

KECAK

A Balinese Music Drama

Performed by
KECAK GANDA SARI
I Gusti Putu Putra, Director

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Total Time: 44:53

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Notes by Fred B. Eiseman and David Lewiston

With its explosive rhythms and exotic sounds, the Kecak has fascinated visitors to Bali since its creation in 1932.

In their seminal work, *Dance and Drama in Bali*, Walter Spies and his co-author Beryl de Zoete captured the excitement of Kecak in these words: "Down the lanes to the temple men are streaming, calling to one another out of the darkness, mustering in the temple-court. Already the circles are forming, one within another, five or six circles of crouching bodies, a hundred and fifty men under the flickering light of a great branching wooden torch. All sounds die away, there is silence and a feeling of suspense. Suddenly the motionless bodies grow tense, awaiting a signal. With a series of short cries they lift themselves, then sink with a hissing sound of outgoing breath. They intone a rhythm, menacing, intense, all exactly together; then drop and muffle it, press it down into the dark hole between their crowded heads. They begin to sway; low articulate sounds break from them; their bodies gleam in the flickering

flame, their eyes half close in dreamy faces. A slow chant rises from a single voice in their midst, a child's high-pitched wailing voice. The swaying grows and grows till suddenly the heaving mass bursts open with a roar, like a crater in eruption scattering fragments. Circle upon circle they fall backwards, the full-blown flower of a volcano. Again they fold together and continue their swaying and their song...." (*Dance and Drama in Bali*, London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1938)

Walter Spies, himself a painter and musician, was the ideal person to describe the Kecak, because he played a key role in its creation. Born in Moscow of German parents and educated in Germany, he came to Bali after the chaos of World War I in Europe and stayed until the Japanese occupation during World War II. He had a profound influence on the island's arts during this period, helping his Balinese friends create paintings and sculpture that would appeal to the tourists who came to the island.

Spies was fascinated by traditional Balinese trance rituals such as the

Sanghyang, and this led to the birth of the Kecak. A Sanghyang ("sang," an honorific epithet; "hyang," god or gods) is a trance communication held when there is serious trouble in the village. In the 1920s and 1930s this was more often than not an epidemic. During a Sanghyang, trance is induced in one or two susceptible individuals so that the spirit that is causing the problem can speak through them and tell the priests how to rectify the situation.

Two types of Sanghyang especially interested Spies, the Sanghyang Dedari and Sanghyang Jaran. In the former, two prepubescent girls are brought into trance by the singing of a chorus of women as the girls inhale the smoke of sandalwood and incense. Then the girls dance to the accompaniment of the highly syncopated chanting of a male chorus, the Balinese equivalent of jazz scat singing. One of the predominant sounds is the syllable *Cak* (pronounced "chak"); the singers are called *Ceks* or *Caks*. In Sanghyang Jaran, an entranced man rides a crude hobby-horse in his violent dance, which is performed on a bed of burning coconut husks to the accompani-

ment of a *Cak* chorus. During these rites the dancer speaks with a strange, strained, sing-song voice that is taken to be that of the spirit whose help is being sought, and this spirit may be questioned about solutions to the current problem.

Spies felt that the unusual *Cak* chorus would be very popular with tourists if it could be woven into an entertainment having a story. So he worked with a Sanghyang group in Bedahulu, not far from the village of Gianyar, to develop a scenario and choreography for a new type of performance featuring this chorus.

For the story, Spies and the Bedahulu men adapted the great Hindu epic, the Ramayana, which was known to all Balinese and to many foreigners who visited Bali. It tells the story of Prince Rama and his wife Sita, and the many hardships they undergo. Sita is abducted by Rawana, the evil king of Alengka (Sri Lanka) who carries her off to his kingdom. After many adventures and a protracted struggle, Rama and his allies, the King of the Monkeys, and the great and universally beloved white monkey general, Anoman

(Hanuman in Indonesian) overcome Rawana and rescue Sita. But the story ends sadly. Sita is suspected of having succumbed to Rawana's advances while she was his prisoner. In a trial by fire she is proved innocent, but the rumors continue. Since she cannot dispel them, Sita asks her mother earth to take her back and she disappears into a furrow in the ground.

