‘To the Extremes of Asian Sensibility’
Balinese Performances at the 1931 International Colonial Exhibition

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ABSTRACT
This article proposes a comprehensive and detailed approach to the reception of the Balinese performances and the performers’ stay at the International Colonial Exhibition of 1931, held in Vincennes, France. Thus, it analyses French sources, such as the daily press, specialised and literary magazines, photographs, films and sound recordings. As one of the most acknowledged attractions of the Exhibition, the Balinese group appeared extensively in the press. This ensemble of documents allowed us to understand that their performances’ favourable reception contributed considerably to creating a positive impression of Dutch colonisation and the progressive inclusion of Bali in the world’s cartography.

KEYWORDS
1931 colonial exhibition, Bali, Balinese performances, colonialism, Dutch Pavilion, theatre critics

When, for the last time, the curtain closed on the glittering scarlet and green gold costumes, one could not avoid experiencing some sadness. To see them again, will we have to cross the South Seas, to go to the small island of Bali, where these fairy visions were born?

(Rops 1931: 1)

Published on the front page of the Journal des Débats Politiques, an article by the historian and writer Daniel Rops entitled ‘Adieux aux Balinaises’ bid a melancholic farewell to the Balinese group which had performed at the International Colonial Exhibition of 1931 in Vincennes. Rops’ article described the newly reconstructed Dutch Pavilion, the theatre where the Balinese presented themselves, the performance, and some of the reactions of the public towards it, especially ‘the charming Balinese female dancers who enchanted our eyes for two months’. As well as Rops, several other authors praised the Balinese performers and lamented their departure from the pages of the French press.
Aiming to comprehend better the Balinese performances reception and the performers’ experience at the Colonial Exhibition of 1931, this article is interested in mapping their stay, drawing on several French sources. This heterogeneous documental collection includes the Balinese performances programmes, theatrical and dance reviews, interviews, press articles and notes, specialised and literary magazine articles, photographs, films and sound recordings. Among these documents, the press has an important role in tracing the events concerning the Balinese performers and the activities related to the Dutch Pavilion, such as the fire of the 29 July and Queen Wilhelmina and Princess Juliana’s visits to the Exhibition. How did these texts present the performances, the performers, the island they came from, the Dutch Pavilion, and the Dutch colonial work staged in it? What did the critics say about the performances, whether specialised or not? Examining an event from the perspective of its press coverage implies dealing with information that was previously selected for publication within a particular framework.

In this sense, we are also interested in what was published as a sign of what was considered ‘important’ enough to be reported by journalists, writers and critics in the newspapers, which could attract readers’ interest. How were these pieces of news reported, and where? On the front pages or in small notes in cultural sections? What scale of importance was explicitly and implicitly organised in these choices? These are some of the questions I will try to answer by following the Balinese group’s appearance.

The International Colonial Exhibition of 1931

The experience of the Balinese performers was part of a broader scenery which included exhibition practices of colonised natives and the recreation of foreign landscapes. This was not an innovation of the 1931 Colonial Exhibition nonetheless became one of its most notable aspects. Similar to other events of this kind, in addition to National Pavilions and their attractions, this Exhibition also included conferences, scientific and educational activities, and commercial negotiations, among others. The Colonial Exhibition of 1931 was the most significant event of this kind held in France in the twentieth century. From 25 May to 17 November 1931, thirty-three million tickets (representing approximately eight million visitors) were sold to the giant exhibition complex, intended to embody the glories of the metropolis and their colonies,
as well as ‘the immense family of the humanity’. According to French historiography, it was the most remarkable colonial event of its type and has been long etched into the collective national memory.\(^5\) Neither the first nor the last of the colonial exhibitions in the world, the International Colonial Exhibition of 1931 was by far the most striking. The importance of creating a unique and definitive event was evident throughout the long process of preparing the Exhibition. The organisers aimed to reproduce and display French imperial actions in its colonies – materialising its civilising values – seeking the endorsement of these policies by metropolitans – in other words, the inhabitants of mainland France. Because of its complexity, the Exhibition may be understood as a ‘colonial ritual performance’ (L’Estoile 2003: 345), as it was a cognitive and political *mise en ordre* of the colonial world.

The 1931 Colonial Exhibition was an event designed for a significant number of visitors from France and abroad and was a success in this regard. Even when circumscribed to the Balinese and Dutch participation, examining the sources reveals how much it appeared in the pages of various periodicals and probably captured readers’ attention. As seen in the advertisements in *Femina*, the numerous pages dedicated to it in the *L’Illustration*, and the daily coverage in other newspapers, the press almost unanimously welcomed the Exhibition, with very few exceptions. In 1931, *L’Illustration* magazine dedicated three issues to the Colonial Exhibition, along with a special issue published in November of the same year. The scenic materialisation of the colonial project in the Exhibition would find a tribune for its defence, moral and economic justification, and praise for its civilising role in the press. The almost exclusively positive coverage of the event in newspapers and magazines demonstrates some sort of agreement between the press and the state. Articles from Marshall Lyautey, Paul Reynaud, the former Minister of the Colonies, and other members of the French government appeared in the newspapers and specialised magazines, such as Albert Sarrault in *L’Art Vivant* (Sarrault 1931). Furthermore, what appeared in the press corresponded to a considerable effort and work of the organisers and the contracted advertising and press agencies in France and abroad, such as the Havas (Commissariat général de l’Exposition coloniale internationale de 1931).\(^6\) The Documentation and Information service (*Documentation et Informations*) had a privileged role in the general organisation of the Exhibition, as one of the four branches of the General Office (*Secretariat général*). Three sections constituted this service: metropolitan and colonial propaganda, foreign propaganda and general publicity (Olivier 1932: 150–151).
The French Press

