bedoyos

*One of Borobudur's 504 serene Buddha images that appear on elevated niches or within the bell-shaped stupas.*

*Energetic court dancing depicted on Borobudur relief.*

as well as foster new bedoyo choreographies, the Yogyakarta court has developed its own distinctive, more militaristic, dance style and traditions.

After Indonesia became an independent republic in 1949, it moved quickly to establish conservatories at high school and college levels to insure the preservation of Javanese performing arts traditions that had earlier been maintained by the royal courts. On a recent trip to Java one year ago, I visited one of these schools: SMKI (*Sekolah Menengah Kesenian Indonesia*), the government-established High School of Performing Arts, a public/private institution that requires testing and audition for admittance to its three-year combined program of dance and academic subjects.

The campus wing that I visited to observe morning classes had four sizeable dance studios equipped with satiny, polished, teakwood floors, some with mirrors, others without. To reach the wing, my guide, Tislingga (Tis), and I walked by a spacious pavilion court that is used for large rehearsals, assemblies, and performances. We caught the tail end of a (male) fighting dance, in which students were dancing combative sequences with long sticks. The gentle chimes of Javanese music beckoned us down a walkway into a room furnished with a set of gamelan instruments, two large white screens, and sets of the elaborately-cut and painted leather shadow puppets for *Wayang Kulit* (sacred art of shadow puppetry). Several young men were practicing their puppetry moves while others were playing the instrumental accompaniment.

We continued on to several dance studios and observed classes—each with about twenty students of mixed gender. Although the dances are traditionally gender-specific, the students are instructed together, and everyone learns to perform both feminine (*běksa putri*) and male (*běksa putra*) modes of dance. They typically rehearse in yoga pants or cut-offs, t-shirt, and the characteristic long, tied dance scarf (*selendang*) that is used as an essential stage property and source of movement vocabulary.

I was curious to see how Javanese Muslim belief would express itself in the performing arts—particularly with respect to the country's dance traditions. For instance, the Hindu epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata form the substance of Javanese *wayang wong* (dance-drama) and wayang kulit, although over time, Islamic elements such as the nine *wali* (the saints who brought Islam to Indonesia) and Sufi mysticism have found their way into the source material for various dance forms. The Javanese (specifically the Yogyakarta school) also have a philosophy called *Jogèd Mataram* that theorizes on four aspects of dance—concentration tempered with awareness, dynamic spirit or inner fire, self-confidence without pridefulness, fearless dedication and discipline—and how these qualities are to be applied to the challenges of life in general. The philosophy emphasizes the interdependence of the dancer's physical movement and inner spirit in the creation of the ultimate artistic expression. These concepts underlie the art form and notions of ideal Javanese moral character. They have been formulated into text from oral traditions transmitted from master to student, tracing back to the seventeenth century Javanese Kingdom of Mataram (roughly 1587–1755).

We entered one studio in which two male instructors were teaching a men's dance. Most male dances are fighting dances, and the two instructors were demonstrating a martial duet—legs wide in a grounded plié as well as during jumps, arms and fists raised, feet flexed. Eventually, the combat led to the use of metal swords. With a direct and outward focus, the students rehearsed the high-energy leaps and partnered swordplay. Finally, they sat on the floor, sipping from their

water bottles, briskly fanning themselves, and receiving feedback from the instructors on their performance.

We moved on to another studio in which two female instructors were working with their students on a women's dance. After some technical instruction and rehearsal, the dancers lined up in rows and an instructor turned on a recording of Javanese gamelan music that began with stately, metered, mellow tones. They danced a slow-motion procession with an elegant aura of ceremony distinguished by a walking step in which one foot swings forward and then rotates outward as the dancer steps onto it. Throughout the walking step, the toes remain lifted in a flexed position. Tis explained that they were performing a *bedoyo* for me. This revered, sacred court dance was traditionally performed by nine beautiful young maidens for the sultan during significant royal occasions—coronations, birthdays, weddings, etc. Much like Javanese culture and religion in general, the bedoyo is a multi-layered assimilation of beliefs, mystical practices, and artistic conventions from indigenous Javanese animism, Hindu-Buddhist traditions, Islamic principles, and even some European influences.