For performance style they drew upon two popular dramatic forms, Wayang Wong and Parwa. In Wayang Wong the performers speak their own lines as they dance the story of the Ramayana. In Parwa, a presentation of Mahabharata stories, a narrator called a Dalang speaks the lines of some of the dancers and assists in telling the story.

The *Cak* chorus underwent the most remarkable transformation. The collaborators greatly expanded the variety of sounds used by the chorus by making use of the Balinese language's rich store of onomatopoeia—that is, words which imitate the sound associated with an object or action, like "bang," "crash," and "thud." They used the Balinese gift for performing complex musical patterns in precise

ensemble to create a striking vocal imitation of the gamelan (the Balinese orchestra of metallophones, gongs, and drums).

Moreover, they went far beyond these musical effects, fully integrating the chorus into the dramatic action. The *Caks* emphasize events by waving their arms in unison; by undulating like waves; by standing up to defy the villains or lying down to submit to them. When Meganada's arrow turns into a serpent, trapping Rama, the *Caks* become the encircling coil of the serpent. When Sugriwa arrives to fight with Meganada, the *Caks* become his army of monkeys and make monkey sounds and motions; it is this section that has given the Kecak its common nickname "Monkey Dance." When Rama and Rawana do battle, the chorus splits into two, one half representing the noble heroes, the other, the evil army.

The result of this synthesis is a truly unique dramatic experience. The Kecak has everything—heroes and villains, love, war, bawdy comedy, excitement, color, lovely costumes, graceful dancers, ancient and sacred religious songs. But the central attraction is the

Cak chorus which, with its constantly changing chants and movements, steals the show.

The first Kecak performance was given in 1932, in front of the temple at the Gua Gajah (the so-called "Elephant Cave") on the western side of Bedahulu. The *pemangku* (priest) of the Gua Gajah was the overall leader. The 40-strong group was considerably smaller than its present-day counterparts, which typically have 75-100 members. The leader of the singing group was I Gusti Nyoman Geledag; the main attraction was the dancing of I Wayan Limbak, a well-known Baris dancer. Both Geledag and Limbak (now respectively 97 and 79 years old) are living and vigorous in Bedahulu; they provided invaluable information for these notes.

The Kecak was an instant sensation and many other groups were formed throughout the island. At the time of writing, 58 years after its creation, the popularity of the Kecak is undiminished.

KECAK GANDA SARI

Bona Village is well-known for its three fine Kecak groups. The group

that performed for this recording, the Kecak Ganda Sari, is the most recent, having been formed in 1987. This Kecak presents its performances in a *wantilan* (a large open pavilion) in Bona Kelod, Gianyar, about 25 kilometers northeast of Denpasar, the island's capital.

Three different types of performers take part in the Kecak: the chorus, the narrators, and the dancers.

The chorus of *Caks* consists of 75-100 men who sit in tight concentric circles around, as Spies put it, "the flickering light of a great branching wooden torch." The men wear checkered black and white loincloths, and they are shirtless. The chorus's three leaders sit on one side of the inner circle; on the other side sit the narrators.

The principal narrator is the *Dalang*; he comments upon the story, and speaks for some of the dancers. Moreover, he translates the words of the second narrator, the *Tukang Kekawin*, who speaks in an exalted language called Kawi, related to Old Javanese, the language of most Balinese sacred texts. Kawi is spoken in a whining, sing-song manner that sounds

peculiar to the Western ear. Since few Balinese understand it, the *Dalang* translates the *Tukang Kekawin*'s words into the vernacular.