In France, the 1890s were a period of pronounced growth in daily newspaper consumption, driven by its vertiginous circulation. The ‘Great Four’ newspapers, *Le Petit Journal*, *Le Petit Parisien*, *Le Matin*, and *Le Journal*, sold millions of daily copies. In 1914, they were responsible for 75 percent of the daily Parisian newspaper production and placed France alongside the United States in per capita print runs (Delporte et al. 2016). The *Belle Époque* witnessed the birth of the mass press and later its conquest by daily newspapers: ‘Before going to work or once back home, on the tram, bus, train or metro, reading the newspaper had become a ritual that transcended social divisions and nourished collective exchanges. In the countryside, it is then part of the daily routine’ (Delporte et al. 2016: 14). The press also helped unite the country: national newspapers spread all over France in a matter of hours, while the local press was also highly active.

In the 1930s, press paradigms were constantly changing: ‘news prevailed over analysis, and for newspapers, to inform was synonymous with spreading the fastest, hottest, but also the liveliest news’ (Delporte et al. 2016: 121). The development of the production, transmission, and impression of photographic techniques such as the *photogravure*, also enhanced their use: they became part of the information devices, validating what ‘really’ happened, as a way of seizing the reality of near neighbourhoods and distant lands. The press was in open competition to give life to reality, favouring the expansion of illustrated magazines such as *L’Illustration*, *Vu: Journal de la Semaine*, *Match*, and constantly modifying newspaper mock-ups to include photographs.

As a great event at that time, the 1931 Colonial Exhibition was covered daily, with each publication presenting interesting elements to readers, diversifying characters, such as the Cambodian and the Balinese dancers, and creating ‘stories’ to be followed. The Balinese group, the dramatic incidents surrounding the Dutch Pavilion, and even the visit of the Dutch royal family became news and were reported and narrated in the press.

The Balinese Arrival

From June to September 1931, a group of approximately fifty-one Balinese performers attended the International Colonial Exhibition, staying at the Dutch Pavilion. The period they spent there was
extended, both in terms of time and press coverage: it began much before the arrival of the Balinese and continued after their departure. Initially, around the end of June, some articles announced the arrival of a Balinese group and a ‘Javanese’ one. Others continued to confuse them during their time in Vincennes (Anonymous 1931a; Anonymous 1931b).

Discrete and small notes, appearing in a very similar manner in four different newspapers, *Le Populaire, Le Temps, Comœdia* and *La Liberté*, announced their arrival at Marseille on 29 May, as well their visit to The Hague to pay homage to the queen of the Netherlands. Their arrival in Paris was expected on 12 June, when they were to perform at the *Théâtre d’Eau* of the Colonial Exhibition. In addition, these newspapers described the group extremely briefly: ‘These dancers come from Bali, one of the Sunda islands. Their group is composed of fifty-one members, including fourteen women’. The four notes have almost the exact text, indicating that a news agency previously sent them as a press release.

Some of the expectations towards the Balinese group were related to the success of the Javanese at the International Exposition of 1889, as was explicitly stated in the extract of the article ‘L’Exposition – Les Danse de Bali à Vincennes’. Published in *Je suis partout*, the unidentified author spent three paragraphs praising the Javanese dancers, regretting the fact that their visit had been cancelled: ‘Naturally, the failure of the main project will provoke the strongest regrets’ (Anonymous 1931c: 10). This writer also predicted the success of the Balinese in the Colonial Exhibition: ‘Does this mean that the Balinese events in Vincennes will fascinate the public to a lesser degree? Rather the opposite is to be expected. The success of the first performance proves it’. Published a day before the group’s arrival in Paris, it reported the success of their period in the Netherlands: ‘Currently in Holland, they performed in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague, arousing general enthusiasm’. On 18 June, *L’Intransigeant* gave the Balinese dancers a cover article, announcing their arrival: ‘Who would not be curious to see these women whose type of beauty is the pure Aryan race from which we come from: Do Balinese women deserve their reputation as the prettiest women in the world?’ (Chamine 1931a: 1).

Moreover, a side article invited readers to discover details of the lunch offered to Queen Wilhelmina on the same day at the Élysée Palace, the first event of such importance under the new presidency of Paul Doumer (Gobart 1931). According to Chamine, the Balinese dancers were already in Paris and performed for Queen Wilhelmina
on 19 June. Indeed, the Queen, Princess Juliana of the Netherlands and Prince Consort Hendrik arrived in Paris on 16 June, and their period in the Paris region was widely publicised by the press.

