

International Conference on  
**SOCIAL SCIENCE, HUMANITIES & EDUCATION**

21-23 December, 2018 in Berlin - Germany

**The cinematographic works of an artist  
Walter Spies about Balinese culture:  
ethnographic spectacles in the social-cultural  
context of 1930-s**

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**Abstract**

The paper provides an overview of existing cinematographic works made in Bali in the 1925-1930s with the participation of the Russian-German artist and screenwriter Walter Spies in the context of their ethnographic significance. The author of the paper analyzes the relationship between the film industry in Bali in this period and significant role of Walter Spies contribution to the promotion of Bali as an original world cultural and artistic center. The relevance of this research consists in growing interest of modern science towards comprehension of regularities in artists' addressing the experience of Eastern cultures. Spies managed to generalize and take to the screen main aspects of Balinese culture without the forfeit of its indigenous features, for example «Bali: Sanghyang and Kecak dances» film (1926), «The Island of Demons» film (1930-1931) and other. In his film works he managed to combine imagery, ethnographic authenticity and beauty of the frame, achieving harmonious unity of artistry, veracity and sacrality. Conscious representation of Bali to the Western world as both sacred and respectable place (in cinema as well), led to the outburst of the western interest to the island in 1930-s, which has also survived today.

**Keywords:** art of Bali—cultural Identity— filmmaking —intercultural processes—tourism

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## Introduction

The object of this paper is the description of main expressive means in films about Bali, made in 1930-1935 with participation of Walter Spies (1895-1942) and analysis of their influence on Western viewing audience. The relevance of this research consists in growing interest of modern science towards comprehension of regularities in artists' addressing the experience of Eastern cultures.

## Methods

### 1. Western expansion of the Bali Island (Indonesia) in 1910-1930.

By the beginning of the 20th century, cultural environment of the Indonesian island of Bali was represented by a unique system, formed around Indo-Buddhist conglomerate of cultures and local beliefs that remained practically immune to external changes approximately from the middle of 16th century. The Dutch who owned the colony of Indonesia, massively invaded the island in 1906-1908, marking the «introduction» of Western civilization to Bali. Orientalist scholar L. Demin notes: «The Dutch government soon began to treat Bali as some sort of profitable ethnographic natural reserve. Trying to attract tourists to the island, the Dutch cultivated Balinese exotics in its pristine form». At the same time scholars, archaeologists, artists, historians started arriving to Bali in order to explore historical and cultural heritage of the island. One of these people was Walter Spies (1895-1942), whose name is traditionally associated with the development of modern professional Balinese art. This Russian-German artist, ethnographer, translator productively worked in Bali in various human science directions from 1926 to 1942 (on the Java Island – from 1923 to 1926, on Bali – from 1926 to 1942). The principal idea of his artistic, museum, ethnographic projects and social-cultural practices on the Bali Island was contributing to the preservation of a large Balinese cultural-historical heritage. Paying a great amount of attention to the study and analysis of ethnographic data about Bali, Spies often served as a consultant for researchers of various topical areas, who worked there at the time. He also directly participated in filming process of several films, devoted to Balinese history and culture.

### 2. Films about culture of Bali by Walter Spies: main aims and expressive means.

In 1926 Spies in collaboration with the Dutch cineaste V. Mullens (1880-1952) worked on creation of the two first full-length films about culture and religion of the island: «Bali: Sanghyang and Kecak dance» and «Bali: Royal Cremation». The first one of them screened Kecak dancing spectacle, staged by Spies and based on ritual dance Sanghyang Dedari. In the film, original dance was transformed, redesigned and completed with the new musical and dramatic elements. Indian epos «Ramayana», serving as a ground for dance plotline, popular on Bali, complicated costumes with traditional Balinese scenic motives, original musical score – all this made Kecak dance spectacular and informative for the Western viewer, as it demonstrated key characteristics of the artistic culture of Bali. Researcher P. Stepputat, for example, thinks that Kecak from the very beginning, right after detachment of the ritual part and addition of plotline, was meant and played for the Western audience only [2, p. 275]. Currently Kecak has become so integrated into the culture of Bali, that now it is the most popular secular dance, synthetic origin

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of which is unobvious even for locals: majority of them think that it is genuinely Balinese. The second film of V. Mullens «Bali: Royal Cremation», devoted to traditional funeral ritual, was also filmed with Walter Spies' participation, but as a consulting ethnographer. The researcher M. Mubarak writes «These films are extremely exotic and portray the “weird” aspect of Balinese culture for the eyes of foreigners» [3, p.125].