Two other narrators, the *Tukang Aun-Aun* and the *Tukang Gending*, have minor roles. As will be seen in the dialogue translated below, the language of the play is mostly noble, stilted, and formal, a typical convention of Balinese drama. For example, Sita addresses her husband "You, Rama"; similarly, Rama speaking with his attendant says "You, Twalen."

Kecak Ganda Sari features thirteen dancers. Girls dance the male roles of Rama and Laksmana, because they are considered *alus*, that is, refined, characters; their movements are graceful, gentle, and supple, as contrasted with the coarse, sudden *keras* actions of the villains, so they are best portrayed by girls rather than men. Garuda is danced by a man. The other dancers are either male or female, according to the sex of the character they portray. Their colorful costumes are a strong contrast to the severe black and white loincloths of the chorus.

Some of the dancers—Rama, Laksmana, Sita, and Anoman—mime the

roles, their words being spoken by the *Dalang*, who alters his voice to match each role. Other performers—the Pedanda, Rawana, Meganada, Delem, Twalen, and Sugriwa—speak their own lines.

The "good" characters are Rama, his wife Sita, and his faithful younger brother Laksmana; Anoman, the white monkey, general of the monkey armies, a mighty ally of Rama; Sugriwa, King of the Monkeys and another ally of Rama, who had earlier helped Sugriwa regain his throne that had been usurped by his brother; and Garuda, the magic bird, who rescues Rama when he is trapped in the coils of a magic serpent.

The villains are Rawana, demon king of Alengka; Pedanda, a priest, actually Rawana in disguise; Meganada, Rawana's son, who snares Rama with his magic serpent; Kidang, a golden deer, who is actually Rawana's minister Marica in disguise; and Trijata, Rawana's niece, who guards Sita in the park at Alengka.

There are also the indispensable clowns, Twalen and Delem, who provide a uniquely Balinese flavor to the traditional Ramayana story. They

serve as attendants to the chief protagonists: In addition to providing comic relief, they translate the unintelligible Kawi spoken by their masters into earthy Balinese. Colin McPhee, the American composer who lived in Bali during the 1930s, described them best. He wrote of Twalen: "This was the beloved clown, whose impudence delighted the crowd, the Falstaff, the Sancho Panza who deflated high-flown motives and sentiment, criticizing even the gods. He it was whose jokes were both cynical and obscene, who parodied so outrageously the poetic love scenes, who could be counted on to think of ways to outwit the enemy at the last moment, and always dealt the last triumphant blow in battle." (*A House in Bali*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1947.)

It is worth pointing out that Balinese performing arts are constantly evolving; every new presentation has a novel twist. This is certainly true of the Kecak. The original 1932 version presented one of the Ramayana's innumerable sub-plots, in which the Monkey King Sugriwa ousts his brother Subali, who has usurped his throne. The other chief character

was Khumbarkarna, Rawana's evil brother. Limbak's adaptation of the Baris dance for his creation of the character of Khumbarkarna was a show-stopper. The Kecak Ganda Sari uses a different story line—the abduction of Sita by Rawana, and the adventures of Rama and his allies in defeating Rawana and rescuing Sita.

THE KECAK PERFORMANCE

I Introduction (3:52)

Wearing sacred black and white checked loincloths, with a flower behind one ear, the *Caks* enter the great pavilion where the performance is to take place chanting "Cak ... cak, cak," arms raised high, vibrating intensely. They form three concentric circles around a fire in the center, and sit crosslegged. A *pemangku* (priest) enters quietly. The *Caks* open their hands to receive his blessing, as he sprinkles them with holy water. The priest leaves.

Then begins the performance heard here. There is a handclap, the *Cak* leader shouts "Ait," the *Caks* respond "Aes, aes, byok, sirr." Through the wildly syncopated chanting of the chorus, the *Tukang Kekawin* can be

heard declaiming in high-flown Kawi: "It is heard that there is a very powerful king. He is capable of defeating all of his enemies in the world. He is a priest and great scholar. The name of this person is Dasarata."