The arrival date of the Balinese group was uncertain, probably between 16 and 23 June. Meanwhile, on 24 June, they allowed the press into a private rehearsal, while they held a premiere for guests the following day. La Liberté published a photograph of a dancer on its front page, surrounded by four female dancers dressed in janger’s costumes and two others dressed to dance the legong. Entitled Les mille et une nuits coloniales the notice stated the following:

This evening at the Colonial Exhibition the first performance of the Balinese dances took place in the party hall of the Dutch section. Yesterday, the journalists attended the general rehearsal of the show. Here are the little dancers with their shimmering dresses. (Anon. 1931d: 1)

In L’Excelsior, an unsigned article announced that the ‘charming female dancers’ would ‘compete with their sisters from Cambodia’ (Anon. 1931e: 6) in a short piece accompanied by several photos. The headline and the titles given to the heading for the two photographs highlighted the ‘female dancers’: ‘Female Dancers from Bali at the Colonial Exhibition’ and ‘A Group of Female Dancers – A Balinese Dance Rehearsal’. This set of photographs contained similar scenes taken at different angles, indicating that several photographers and press vehicles were present at the occasion, probably before or after the general rehearsal of 24 June (Figures 1 and 2). The first photo showed a group of seven men in the foreground: in the middle, three were sitting on the ground, and four were standing up at the extremities. On each side, someone held an umbrella. A stairway and door decorated with Balinese motifs are in the middle ground. The similarity of the scenario of these images, also present in other publications, the exact incidence of sunlight, the equivalence of the subjects photographed, and their body positions seemed to suggest that they were taken during a photo session.

The actual Balinese premiere seems to have been on 25 June: ‘On Thursday, 25 June, all of Paris, diplomats, society, and literary attended the theatre of the Dutch section for a magnificent party during which the little dancers of Bali performed’ (Anon. 1931f: 347). The Balinese dancers and the little piece of the island recreated in the outer court of the Dutch Pavilion seemed to have promptly conquered the Parisian elite. On 9 July Les Salons et les Gens section in Candide (Fouquières 1931: 5) described a party organised by Countess Etienne
Figure 1. Part of the Balinese group posing for a photo shoot. Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris. Photo: Thérèse Bonney ©The Regents of the University of California, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
de Beaumont, where the guests were invited to disguise themselves in ‘colonial outfits’. Lady (Iya) Aby, a socialite and fashion icon, chose *Vision des îles de Bali*. At the end of the party, the dancer Ida Rubenstein performed a *prelude d’un ballet colonial* under fire cascades, just before the arrival of Josephine Baker, ‘partly dressed in white silk’, at the end of an event that gave ‘more than one person, the desire to go around the world’, according to the columnist André de Fouquières.

**Figure 2.** Part of the Balinese group posing for a photo shoot. Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris. Photo: Thérèse Bonney ©The Regents of the University of California, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
The Balinese Performers

As we have seen before, the press announced that the troupe of performers comprised fifty-one people, including fourteen women and thirty-seven men. It is difficult to be sure of this number, as no official list has been published or found yet, while the official programmes available do not include all the group members. ‘Programme de la musique et des danses exécutées par un groupe de danseurs et danseuses de l’île de Bali sous la direction de Tjokorde Gede Rake Soekawati’ (Savarese 2021), the official programme, does not state the names of all the performers. Instead, it gives only a few of them: I Dewa Gede Raka, playing the role of Roi Erlangga, Jero Djandra, the role of Patih, Cokorda Gede Rai Sajan, that of Pandoeng, and Ni Rimpeg, playing Laroeng. The conductor of the gamelan was I Dewa Gede Mandra, presented as a kendang player. Finally, the stage designers were named Cokorda Agung and Cokorda Oka Tublen.12

The programme for the Gala Balinais performance, given by Cokorda G. R. Sukawati at the Salle de Fêtes de la Cité des Informations on 4 September 1931, included a photo, probably with the entire group, containing thirteen women and thirty-two men, forty-five people in total (Figure 3). Various sources give specific names: I Nyoman Kakul (Dibia 2004), I Ketut Maria (Cohen 2010), Anak Agung Gede Mandera (Coast 2004), Madé Lebah (Warren 2007), Ni Nyoman Jabreg, I Ketut Gerudung, I Gusti Kompyang (Bloembergen 2006). All the evidence indicated that the troupe that came to Europe in 1931 consisted of accomplished and talented performers and others from the close circle of foreigners who lived in and visited the island, such as Walter Spies and the Covarrubias.13

Cokorda Gede Raka Sukawati

During his period at the Colonial Exhibition, Cokorda G. R. Sukawati interacted directly with journalists. Indeed, his was the only name from the group relayed by the press. On the front page of Parissoir, a journalist asked Cokorda G. R. Sukawati, ‘the only one who spoke some few words in French’, about the trip to Europe: ‘They are enchanted! Their trip was perfect. They had superb weather. The sea is divinity for us, so a bad trip would be considered a bad omen’. Asked about how they found the Exhibition itself, he answered back:
Figure 3. Middle pages from the ‘Gala Balinais’ programme, Paris, École française d’Extrême-Orient’s Archive.

