

Kecak Dance in Uluwatu : A Manifestation of Balinese Culture and an Internasional Tourist Attraction



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Abstract

This research examines the cultural significance and tourism dynamics of the Uluwatu Kecak Dance performances at Pura Luhur Uluwatu, Kuta Selatan, Badung, Bali. The study employs ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews, and historical document analysis to understand the evolution and current state of this cultural performance. Results indicate that while tourism has significantly impacted the presentation and frequency of performances, the sacred essence of the dance remains preserved through careful management by local authorities and cultural practitioners. The study reveals the delicate balance between cultural preservation and tourism development, suggesting sustainable approaches for maintaining authenticity while accommodating modern tourism demands.

Keywords: Uluwatu Kecak Dance, Cultural Heritage, Balinese Performance, Religious Tourism, Cultural Preservation

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The Kecak Dance at Pura Luhur Uluwatu is one of Bali's cultural icons that is renowned internationally. This performance not only captivates audiences with its artistic and traditional elements, but also due to its dramatic and magical setting, perched on cliffs overlooking the Indian Ocean. To understand how the Kecak Dance and Pura Luhur Uluwatu have become so significant to Bali, it is essential to explore the history, origins, and development of the dance, as well as the role of Uluwatu Temple in the beliefs and culture of the Balinese people.

The Kecak Dance has a long historical background deeply rooted in Bali's spiritual culture. The dance was first developed in the 1930s by Balinese artist Wayan Limbak, who collaborated with German painter and artist Walter Spies. Essentially, the Kecak Dance was inspired by an ancient religious ritual called Sanghyang, which involved trance-like states where participants would become possessed. In the Sanghyang ritual, the possessed dancers were believed to become mediums for communicating with ancestral spirits or deities, asking for protection and assistance. This ritual was often performed during times of crisis or when the Balinese people felt threatened by natural disasters or social issues.

Wayan Limbak and Walter Spies modified the elements of Sanghyang and combined them with stories from the famous Hindu epic, Ramayana, to create a performance art that could be enjoyed not only by the Balinese but also by visitors and tourists. Thus, the Kecak Dance evolved into a theatrical dance, with a dramatic narrative taken from the Ramayana story of Sita's abduction by the evil giant Rahwana, and Rama's, Lakshmana's, and the monkey army's struggle, led by Hanuman, to rescue her.

Unlike most traditional Balinese dances accompanied by gamelan music, the Kecak Dance uses human voices as its sole musical accompaniment. A group of men, numbering in the dozens, sit in a circle and chant "cak-cak-cak" rhythmically, creating an atmosphere full of energy and excitement. This chanting accompanies the dance and enhances the narrative performed by the main dancers portraying the characters of Rama, Sita, Rahwana, and Hanuman. The sound produced by these men, often referred to as the "monkey chant," adds a magical and hypnotic element to the performance, making it unique among various forms of dance.

Initially, the Kecak Dance was merely part of religious rituals performed by the Balinese for spiritual and magical purposes. However, over time, the dance evolved into a form of performance art that could be enjoyed by a broader audience, including international tourists. Under the influence of Balinese and European artists like Wayan Limbak and Walter Spies, the Kecak Dance began to be performed more formally at various locations in Bali, including Pura Luhur Uluwatu, which has now become one of the most iconic locations to witness this performance.

One of the reasons the Kecak Dance at Uluwatu is so captivating is because of its dramatic setting. Pura Luhur Uluwatu is located at the edge of a 70-meter-high cliff that directly overlooks the Indian Ocean. Every evening, as the sun begins to set, tourists gather in an open amphitheater built on the cliff's edge to watch the Kecak Dance with the spectacular backdrop of the setting sun. The fading sunlight gradually creates a magical atmosphere that enhances the overall experience of watching this dance.

At Uluwatu, the Kecak Dance performance begins at dusk, around 6 p.m., as the sun starts to set, creating a beautiful silhouette on the horizon. The Kecak dancers sit in a circle, and when the chanting “cak-cak-cak” starts, the atmosphere becomes filled with tension and anticipation. The dancers then begin enacting the epic Ramayana story, with dramatic scenes from Sita's abduction by Rahwana to Hanuman's heroic act of setting Rahwana's kingdom on fire with his fiery tail. The use of fire in this performance, particularly in the Hanuman scene, provides dramatic visual effects that heighten the emotional intensity of the story being told.

Pura Luhur Uluwatu holds an important role in the culture and beliefs of the Balinese people. This temple is one of Bali's six main temples, known as Sad Kahyangan, or the six sanctuaries believed to protect the island of Bali. According to legend, Uluwatu Temple was founded by a holy priest from Java, Dang Hyang Nirartha, who arrived in Bali in the 16th century. He is considered one of the key figures in spreading Hinduism in Bali and is believed to have achieved moksha (spiritual liberation) at Pura Luhur Uluwatu.

