Stephen Davies (2008) has recently opened up new ways of looking at the history of Bali’s premier dance form, legong. He has argued that legong started in the late nineteenth century, more specifically after 1887, probably in 1889, and that it is primarily derived from a form which Balinese presently call andir. This article, which acknowledges Mark Hobart’s attempts (2007) to deconstruct the idea of Balinese dance as ancient tradition, involves a substantial reconsideration of the canonical nature of certain dance forms in Bali. But does Davies go far enough in that reconsideration, and does his claim stand the test of contemporary evidence?

The evidence Davies (2008) used was largely oral history, including publications and theses by Balinese making use of that oral history. Beginning with Moerdowo’s drawing together (1977) of oral and other kinds of records available in the 1970s and 1980,1 Davies has spoken to as many of the surviving keepers of oral history as possible. Davies pays close attention to the details of the different versions, and is very careful to ensure that he is faithful to his sources.

What is missing from Davies’ account is evidence from closer to the time period, evidence that can allow us to fix the date of the origins of legong more closely, and also to understand precisely what its performative and musical associations and origins might be. This evidence is present in Balinese and Dutch-language sources, and while there are limitations to these sources, they certainly modify the conclusions of the article.

A major window into nineteenth-century Balinese culture is the dictionary of the eccentric Chinese-Dutch scholar, Herman Neubronner van der Tuuk.

1 Davies actually refers to a later version of this publication, but as far as I can see this is a republication of the 1977 text.
This dictionary was compiled between when he first arrived in Bali in 1870 and his death in 1894 (Van der Tuuk 1897-1912). Although he lived in North Bali, he travelled extensively and had contact with advisors, literati and artists from all over the island. He drew on written, oral and visual sources, and his dictionary remains a treasure-trove for the cultural historian.

Van der Tuuk says of legong (s.v.) that it is: ‘a certain way of dancing for many, sometimes six, women and the subject matter comes from the babal bajar2 (see mandir; two dancing girls, that dance in an unusual way and are not ‘ibing’-ed or ‘tongko’-d) […]’. The last terms refer to the way that members of the audience of dance forms, such as joged, join in stages of the performance in a flirtatious manner, trying to get close to the dancers by dancing in step with them (ngibing), and attempting to kiss them (tongko).

While Van der Tuuk links ‘andir’ and legong, he does not see ‘andir’ as the main form of the original dance, which he defines under the name of ‘mandir’ (s.v.) as: ‘Name of the hero of a poem in new verse metres; 2nd name of a dance that is performed by a woman (sometimes by a man) and the performance from the babad layar; see legong, after nandir’. However the reference to ‘Babad Layar’ is circular, for it is described under ‘layar’ as: ‘a certain work unknown in Buleleng [North Bali, where Van der Tuuk lived], in which the performance is of the mandir and the legong’. Perhaps the confusion comes because ‘babar layar’ is now well known in Java and Bali as the name of a musical passage, and perhaps this formed the metrical basis of one of the stories performed in nandir and legong, of which there are many narratives known. Under ‘andir’, Van der Tuuk simply says, ‘see nandir’. The latter is given as: ‘the name of joged-s, who dance better than the ordinary dancers, and during whose dance cakes are sold to the by-standers […]’; two women with a gudrug; following legong’. Gudrug (s.v.) is then defined as ‘a clown with the joged geguden who is supposed to be her father. Tjondong is her mother; the geguden is then known as Ambarsari; see ludrug and under banyak.’ Ludrug continued into the twentieth century in Java as a popular comedy form, and banyak is the term for a type of clown follower. Ambarsari is a heroine from the Megantaka story and other narratives, while condong is the clownish female servant found in legong and other related forms, as I will discuss below. According to Bandem and DeBoer, the joged geguden (also called joged pingitan and joged tongkohan) was the ‘private’ joged of Balinese royalty, and in its first section ‘is pure legong’ (Bandem and DeBoer 1981:102).

From all this we can say that there was already a defined form of legong at the time Van der Tuuk was writing, and that this form was closely related to

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2 Elsewhere ‘babad lajar’. Note that this dictionary was assembled by J.L.A. Brandes from Van der Tuuk’s notes, and hence mistakes occur based on handwriting or other lack of cross-referencing.
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the form known at that time as nandir or mandir, which in turn is related to joged, particularly in its royal form. The major difference he identifies between joged and legong is that the latter involves no audience participation. It is not at all clear which of these was the prior form. Van der Tuuk might describe legong as unusual in some aspects, but he does not call it ‘new’.