Photo by the author.
‘Superb. They were a bit disoriented on the first two days, but they are used to it now’\textsuperscript{14} (Prussey 1931: 1–3).

A member of the royal house of Ubud, Cokorda G. R. Sukawati was responsible for its reputation in terms of external affairs, while his brother Cokorda Agung dealt with internal issues. Cokorda G. R. Sukawati was the first Balinese member of the \textit{Volksraad}, the People’s Council, located in Batavia, which had a symbolic and advisory power, as the administrative decisions were primarily issued by the Ministry of the Colonies. As the first nationally influential Bali politician, Cokorda G. R. Sukawati was friendly with other royal houses of the archipelago (Vickers 2019) and with the Dutch administrators. Involved with the East Indies committee for the Dutch Indies’ participation in the Paris Exposition, he was responsible for forming the group of Balinese performers that would come to France and the Netherlands (Bloembergen 2006). Finally, the Balinese trip seemed to be both due to the resistance to and subsequently prohibition by the Javanese courts of ‘refined, aristocratic dancers and musicians from Java performing at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris’ (Gouda 2008: 226) and to Cokorda G. R. Sukawati’s influence on Dutch administrative circles.

As the group’s artistic director, he was also interviewed by journalists and became the privileged interlocutor between the Balinese and the press – even when a translator was available. \textit{Gala Balinais}, an event organised by Cokorda G. R. Sukawati to benefit \textit{Cité Universitaire de Paris}, was also remarkable (Figure 4). Among its patrons were Paul Reynaud, André Honnorat, Marshall Lyautey, Governor General Olivier, and Jonkheer J. Loudon, the Dutch minister in Paris (Figure 5). This \textit{Gala} also received considerable attention in the press since it was a diplomatic event, as by September the Balinese reputation for dance and music was already established. After the Exhibition, Cokorda G. R. Sukawati remained in Europe, returning to the Netherlands to attend an agricultural course (Bloembergen 2006). He returned to France in 1932 and married Gilberte Vincent, a French woman, as his second wife, which seemed to be frowned on by the colonists (Vickers 2019). After the Japanese occupation, he was appointed by the Dutch as President of \textit{Negara Indonesia Timur}, or the State of Eastern Indonesia, a state that had a very short life. After independence, Cokorda G. R. Sukawati retired from politics.
The Balinese Dance Programmes

At least three different dance programmes were presented. The first – *Participation néerlandaise, l’Exposition coloniale: Programme de la musique et des danses* (Savarese 2021) – was the permanent one and seems

**Figure 4.** Cover page from the ‘Gala Balinais’ programme. Paris, École française d’Extrême-Orient’s Archive. Photo by author.
to have included the performances scheduled throughout the exhibition. A second programme, the *Programme Officiel des fêtes du 7 au 13 juillet*, was slightly different, including other dances and musical interludes. For the *Gala Balinais: soirée de gala de musique et de danses*
balinaises, performed on 4 September, another programme was presented, this time including the ‘mask dance’ or *topeng*.\(^\text{18}\)

The consensus is that the programmes were similar to those performed at the Bali Hotel for tourists since the 1920s and designed to please a foreign audience. According to Madé Lebah, ‘We brought with us the Legong, Topeng, Baris, Janger, and the Barong, because Europeans cannot bear it unless the performances are short and varied’ (Warren 2007: 62–63). It consisted of recently created dances, such as the *janger*, and others usually presented outside the temples for entertainment purposes. The exception was the *calonarang*, generally performed in specific temples and at crossroads and considered highly sacred, which seemed to be presented under the name *Rangda*.

**Dutch Participation and Its Pavilion**

As the preparations for the exhibition proved to be long, successively delayed, and intertwined with the First World War, as time went by, it was decided to give it an international character, asking the Dutch and other European states to participate. Great Britain, Germany, and Spain declined and, finally, only five European states would build national and colonial pavilions at the Colonial Exhibition of 1931: Denmark, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal.

Located in the east, which today is part of the current Paris Zoological Park,\(^\text{19}\) the Dutch Pavilion was inspired by several buildings from the ancient monuments of the archipelago. Conceived by the architects P. A. J. Moojen and W. J. G. Zweedijk and composed of different sections, the pavilion was intended to represent the grandeur and importance of the Dutch colonial empire while presenting the artistic heritage of the archipelago. The main pavilion covered an area of more than 6,000 square metres, with an imposing 110-metre-wide facade. Since a perspective of prominence was crucially important in the exhibition’s environment, the ground floor was highly elevated. While drawing inspiration, in every detail, from the native styles, Mr. Moojen took the liberty of giving, as he says, the whole edifice ‘a modern expression’, and he succeeded in making the new archaic. Entering the central pavilion, the visitor found a vast and spacious 870 square metre hall, where specimens of indigenous art and information about the colonies were displayed. On the left of the room was a diorama of a Balinese landscape, and on the right side, a diorama of a Javanese one. According to the magazine *L’Illustration,*
these dioramas were very successful, as the room and the halls had considerable dimensions. In the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Albert Flament gave a more detailed and personal account of his impressions of the pavilion:

> In their immense palace, the Dutch have multiplied diagrams, panoramas, samples presented individually or comparatively, reproductions of all kinds, and these ‘still lives’ that strike the imagination, as the display of drops of gold and silver coins, made in metallic cardboard, that flow from wickets in baskets and represent the billions provided by the income of the colonies. . . . It is gaping, empty, and dark. The audience shudders and drifts away, convinced that Holland would starve to death if it had only its tulips, hyacinths – and bankers. (Flament 1931: 221–222)

A ‘Balinese wall’ joined the main pavilion and a smaller and more architecturally modest construction, housing representatives of a dozen large Dutch firms. In the middle of this Balinese wall was a reproduction of a *candi bentar*, the characteristic split gateway of the

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*Figure 6.* Part of the Balinese group crossing the ‘Indigenous square’. Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris. Photo: Thérèse Bonney ©The Regents of the University of California, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
island’s temples. Passing through this entrance, visitors entered a reproduction of the inner courtyard of a Balinese temple, called the ‘Indigenous square’, which had altars and towers typically associated with decorated Balinese walls (Figure 6). At the bottom of this square, on the edge of the forest were the group dwellings.

Accessing the Indigenous square, the public faced the theatre (Pendopo). A column by Gérard Houville’s (1931) published in Le Figaro gives an idea of the Dutch theatre:

Bali, the island of Bali, baptised or not by this legendary character, is one of the beautiful possessions of Holland in the great Asian archipelago, and at the Vincennes Exhibition, it built its charming theatre in a place which, in the evening, seems slightly displaced and, under the dim lights, a little mysterious. (Houville 1931: 5)

According to Gouda (2008), the Dutch organisers felt and expressed great displeasure in perceiving themselves as secondary actors in the theatrical narrative of the European imperialism staged at the Exhibition. In 1931 Dr. L. J. van der Waals, the general secretary of the Dutch Exhibition committee, wrote from the Hague to P. A. J. Moojen, stating that the French, in the last few years, had tried to situate themselves ‘at the apex of all the colonial powers. Neither the Netherlands nor England should allow themselves to be dragged along, because the French devote all their efforts, as was the case with the actual Exhibition itself, only to the exaltation of the glory of France itself! (la gloire de la France)’ (Gouda 2008: 209).

The Javanese anti-colonial newspaper Timboel criticised the architectural complex of the Dutch Pavilion from an aesthetic perspective: ‘Who cares? Bourgeois Paris is flabbergasted because it does not know any better!’ (Gouda 2008: 212). In 1927, the Javanese newspaper had already warned that any exhibition could become ‘a parade of eccentricities that reduces the culture to nothing more than an ornament on the banks of an industrial centre’ (Gouda 2008: 220).

On the night of 28 June, the Dutch Pavilion burned down during the visit of Princess Juliana of the Netherlands to Paris. This accident was widely reported in the French newspapers, where photos of the old Pavilion, firefighters amidst its wreckage, and Princess Juliana at the place, appeared on their front pages. Even the newspapers that were clearly opposed to the Exhibition put the fire on their front page, such as the L’Humanité.

Excelsior reported the events of the fire, giving a very detailed account. After the beginning of the fire, Mrs. and Ms. Moojen were alerted by two guards as they lived in a building adjoining the Pavilion.
The fire spread so wildly that they had just enough time to get dressed and run away. Then, Mr. Moojen ran to the Balinese dwelling to alert the group. The collections lost in the fire were irreplaceable and priceless: ‘Mr. Moojen said, crying, that it had taken more than twenty-five years to put them together. There were pieces from before our era. The borrowed collections of the Batavian Society and the Leiden Ethnographic Museum were also irreplaceable’ (Anon. 1931g: 1–2). Just two years before his death, and still participating in gamelan rehearsals in Peliatan, the only memories that Anak Agung Mandera had of the Colonial Exhibition related to the accident: ‘Yes, the fear of fire when our house burned down’ (Savarese 2021: 199). As the fire did not reach the theatre, the Balinese shows were re-launched on 30 June, though without the matinée (Anon. 1931h), and continued to be presented during the reconstruction work. The number of spectators of the Balinese shows increased considerably after the fire.

The accident generated deep turmoil and compassion in the press and the rapid reconstruction of the Pavilion aroused general admiration. With a collection of pieces borrowed from the Trocadéro and Guimet Museums, the Amsterdam Colonial Institute, wealthy collectors, and even from Queen Wilhelmina’s private collection (Anon. 1931i),20 the new pavilion was reconstructed and reopened on 18 August for the opening ceremony of the rebuilt pavilion (Anon. 1931j, 1931k). The Balinese group presented a third new programme of dances, and this may have been presented again over the following days.