The seated *Caks* sway back and forth with their hands on their knees, mimicking the sound of a gamelan with their chant. The *Cak* leader rises to his knees, interjecting cues for the chorus, while the *Tukang Kekawin* and *Dalang* recite the story.

Dalang, in the vernacular: "Long ago there was written a book called the Ramayana that consists of seven parts. This book was written by Empu Walmiki. Sang Hyang Kawi Swara Murthi came and chose the part of the story that will be performed here. It is mentioned that Rama and Sita are in the forest. That's the story that is going to be mentioned."

Characteristic of Balinese drama, the exact story to be presented is revealed only indirectly, little by little. From this announcement the audience knows which part of the Ramayana is to be presented. In the story, King Dasarata, to please his queen, Dewi Kekayi, has banished his

son Prince Rama, his son's wife, Sita, and Rama's faithful younger brother Laksmana to live in a forest. Rawana, the evil king of Alengka (Sri Lanka), has fallen in love with Sita, and plots her abduction.

The coming of the demon king Rawana is announced in the same elliptical manner as, in a long drawn-out phrase, the *Tukang Aun-Aun* sings "Auwun-Auwun," an onomatopoeic sound which refers to something flying in the air. Looking up at the sky, the *Caks* make a "shhh" sound as they sway gently from side to side.

Dalang, interpreting: "There is a figure in the sky."

Tukang Aun-Aun: "He who has ten faces."

This clearly brings Rawana into the story, since he is believed to have ten faces. At a handclap the *Caks* collapse forward, then sit up and raise vibrating arms to the sky.

The *Dalang* confirms this: "Now is described the journey of Sang Dasa Muka [Rawana]."

Again, the *Tukang Aun-Aun* declaims in a long, drawn-out phrase, "The story develops"

Dalang: "Rawana intends to kidnap

Sang Diah Sita."

Tukang Aun-Aun: "That is Sang Rawana."

Unsuccessful in his first attempts to abduct Sita, Rawana sends his minister Marica to the forest in the form of a golden deer. The deer lures Rama and Laksmana away from Sita, enabling Rawana, disguised as a priest, to capture Sita.

2 Forest Scene (6:11)

Rama, Sita, and Laksmana appear in the center of the *Cak* circle, and begin to act out the drama. The *Caks* become the forest, swaying like trees moving gently in the breeze.

Rama: "You, Diah Sita, let's go look around in the middle of the forest."

Dalang: "While Rama and Sita are enjoying themselves in the forest they see a deer." The chorus chants "Cak ... cak, cuk."

Sita: "You, Rama, I like this deer, could you catch it for me, please?" The *Caks* sway back and forth, nodding their heads mournfully, a premonition of trouble.

Rama: "You, Laksmana, now you should guard Sita. I am going to leave to catch the golden deer." He takes off in pursuit.

Sita: "You, Laksmana, because your brother is chasing the golden deer, let's go home."

Laksmana and Sita leave, and Rama returns.

Dalang: "Now it is told that Rama is chasing the golden deer. Rama tries to shoot the deer, but it is very agile. And then he got very angry and shot the deer." The magical deer is shot, circles around the stage, limping, and pretends to die. The *Caks* end this section with "Cak ... cak, sirr," as a cadence.

The scene switches back to Sita and Laksmana.

Dalang: "When Diah Sita and Laksmana are waiting for Sang Rama, accidentally Diah Sita heard the voice of Rama calling for help."

Deer, imitating Rama: "Tulung, tulung." ("help, help).

Sita: "You, Laksmana, maybe that is your older brother who needs help, please hurry up and help your brother."

Laksmana: "You, Diah Sita, maybe that is not Rama who needs help. Maybe that is the voice of our enemy."

Dalang: "Now Sita got very angry."

Sita, speaking coarsely: "You, Laks-

mana, why did you talk that way? Maybe you are waiting for Rama's death so that you can marry me."