Van der Tuuk was also an advisor to the Dutch medical officer Julius Jacobs, who visited Bali in 1881 (Jacobs 1883). Jacobs was feted by various Balinese rulers, including the King of Gianyar in South Bali, one of the major political players of the nineteenth century. Jacobs was entertained in the royal palace by music from the semar pagulingan orchestra or ensemble. He specifically says that the semar pagulingan ‘is the only one used whenever gandrung and legong or joged gegudegan are performed’. Here again legong and joged gegudegan are described as related forms.3 Gandrung and joged are very closely connected, the main difference being that the former is played by young boys and men in drag, the latter by women. Jacobs and other observers describe how both dances were often connected to forms of sexual play and prostitution.

As I have shown elsewhere (Vickers 1985), there is a detailed Balinese musical treatise that deals with the semar pagulingan, its different variant forms, and the types of performance associated with these different ensembles, including joged and legong. This text is called the Aji Gurnita, also known as the Tutur tabeh-tabehan. The semar pagulingan was originally a seven-toned musical genre, although some twentieth-century adaptations have been changed to follow the dominant five-toned forms of music. The tunes played on the semar pagulingan in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were usually the same as those played for the gambuh dance-drama, which is regarded as the ‘classic’ form of Balinese theatre, with antecedents going back to Majapahit Java. Gambuh is regarded as the form of dance-drama from which others are derived, and was certainly the dominant form in the nineteenth century (Formaggia 2000; Vickers 2005). New forms of semar pagulingan tunes became important in the latter part of the twentieth century, as knowledge of the more complex older tunes declined.

There are difficulties dating the Aji Gurnita. The extant manuscripts of this text are largely undated, but were all written before the middle of the twentieth century (Schumacher 1985). The known manuscripts all come from the former South Balinese kingdoms of Badung and Mengwi, and are closely related. These texts refer to the practices and milieus of the Balinese courts, in particular the importance of gambuh and its related forms, which celebrate the roles of the God and Goddess of Love, Smara and Ratih. The texts are probably from the late nineteenth century, although they could even have

3 Quoted and translated Vickers 1985, p.144.
been written in the early twentieth century after the Dutch conquest, as a way of attempting to conserve a set of practices and values that were in decline. Van der Tuuk did not know of their existence, an argument that these texts, in their current form, date from after the 1890s, but we cannot assume that even Van der Tuuk would have been able to get access to all texts that were in circulation at the time he worked, particularly when, as with the *Aji Gurnita*, these texts contained esoteric knowledge to which access was restricted by the royal and priestly groups.

In his article, Davies tries to refute the probable myth that the late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century king of Sukawati Dewa Made Karna invented the *legong* through meditation. In this myth *legong* is connected to the exorcistic and more folk-based *sanghyang* performance. The new form ‘*sanghyang legong*’ was adapted elsewhere into *(n)andir*, which was in turn later adapted into *legong* (Davies 2008:199). Davies demonstrates convincingly that *legong* is probably not related to the *sanghyang* performances. This case is well made. However, by overthrowing the myth of the *sanghyang* origins, Davies also shows, intentionally or not, that the story which says that *legong* in its current form originates from *(n)andir* may not be true. What if the derivation was the other way around? The problem is that we know very little about *(n)andir*, and what we do know links it very closely to *legong* (Talamantes 2006).

Davies has the problem that much of the current oral history of dance-drama in Bali is focused on the region of Gianyar, specifically on Ubud. This is because the cultural politics of Bali have produced a new myth, that this region is the centre of the arts in Bali, and thus the present-day perceptions tend to filter out information that other regions all had strong cultural and artistic traditions. This myth was constructed through the patronage of artists, but more importantly of western writers, by the Ubud royal family from the 1930s onwards. Moerdowo’s systematizing (1977) of information about Balinese cultural history was carried out in the 1970s, and forms the basis of most subsequent accounts. It was based on materials collected at a time of revived interest in Balinese cultural forms when new institutions for cultural preservation were being established, and a number of seminars and publications were being sponsored by the government. Moerdowo, a Javanese medical practitioner who lived on Bali for many years, relied very heavily on the knowledgeable Balinese performer and intellectual, Ktut Rinda. Rinda was a *dalang*, a puppeteer, as well as a dancer of the historically-based *topeng* masked dances, and was responsible for the writing down of many genealogies (*babad*), although questions about authorship of these texts are fraught, as their claims to legitimacy are based on their supposed antiquity.4 The

4 I had got to know Ktut Rinda quite well in the early 1980s when he was providing valuable advice to me on *gambuh*.
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younger generation of Balinese involved in documenting Balinese performing arts, writers and teachers such as Made Bandem and Wayan Dibia, relied heavily on the authoritative information provided by Dalang Rinda. It should be noted that Dalang Rinda was from Blahbatuh, in Gianyar, and his knowledge of oral history provided by his teachers and ancestors was oriented towards the major palaces of Gianyar. Bandem and Dibia also come from the former kingdom of Gianyar.