The Balinese performances had been well received since the beginning, by August they had established a considerable reputation: ‘The Balinese theatre, its music of a rare quality among the Asians, its dancers with such pretty costumes, its little dancers with flashy hairstyles are very successful. We had to multiply the [number of] presentations’ (Anon. 1931l: 4). The troupe was the sensation of the Colonial Exhibition, with full and sometimes extra sessions in the morning. On 5 August, the Balinese had a holiday to ‘celebrate a special solemnity’ (Anon. 1931m: 5) near the theatre and the thirty-seven men and the fourteen women finished the day with an ‘excursion to the forest of Fontainebleau’ (Anon. 1931n: 5).

The Reception of the Balinese Shows

It is, however, a spectacle of the highest aesthetic value, and of unforgettable beauty. Near the palaces of the Dutch East Indies, this marvel
which contained the most sumptuous art jewels of the exhibition, where the showcases stared with the brilliance of gold, precious stones encased in the rarest and most precious delicate gems that the subtle and fine hands of Asians chiselled and carried, near this atrocious heap of ash, still subsists, simple, neat, perfect, like everything that is built in Holland, the theatre of Bali. This is where, every evening, dancers from Bali come alive to the sound of the Gamelan. (Fels 1931: 995)

With the beauty of gestures and movements, the complexity of the sequences employing the whole body and through the music of the gamelan, the Balinese dances also acquired a status of ‘primitive learned beauty’, drawing on a term used by Florent Fels’ in an article in the illustrated magazine *Vu: Journal de la Semaine*. Accompanied by a series of photographs, in a highly poetic text, he gave his impressions of the performances analysing ‘the extremes of Asian sensibility’ shown by the Balinese. A Fels friend, Antonin Artaud, wrote the most known text about them: ‘On the Balinese Theatre’. Artaud published his first text on them in October 1931, *Le Théâtre Balinais, à l’Exposition Coloniale*, in the 271st issue of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. This experience also directly affected other texts of the collection: *Oriental and Western Theatre* and *Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène*. Artaud describes with clarity some aspects of the performances, such as technical rigour, the relationship between sign and stylised gestures, and the millimetric accuracy of the performers’ corporeality:

Everything is thus regulated and impersonal; not a movement of the muscles, not the rolling of an eye but seen to belong to a kind of reflective mathematics which controls everything and by the means of which everything happens. And the strange thing is that this systematic depersonalisation, in these purely muscular facial expressions, applied to the features like masks, everything produces a significance, everything affords the maximum effect. (Artaud 1958: 58)

His astonishment towards these performances profoundly marked twentieth-century theatre. For him, the Balinese programme at the *Pendopo* was a revelation. It made him call for a reinvention of western theatre: ‘our purely verbal theatre, unaware of everything that makes theatre’ (Artaud 1958: 56), a derivation of the literary activity, submissive to psychological and superficial dramas. For him, the Balinese performances would be a ‘pure theatre’, transcending the verb, filling the space with corporeal density, placing the myth as the centre of theatre and strongly affecting the spectators’ senses in a ceremonial and profane spectacle.

The artistic excellence of the Balinese performers was also unanimously attested by Levinson (1931a, 1931b), Fels (1931), Houville
(1931), and many others, as well as the fascination they caused the spectators. Theatre and dance critics, such as René Chavance and André Levinson, tried to analyse the Balinese by using other Asian performances as examples of comparison. Music, movement analysis, costumes, and dramaturgic arguments were observed and commented on: ‘The result is a life, a singular colour. The animation of the protagonist’s interpretation fades away with the rhythmic movements of the choir, the brilliance of the tones, and the picturesque fairy interventions have a variety and take relief to which the less informed spectators cannot remain insensitive’ (Chavance 1931: 2). Other critics would be more attentive to the show as a whole, also interested in what was happening on stage and in the audience.

The music, which filled the ambience of the shows, was one of the most noticeable points: described as captivating and strange, it evoked in the perception of the writers, the mystery of the tropical forest: ‘prolonged sounds that tense and create a strange atmosphere, are added, at times, to hallucinating melodic arabesques, punctuated by gong strokes, which resonance stretches for a long time’ (Primefosse 1931: 321). The question of the recording of music was evoked: ‘It will be deplorable if the artists who brought revelation to us, and will be so distant once the Exhibition finished, leave only a memory that will fade. Perhaps the mechanical means, phonograph, cinema, will give us the satisfaction of keeping it?’ (Tiersot 1931: 3). Interspersed with the banging of the gong, the dancers vibrated with the musical sounds: ‘The eyes seek the noise that evaporates. Silence. The revolted hands whip the air to repel it. And suddenly, begging, sinister, a scratched song rises and seems to command the mysterious light, coming from no one knows where’ (Simons 1931: 1).

As a journalistic activity, reviews were related to news of theatre and dance. Scenic arts reviews may be distinguished from columns in the major daily newspapers and those written for specialised magazines. They were both addressed to their specific audience of readers and thus shared references, values, and even a specific ideological vision of the world. The critic represented a certain fraction of the audience, and his judgement was listened to if confirmed by the readers. For theatre critics, the principle of separation between facts and opinions, the theoretical golden rule of so-called objective journalism, was not applicable, as the subjectivity of the columnist was accepted, even proclaimed (Ferenczi 2003: 13).