Once the dancers completed their procession into the dance space, they knelt to the floor with hands folded in devotion, then sat cross-legged in a contemplative pose with the right hand resting on the right thigh and the left hand placed on the left knee. This reverential posture is called the *sembah,* or salutation, and is directed toward the sultan, a deity, and the noble guests. It is offered again at the end of the dance ritual before the exit procession. The dancers rose to the lulling gamelan chimes and *kidung* (sung sacred poetry) and danced as in a dream, using one hand to softly manipulate the loose ends of their sashes in a myriad of sensuous patterns—flipping, pulling, lifting, dropping, spreading, flicking, casting away, and more. Concurrently, the other hand formed flowing gestures that assumed the silky quality of the fabric while one foot would brush behind the other to land in a decisive thump on the floor. The subtle, slow-motion shifts of weight, inclination of the torso and head, level variations, direction changes, and distinctly inward gaze had a deeply meditative quality and looked like underwater Tai Chi.

The dance evolves into an endless series of group configurations and floor patterns that are imbued with mystical symbolism. The formations correspond specifically with spiritual concepts and mental processes within the Javanese-Muslim belief system. Amidst the changing formations, the dancers unsheathe their *kris* (slender dagger) worn tucked into the sash, and engage in a graceful, stylized, choreographed combat. This may be repeated with bows and arrows and, in earlier times, European pistols were sometimes used.

Finally, the students dropped into a creeping walk performed in a deep squat, continuously nudging the long sash out of the way. The bedoyo concluded with another sembah and processional departure. I was entranced by the power, beauty, and hypnotic control embodied in this dance.

A few months after my visit to Java, I attended a lecture/demonstration on Javanese Court Dance at the Indonesian Consulate in New York City. The presentation was given by Heni Winahyu—dancer, lecturer, professor, and former chairperson of the dance department at ISI (*Institut Seni Indonesia*), the performing arts college in Yogyakarta. As Winahyu began her discussion and slide presentation on the bedoyo, I realized I had seen the dance she described. She spoke of the dance in intriguing esoteric terms. The


*Students at SMKI, the government-established High School of Performing Arts in Yogyakarta, rehearse a stately bedoyo dance.*

pusaka bedoyos are thought to contain protective power. As sacred heirlooms, they retain their power through sustained ritual performance much as valuable inherited daggers require ritual cleansing to retain power. They must be performed by nine beautiful female dancers; other lesser bedoyos are performed with fewer dancers - never nine, a number with esoteric significance.

The concept of the ruler's union with the Goddess of the Southern Ocean, a goddess associated with fecundity, was a symbolic guarantee of fertility, wealth, and well-being for this rice-growing kingdom. It is not unlike other court dance cultures in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand), in which

an ancient tradition of celestial dancer-guardians translated into royal dancers, sustained by the monarch, who would perform sacred dances to ensure blessings and fertility for the land and the people.

The bedoyo is not just a dance, but a ceremonial event that can span over several hours. In preparation for the performance, stipulated offerings of flowers, various foods, money, and incense are made to Ratu Loro Kidul, who is believed to be present whenever the dance is performed. The bedoyo cannot be performed just anywhere; it must take place in the *pendopo* (pillared, marble dance hall) of the kraton. For the event, the dancers purify themselves by fasting, showering, praying, and making offerings before performing. They wear a dazzling costume, royal bridal attire made from batik fabric decorated with gold thread trim and adorned with glittering jewelry. Even the women's elegant hairstyle is prescribed.

The dancers themselves are called bedoyo. In earlier times, the bedoyo were *abdi dalem* (retainers of the court), who lived within its boundaries. Court dancers have always been recruited from all levels of society and locales, although many in the royal family have become dancers as well. In fact, the royalty is involved at the highest levels. Crown Princes, royal uncles, and Sultans have been court choreographers and served as Palace Performance Director.

*Court gamelan musicians play the melodic percussion that is a co-equal element in Javanese dance performance.*

The bedoyo dancers' responsibility, in addition to performing the bedoyo, was to guard the ruler's sacred regalia. Winahyu pointed out that "The dance is like a weapon in the sultan's palace." In fact, the dancers enter the pendopo from the weapon storage room.

The accompanying music (meter and tuning system) and poetry (lyrics) sung by a mixed chorus with a female soloist are specified and of primary importance in terms of the compositions' supernatural powers. There are Javanese texts that claim that these sacred sounds may be used as a protective charm against destructive forces. But the idea of the bedoyo's protective influence extended beyond magical power to a contingent of female dancer-soldiers, reported by seventeenth century Dutch envoys who described royal dancers, armed and trained as soldiers, protecting the king during audience sessions.