In 1928-1929 Walter Spies was involved as a screenwriter, casting director and consulting ethnographer in the filming process of «Goono-Goono», (second title «Der Kris»), made by the president Theodor Roosevelt's brother – Andre Roosevelt (1879-1962) and Belgian director Armand Denis (1896-1971). The Bali-based researcher M. Chin writes: «Andre Roosevelt undertook in the 1920s to develop the tourist market, although this did not deter him from suggesting measures to preserve the integrity of Balinese society and its culture: “Having leisure, my friend Spies and I started a scheme which would tend to slow down the invading forces from the West and keep the Balinese in their happy, contented ways for a few decades longer ..... We want to make of Bali a national or international park, with special laws to maintain it as such”» [4]. The plot unfolds around mystical, but mostly simple lyrical love story including erotic scenes. The film is set on the background of Balinese landscapes and shows the viewer alluring natural beauty of the island and its residents. As researcher J. Stowel notes, «according to Spies's own account, he found the story, planned the film, chose the cast and did most of the direction while Roosevelt, who was a skilled photographer, operated the camera» [5, p. 138].

In 1932 «Goono-Goono», which successfully combined artistic imagery of the plot and actuality of the presentation, premiered in the USA. American viewers, who lived under conditions of economic crisis in the country – unemployment and utter fear of the future – were deeply impressed by the film about the trouble-free Island that combined exotic nature, mysticism and eroticism. Specifically after the screening of «Goono-Goono», the USA was captivated by «Balimania», and the image of Bali turned out to be a creative accelerator and inspiration. Many young people wanted to get there, which resulted in a new popular trend and was reflected in everyday culture of that time. Thus, in New York in the mid-1930-s bars and other places, created in Balinese style, opened, theme parties took place, the expression «goona-goona», which originally meant “love magic», became a part of urban slang.

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The film induced a wave of imitations in the cinematograph<sup>1</sup>, and the expression «goona-goona», which originally meant “love magic», became a part of urban slang<sup>2</sup>.

In 1930 Spies proceeded to creation of his most significant and large scale cinematographic work – «The Island of Demons» («Die Insel der Dämonen», 1930-1931). Spies took part in filming as a screenwriter, artistic director, casting director, dance director and consultant on ethnographic matters, culture and art of Bali and as an assistant to the film director Victor Baron von Plessen(1900-1980). As Walter reported to his mother, the story would concern «a battle between white and black magic, very uncanny things – trances, dreams, exorcisms and divine possessions – but the whole thing like a marvelous great folk song, very simple and grand. In direction and filming technique it will be strongly reminiscent of Russian films; very strong and simple and full of magic-realism» [7, p.298].

The film is set on the background of main distinctive locations of Bali, including a temple of Besakih, the sawah (rice fields) of Tabanan, the seaside temple of Tanah Lot and further parts of West Bali. The collective image of the island, symbolizing its mystical history, according to Spies' conception, was the Rangdu witch – character, borrowed from local folklore. As principal expressive elements of the film, Spies used several types of traditional dances, some of them were: Sanghyang Dedari (used as a base for Kecak dance), with excluded due to ethical reasons ritual part; Legong and fragments of Baris and Barong. «The Island of Demons» begins with landscape views — rice terraces, sky reflection in their waters – which intersperse with frames of peasants working in the field. Then the action switches to the main plotline, built around a mystical interplay between higher powers of the good and evil in historical Balinese community. In the final scene of the film, during a large feast in the temple, Spies staged a complete ritual of Sanghyang Dedari dance, with excluded due to ethical reasons ritual part. The burning lamp was placed in the centre of a male-voice choir, which he made more structured, that in the original Sanghyang Dedari dance. This technique was probably, conditioned by the necessity to use extra lighting for the filming process. Spies was the first to use lamp with fire, but nowadays it is an integral part of Kecak dance, which was mentioned above.