The Asian performances confronted critics with a system of values and references they were hardly used to. Even though in 1931 the
shows were already more common in France than in the previous century, some critics still strove to create relations between what happened on stage and European artistic references. As a result, the Balinese drama was compared to the tragedy of Hamlet (Richard 1931: 2), Siegfried, and tetralogy (Cadilhac 1931). The spectators were also observed by the authors, who described interesting situations of their misunderstanding of the performances: “It’s like the Grand-guignol”, said one spectator: too bad for him. Another one regrets not having an explanatory programme. Someone turns back and asks him if he wants an umbrella’ (Richard 1931: 2).

The success of the Balinese shows was such that the troupe’s departure was postponed for three days, prolonging the Gala Balinais presentations until 7 September. The departure of the Balinese troupe was followed by farewell articles and even poems in the press. Chamine (1931b) wrote about how the Balinese disassembled their belongings and put them in the truck: ‘The Balinese left. I saw the three trucks carrying the troupe and its accessories to the Gare de Lyon. . . . I went to see the abandoned city, behind the pink doors of the small Dutch garden. There was a dry, peppery odour everywhere that was not the Westerners’ one’ (Chamine 1931b: 1). When they returned home in September, they left behind a Colonial Exhibition less visited and colder due to the arrival of autumn.

Conclusions

The Balinese performers attracted diversified press coverage during the exhibition. Nevertheless, the articles published constantly highlighted many of the same points: comments about the physical aspects of the Balinese women and delight with their beauty; a deep feeling of strangeness and astonishment concerning the musicality of the gamelan – which was a fundamental element of the exotic environment of the shows – as well as the sophistication of the choreographic movements of the dances. The subsequent reports on Bali would write about the film Kriss, by Armand Denis and André Roosevelt, which premiered at the end of 1931, prolonged the public’s fascination with that island for a few more months. It would allow the French public to discover what the costumes had hidden: ‘Much had been said about the island of Bali since the beginning of the Colonial Exhibition. The success of the little Balinese dancers preceded the discovery of “the topless island”. Now the cinema was also implicated in revealing public or secret beauties’ (N. F. 1932: 10).
The Balinese performances were certainly worthy of the numerous compliments they received during their time in Paris. However, their abundant media appearances seem to have been promoted relatively deliberately, as evidenced by the publication of structurally equal advertisements before the troupe’s arrival and throughout their performances. In this sense, organising rehearsals exclusively for the press, and premieres for guests of political, diplomatic, and cultural importance, also seem to have been ways of attracting those who could develop favourable opinions on Dutch colonisation and the Balinese arts. The coverage of the Balinese group in the press made it appear that they were an independent group with autonomy. Reports of the Pavilion, or the successive visits of the Queen and Princess, received a different treatment, and these articles rarely mention the Balinese.

The success of the Balinese dances in Paris in this extensively publicised event placed Bali on the world map. The group’s performance may have raised awareness among Balinese and foreigners of the commercial possibilities of these art forms (Harnish 2005), demonstrating their economic viability. After the Colonial Exhibition of 1931, Bali would become a place for wealthy tourists in addition to a well-known anthropological research field, which would further amplify its celebrity.

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Notes

1. The corpus assembled in this article comprises documents from French archives: the Balinese performances programmes, press newspapers and magazines, specialised and literary magazine articles, photographs, films and sound recordings. Concerning the French press documents, I started by searching for the entries Bali, Balinais, Javanais, Hollande, Néerlandais in all 1931’s numbers of thirty-five newspapers available on the digital library ‘Gallica’, from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF), and of eleven specialised and literary magazines from different libraries. I finally worked with 356 documents, chronologically organising articles and notes concerning the Balinese performers and performances, the Dutch Pavilion and the visit of the Dutch royal family from different media. Then, I traced a chronological line connecting the Balinese stay and the International Colonial Exhibition events, highlighting the theatre and dance critics. Following the daily press can provide a broader account of the group’s activities, going beyond their performances. Some articles published in newspapers provide detailed descriptions of the group, and others have information concerning the events they participated in. Furthermore, theatre and dance critics are a source of accounts of performances’ reception along the time, as these texts would frequently describe the performance, giving pieces of information about it. They also have a crucial function of creating an opinion about a particular performance, as they must indicate if it is worth or not to be seen.

2. The Gaumont Pathé Archives has about a hundred short black and white films with sound from the Colonial Exhibition. Some are concise shots, and the same shots are frequently part of longer films. The film Visite Exposition Coloniale de 1931 (4/3 Anamorphic) is one of the longest in the collection, at about twenty minutes, where we may glimpse a panorama of the Exposition. From minute 19:48 onwards, we can see the Dutch Pavilion. The Chronique de l’Exposition Coloniale presents the visit of Queen Wilhelmina and the procession of personalities accompanying her. The film editing highlights her arrival at the reproduction of the temple of Angkor Wat, where she is greeted by a group of women, probably the Cambodian dancers. The film Le Feu presents the burning of the Dutch Pavilion, and in another film also named Chronique de l’Exposition Coloniale, the new Dutch Pavilion is shown. I did not find any film footage of Balinese performers at the Colonial Exhibition in the Gaumont Pathé Archives.