Winahyu then performed a *golek*, a short women's solo

IGNATIUS DWI KARYANTO, COURTESY OF JEN SHYU

*Below: Court dancers manipulate the dance sash as they perform a srimpi (offshoot of bedoyo) at the Kraton Palace of Yogyakarta.*

dance, which was created by a choreographer from the Yogyakarta kraton. Her assured and deft manipulation of her rose-colored sash, along with the constant floating movement of the head coordinated with circling wrists and decorative hand gestures was reminiscent of the bedoyo. Her lowered, indirect gaze as well as the indirect floor patterns of the choreography also complied with the conventions of female court dance, in which direct eye contact and approach are never made with someone of higher status.

I caught up with Winahyu in a Skype interview while she was attending a creative dance workshop in Tucson, Arizona, on the Barbara Mettler Method (an approach to dance that uses improvisation as a means of movement exploration to reconnect with emotional experiences and physical sensations to enable a more fully experienced life). She is hoping to use the method to facilitate a community service project back home—a creative dance workshop for women inmates of a jail. All faculty members of Indonesian government institutions of higher education must fulfill community service duties in addition to their teaching and research responsibilities.


*Heni Winahyu, professor and former chairperson of the dance department at ISI (*Institut Seni Indonesia*), the performing arts college in Yogyakarta, and former bedoyo dancer at the Kraton Palace of Yogyakarta, performs a* golek *dance at Indonesian Consulate in New York City.*

It was during this conversation that I learned that Winahyu herself was a bedoyo dancer in the Yogyakarta kraton. Currently, her role at the kraton is mostly in a teaching capacity, although she did perform recently in a new bedoyo that required an extensive cast. She started studying dance in the sultan's palace as a fifteen-year-old and was invited to perform two years later. Dance at the Yogyakarta court is a considerable enterprise, with a large pool of dancers to accommodate productions with as many as fifty performers. The instructional staff consists of five senior teachers and ten junior teachers for the female dances alone, and more for the men's dances. This does not include the gamelan musicians and chorus, which are integral and co-equal elements of Javanese dance composition. The court dancers and musicians hold public rehearsals at the Yogyakarta kraton every Sunday; they perform the pusaka bedoyo annually in honor of the anniversary of the sultan's accession.

One of the most noticeable aspects of the bedoyo is the inward focus and placid visage of the dancers. The gaze is directed toward a spot on the floor about two feet in front of the performer. Dancers are instructed not to show any emotion through their face, as the dance is a meditation. Emotion is only to be used internally.

The spatial formations of the dancers are of crucial significance in the pusaka bedoyos. The dancers form symbolic configurations—predominantly linear designs—in which they linger for a period while shifting directional facing or modulating level. They then hasten on tiptoe or employ a sideways crossing step to reposition themselves into a new formation.

Each of the nine dancers has a specific name and role that corresponds with a part of the whole human being. For instance, the lead dancer, called the *batak*, symbolizes the head, or the mind. The second dancer, the *èndhèl*, signifies the heart, or desire. The fifth dancer, or *bunthil*, represents the rear, and so on.

The formations symbolize mental processes, or struggle, along the path of spiritual progress as expounded by Islamic mystics. The opening configuration represents the entire human body with all elements in harmonious balance. Another pattern involves certain dancers leaving the line, signifying inner conflict, or opposition. The dancers' return to the formation is a metaphor for reconciliation and unification. The final arrangement of the dancers illustrates the resolution of the soul's inner striving to overcome human passions and attain a unification of mind and heart.

The harmonious union of mental discipline and human emotion integrated in an embodied expression is a profound concept. It is this union of mind, emotion, and body that so many religions, individuals, and societies have cultivated as a safeguard against obstacles both external and internal. Since postcolonial times, the Javanese have given relevance to this court dance form by extending its philosophical significance and using it as an educative tool in the formation of model Javanese identity and behavior. Within the arts community in Central Java there is a credo of perpetuation along with meaningful adaptation and enrichment of artistic traditions. In this way, the sacred bedoyo dance and the performing arts in general are empowered to assert timeless values.

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