The background music of the film, based on composite score, has a particular significance. During the filming, music and sounds were recorded in a real sounding, which, according to Spies' idea,

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<sup>1</sup>Roaring success of «Goona-goona» in the USA determined the emergence of the term «*goona-goona epic*»— type of films, where rituals and rites of exotic cultures are exploited for commercial purposes to reach the maximal impact in the viewer to the detriment of sound authenticity. They often make use of implausible plots, documentary frames of questionable authenticity and falsified scenes. The film «Legong: Dance of the Virgins», popular at the time and directed by H. De La Falaise (1898-1972) can be regarded as one of the examples of «goona-goona epic» (it was filmed on Bali in 1933, and premiered in New York in 1935). The work contains a number of contradictions and false insights about Balinese traditions. Modern researcher S. Davies notes in this connection that: «Henry De La Falaise scripted and shot the full length feature film «Legong: Dance of the Virgins» using locals as actors. This was a silent movie two color Technicolor. His misunderstanding of the caste and naming system made a nonsense of the relationships depicted in the movie, and the heroine's suicide is decidedly un-Balinese, but this was not evident to the film's large American audience» [6, p. 150].

<sup>2</sup>As the eponymous film came out, in the USA the «goona-goona» expression received an erotic subtext or an alternative meaning of drug intoxication.

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was supposed to enforce the sense of authenticity of the film narrative. In 1933 in Berlin famous composer W. Zeller (1893-1967) created an adaptation of the musical film score, where voices and music of gamelan (Balinese orchestra)<sup>3</sup>are heard.

After successful premiere in Germany in 1933, «The Island of Demons»for many decades remained the chief and most visual material about «genuine» Bali. These days «The Demon Island» is particularly current as a retrospective history of Bali, untouched by Western civilization influence.

## Results

Undoubtedly, these and other films about Bali by Westerners, played a role in creating the mythical image of Bali as the island of the gods, and as exotic, mystical, yet culturally refined and sophisticated. The author of one of the first books about the culture of Bali, addressed to the Western reader, Mexican artist and writer M. Covarrubias wrote in 1937: «the remote little island only became news to the rest of the Western world with the advent, a few years ago, of a series of documentary films of Bali. He newly discovered "last paradise", became the contemporary substitute for the nineteenth-century romantic conception of primitive Utopia» [8, p. 48].

However, hardly all films about Bali, which were made by Western directors and became renowned in the West in 1930-s, can be regarded as successful from the point of understanding of Balinese culture and rituals by their makers: many of them hankered for commercial success rather than authenticity of the narrative, whereas Spies' main goal was popularization of Bali as a world cultural and artistic center.

Modern researcher R. Mann underlines that «word about Bali was getting out to the world and Walter Spies was very much part of it using both his photographic skills to participate in books and his film making skills, too. All of this activity clearly had the potential to benefit Bali and several visitors who subsequently became famous in the context of Bali incited his early books and films as their reason for going there» [9, p. 55].

Films about Bali made with direct involvement of Walter Spies, stand out among other films about Bali of the 1930-s, due to the wide list of professional competencies of this master. Being an artist, musician, translator, he devoted almost 20 years of his life to the island of Bali, combining scientific research and creative activity. The Eastern mentality turned out to be kindred to Spies: he had a gust of connection between languages and culture, sensibility and sense, abstract ideas and experience. In his creative activity he combined love and gentle attitude towards everything Balinese along with commitment to thoughtful penetration into the essence of matters and events of each element of history and culture of Bali. This is largely the reason why in his film works he managed to combine imagery, ethnographic authenticity and beauty of the frame, achieving harmonious unity of artistry, veracity and sacrality.

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<sup>3</sup>In 1998 «Die Insel der Dämonen» was restored by employees of the EYE Film Museum in Amsterdam. Restored version is based on several copies of the film, owing to this fact, the film «Die Insel der Dämonen» became available for a wide audience.

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## Conclusions

Sharing his rich experience of acquaintance with Bali with the viewers, Spies believed that his films would help the Western viewer on the long way of perceiving religion, culture, art of the unique Balinese civilization. He craved for everyone to comprehend and feel the significance of a delicate dialogue between the West and the East, gentle attitude to each culture, which remains important nowadays.

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