3. The Balinese ensemble participated in the sound recordings made by the Institut de Phonétique, the Musée de la parole et du geste and the University of Paris, with the support of the Pathé recording company. Three discs are present in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF). For further information on these recordings, see Cordereix 2006.

4. In order to have an idea of its proportions, the population of France in 1931 was around forty-one million inhabitants (Cholley 1932).


6. I made my last research at ANOM (Archives nationales d’outre mer) in 2022, and the International Colonial Exhibition fonds had a provisional classification.

7. The golden age of the French press is also chronologically placed between the Belle Époque and just before the Second World War (Chupin et al. 2012).
8. The Balinese will be designed in this article as artists and performers, as these terms can encompass dancers, actors, and musicians.

9. In 1889, the Javanese dances were also the sensation of the International Exhibition. For further information, see Lombard 1992.

10. *L’Intransigeant* is one of the newspapers that paid most attention to the Balinese troupe and, in 1931, had the largest print run for an evening newspaper.

11. Pictures from Bali have circulated in Europe since the 1920s, mainly due to the publication (and successive re-editions) of ‘Bali’, the two albums of photographs by Gregor Krause. A reduced edition of these books was released in France at the beginning of 1930, with a nude Balinese woman taking a bath on the cover page. This work presented an extensive ensemble of black and white photographs of Balinese daily life and the island landscape: collective river baths, women at the market, dances, ceremonies, temples, and exuberant tropical nature. The number of photographs changes considerably from one edition to the other.

12. In the Dutch spelling: I Dewa Gde Raka, Djero Tjandra, Tjokorda Gede Rai Sajan, I Dewa Gde Mandra, Tjokorda Agoeng, Tjokorda Oka Toeblen and Tjokorda Gede Raka Soekawati. In this article, I am using standardised Balinese spelling. I Dewa Gde Mandra is probably Anak Agung Gede Mandra.

13. Miguel and Rose Covarrubias visited their Balinese friends at the Colonial Exhibition of 1931, between two journeys to Bali. Miguel Covarrubias reports one diagnostic of their state at the event: ‘It was depressing to watch our Balinese friends transplanted to the Paris Fair. They were cold and miserable there in the middle of the summer, shivering in heavy overcoats or wrapped in blankets like red Indians, but they were transformed into normal, beautiful Balinese as soon as they returned from their unhappy experience’ (Covarrubias 2008: 9). On 4 September, Miguel Covarrubias praised Bali and its culture in the European edition of the Chicago Daily Tribune: ‘There is no decadence there. Every art is well developed and keeping ahead of the traditions of the past. . . . Bali ought to be studied by intelligent people before its culture disappears.’ (Anonymous 1931o: 4).

14. Surnamed ‘Drop of dew’, the star of the Balinese dancers, was identified as Sishuwi Tan in this article. Made Lebah gives an interesting and concise account of the trip to the Netherlands on Warren 2007. See Bloembergen 2006 for a detailed account of the Balinese gamelan that went to the Exhibition.

15. It seems that there was a difference between the official programme of the exhibition and other documents, such as the *Programma van musiek en dansen door een gezelschap van Bali*, from Cokorda G. R. Sukawati. Michel Picard refers to this document to announce a difference in his article ‘Dance and Drama in Bali’ (1996).

16. This programme was composed of the following attractions: Gong – Un épilogue musical, Danse du Gong, Legong, Angkloeng – Un intermède musical, Tjalong Arang.

17. Gong – *Un épilogue musical*, Danse du Gong, Gebiar, Djanger, Lasem, Legong, Rakasasa et Barong. One small note at *L’Excelsior* from 17 August indicates that another different programme was presented at the new Pavilion’s opening.

19. The Colonial Exhibition had a zoo park in another area, more south of Lake Daumesnil.

20. At the bottom of the same page, a small announcement stated that just on Saturday, 15 August, the Exhibition had sold 476,022 entry tickets.

21. In theatre studies, several works have dealt with the Antonin Artaud’s perspective of the Balinese performances in the Paris Colonial Exhibition: Borie 1989, Clancy 1985; Clave 2006; Cohen 2010; Foley 1992; Harari 1987, Ladeira 2016; Quilici 2004; Savarese 2021; Savarese and Fowler 2001. Nicola Savarese’s works are pioneering in tracing the group’s activities in the Colonial Exhibition. As noticeable critics, we have Bharucha 1978 and Grotowski 1969, for example.

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Anonymous (1931m), ‘La fête religieuse des Balinais’, *Le Matin*, 05 August.
Chamine (1931b), ‘Gracieux, précieux les Balinais sont partis en emportant de touchants “souvenirs”’, *Comédia*, 12 September.

**Films and Photographs**

*Chronique de l’exposition coloniale* (1931), 1 min 38 s. ref/ PJ 1931 085 2. Saint-Ouen: GP Archives.
*Visite exposition coloniale de 1931 (4/3 Anamorphosé)* (1931), 21 min 41s. ref/ SD 39 75 A. Saint-Ouen: GP Archives.

**Sound Recordings**


**Archive Materials**