Early on in his article Davies rejects an alternative account of the origins of legong, from a book that was also produced as part of the reconsideration of Balinese cultural history in the 1970s. The principal author of this work was Nyoman Rembang, a great musician from Sesetan, in the former kingdom of Badung. Rembang and his co-authors provide another narrative from Balinese oral history (possibly one influenced by their knowledge of the Aji Gurnita text). In this version, when the pre-eminent kingdom of Bali, Klungkung, was being established out of the ruins of the kingdom of Gelgel, the completion of the palace was marked by the creation of the semar pagulingan ensemble, and according to one legend, at this time (probably the beginning of the eighteenth century) legong was first performed. Rembang et al. (1974/75) then go on to speculate that legong may actually date to the era of the great king of Gelgel, Baturenggong, but then almost all major developments in Balinese history are attributed to this era. Davies (2008:196) dismisses the whole account as ‘speculative’, and gives only cursory treatment to links between legong and the semar pagulingan and related ensembles, but he should have given more consideration to the Klungkung origins of the form.

As already mentioned, gambuh was the major dance-drama form of the nineteenth century, and probably of the preceding centuries. Gambuh and semar pagulingan have the same musical basis: they are both seven-tone musical forms, and semar pagulingan tunes were originally from the gambuh repertoire. As the Aji Gurnita indicates, legong was performed to the accompaniment of a variant of the semar pagulingan, and some of the gambuh and semar pagulingan tunes, such as lasem, palayon, kuntir, bramara and gadung melati, are still used as legong tunes (Davies 2006:315). Gambuh performances usually open with a dance by the servant and companions of a princess. The companions are four ladies-in-waiting, called kakan or ‘sisters’ of the princess (who is usually either Rangkesari or Ratnaningrat, although other princesses appear). The servant, condong, is a key figure whose dance is quite difficult, and who presents key narrative elements to the audience, as well as translating the words of the princess and kakan, who declaim in Kawi, the poetic language usually known as Middle Javanese.

In formal terms, classical versions of legong look very much like adaptations of the condong-kakan and princess sequences from gambuh. Davies argues that the condong was a late introduction to legong, although using
evidence focused on Gianyar (Davies 2008:206). Even if this is the case, the
dances of the princess and kakan in gambuh still remain elements that could
have been adapted to create legong, since there are still narrative links: the
most famous narrative performed in legong, the story of the portents of the
death of the king of Lasem, is a gambuh narrative, as are other Malat episodes
performed in legong.5

Depictions of women dancers that can be associated with the semar-
pagulingan (or related) ensembles are found in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Balinese paintings and manuscripts. One of these, originally
from Klungkung, shows a young woman dancing in the presence of the god
Indra, accompanied by other women performing on what I interpret as a
semar pagulingan ensemble, with short flute, rebab (lute) and metallophone.
This depiction is not decisive, as the same elements (female dancers and
instruments) could also be used for performing the joged, although other
nineteenth-century depictions of the joged usually include the element of
the dancer carrying a fan. What is significant is that the manuscript with
this illustration is a work on English paper, which most likely dates to the
early nineteenth century, perhaps even to the second decade of that century
(Vickers 1985:159).

If we view legong as a segment abstracted and adapted from gambuh, using
the semar pagulingan rather than the usual gambuh ensemble, then it would not
be unusual for this form to have been created in the nineteenth or even eighteenth century, when the courtly orchestras and performances were at their
height, rather than in the period around the final Dutch conquest. Legong was
definitely already in existence in the 1880s. Legong, as with all the other forms
of Balinese music and dance-drama, has undergone substantial change over
the course of the twentieth century. Such change does not go in a single direc-
tion, and clouds any attempts at historical reconstruction, particularly when,
as is the case in Bali, originators of variations in choreography are ascribed
with creating the form as a whole. Davies has provided important evidence
for the history of Balinese cultural forms, but since the evidence is so patchy,
more work remains to be done on older forms of evidence, such as Balinese
texts and visual representations.

5 And also in (n)andir: Talamantes (2006) indicates this with her description of a variant version
of the Lasem story as performed in the village of Carik.

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