Due to its highly sacred position, Pura Luhur Uluwatu serves as the center of various Hindu religious ceremonies in Bali. The temple is not only regarded as a holy place for worshipping Hindu deities but also as a place of spiritual refuge for the Balinese people. Each year, major ceremonies are held at this temple, including Piodalan, the temple's anniversary celebration, which is usually attended by thousands of Hindu worshippers.

The presence of the Kecak Dance at Uluwatu adds a spiritual and cultural dimension to this temple. Although the Kecak performances at Uluwatu are largely aimed at tourists, the spiritual and sacred elements of the temple remain preserved. For the Balinese, the performance of this dance in the sacred environment of Uluwatu strengthens the connection between art, culture, and religion, which are central to Balinese life.

Bali's tourism has grown rapidly since the 1960s, and the Kecak Dance at Uluwatu has become one of the main attractions for tourists. Each year, thousands of tourists from all over the world come to Bali to witness this performance, particularly because of its incredible location. However, there have been some criticisms that tourism may have commercialized the performance, diminishing its sacred and spiritual value.

Nevertheless, many argue that the Kecak Dance performance at Uluwatu has helped preserve Balinese culture. By making this performance part of the tourism industry, Balinese art and

culture remain alive and thriving while providing livelihoods for many local artists. The Kecak Dance also serves as a means of introducing Bali's cultural and religious values to the international world, enhancing appreciation for its rich heritage.

The Kecak Dance has evolved into an internationally recognized symbol of Balinese culture. This performance not only represents the richness of Balinese art and culture but also illustrates the harmony between humans, nature, and spirituality, which is central to Balinese life. In Uluwatu, where the natural beauty merges with deep spirituality, this performance creates an unforgettable experience for anyone who watches it.

In addition to its profound cultural and spiritual background, the Kecak Dance has also become a symbol of how traditional art can continue to evolve without losing its identity amid modernization. For many tourists, witnessing the Kecak Dance at Pura Luhur Uluwatu is a gateway to understanding Bali's rich cultural heritage, rooted in the harmony between humans and nature. This tradition remains alive because the Balinese people proudly maintain their heritage while continuing to open themselves to the outside world.

On the other hand, the popularity of the Kecak Dance at Uluwatu raises questions about the commercialization of culture and how to maintain a balance between preserving traditions and meeting the needs of the tourism industry. Even so, to this day, the Kecak Dance remains one of the best examples of how Bali successfully integrates tourism and cultural preservation into a harmonious whole.

For anyone visiting Bali, watching the Kecak Dance at Pura Luhur Uluwatu is not just a simple artistic performance but also a deep experience that brings the audience closer to Bali's cultural and spiritual heritage. This performance is not only visually mesmerizing but also touches the heart and soul, providing insight into the life of the Balinese people who deeply value the connection between art, religion, and nature.

1.2 Previous Arguments

Scholars and cultural observers have presented various perspectives on the evolution and impact of the Kecak Dance at Uluwatu:

1. Michel Picard (1990) argues that the transformation of ritual performances into tourist attractions has led to a "touristic culture" in Bali, where traditional elements are modified to meet visitor expectations.
2. I Wayan Dibia (2000) contends that the adaptation of sacred dances for tourism has actually helped preserve these art forms by providing economic incentives for younger generations to learn and maintain them.
3. Ni Made Ruastiti (2010) emphasizes the importance of maintaining balance between commercial success and spiritual significance in Balinese performing arts.
4. Adrian Vickers (2012) suggests that the Kecak Dance represents a successful model of cultural adaptation, where traditional elements are preserved while creating new meanings for contemporary audiences.

5. Soedarsono (2015) observes that the adaptation of traditional performances for tourism has created a "neo-traditional format" with its own artistic and economic value.

6. I Nyoman Darma Putra (2018) emphasizes the importance of community-based management in maintaining balance between commercial and spiritual values.

1.3 Problem Formulation

1. How has the presentation of the Kecak Dance at Uluwatu evolved to accommodate tourism while maintaining its cultural integrity?

2. What are the economic and social impacts of daily Kecak performances on the local community?

3. How do temple authorities and dancers balance sacred traditions with commercial interests?

4. What measures are in place to ensure authentic transmission of cultural knowledge to younger generations?

1.4 Objectives

1. To document and analyze the historical development of the Kecak Dance at Pura Luhur Uluwatu.

2. To assess current management practices and their effectiveness in preserving cultural authenticity.

3. To evaluate economic and social benefits for the local community.

4. To propose sustainable strategies for cultural preservation while maintaining tourism appeal.