Dalang: "Then Laksmana talks to Diah Sita."

Laksmana: "You, Sang Diah Sita, if you insist that I go and help Rama, I will leave you here, but please do not leave this place." He draws a protective circle on the ground around Sita before leaving. The *Caks* sway more and more vigorously, and the tension mounts until Laksmana leaves. Then there is silence.

3 Sita's Abduction (5:48)

The Pedanda enters, Rawana disguised as a priest. The Pedanda recites a mantra, ("Begawan Biasah, who had great knowledge, is the son of Parasara,") as a pretext for talking to Sita. Heads down, the *Caks* sing slowly. They sway slowly, representing, perhaps, an old man.

The Pedanda addresses Sita in guttural Low Balinese, as befits a high priest addressing an inferior: "You, Sang Diah Sita, I am one who meditates in the middle of the forest. For seven days I have not eaten or had a drink. You, help me and give me one

swallow of water."

Sita, respectfully: "Ratu Pedanda, if that is what you are saying, wait for me a moment."

Pedanda: "You, Sang Diah Sita, if that's so, hurry up and bring me some food."

Sita: "You, Ratu Pedanda, please take my food."

Pedanda: "You, come close to me."

When Sita leaves the protective circle, he grabs her, changes into Rawana, and carries her away.

Hands on knees, the *Caks* bob their heads up and down and resume their syncopated chant of "Cak ... cak, cak."

Sita: "Help me, Sang Laksmana. I was kidnapped by Rawana."

Rawana: "Please, you, Diah Sita, don't call out like that. Go with me to Alengka."

Rawana comes forward with Sita, leading the *Caks*, who now represent the people of Alengka. There is an element of frenzied possession in this scene; the *Caks* behave as though possessed by Rawana's demonic energy. As he gestures towards a group of *Caks*, they rise to a crouch, waving their arms, returning to a sitting position as he turns his attention to another

group. It is as though they are puppets, animated involuntarily by his electric energy. They clap their hands in celebration as Rawana dances, telling the North, South, East and West that he has captured Sita. As this scene draws to a close, the *Caks* surround Rawana; the inner circle stands, the middle circle kneels on one knee, and the outer circle remains seated. With their arms raised and vibrating intensely, they seem to form a mountain into which Rawana vanishes. As though the energy animating them has been cut off by Rawana's departure, they chant "Tudag, tudag, tu es" (here, "tudag" implies "death") and collapse backward.

4 Interlude (4:23)

An extended interlude marks the transition from the wild joy of Rawana to the despair of Sita in captivity. The *Cak's* chanting introduces this note of despair. They sing a mournful refrain, bobbing their heads; they slump, rise, and sway again in rhythm, raising and lowering their heads, suggesting a crowd gossiping about the kidnapping of Sita. (This section most closely resembles Sanghyang, from which the

Kecak was adapted.) They lift their arms to the sky, punctuating their song with handclaps, and then return to the simulation of a gamelan with "Cak ... cak, cak."

A long section of the epic describes Rama's adventures in getting to Alengka, overcoming Rawana, and winning back his wife. Many of these stories relate the exploits of his allies, the King of the Monkeys, Sugriwa, and the great and universally beloved white monkey general, Anoman (Hanuman in Indonesian). There is only the barest mention of these adventures in the Kecak Ganda Sari.

5 Sita's Captivity (7:28)

The *Caks* chant "Tut, dag, tut, tut," introducing the next scene, which takes place in the park in Alengka, the place of Sita's imprisonment, where she is guarded by Trijata, Rawana's niece.

As the chorus chants "Cak ... cak, cak," we hear a female singer. She is *Tukang Gending*, a female narrator, sitting in the outer *Cak* ring behind the Dalang. As Sita, she whines, "My heart is broken, I am deeply injured due to the trick of the demon king. I

fell down, I look like a corpse. My beloved husband left me alone. Let me die with a broken heart rather than live on in captivity."

Dalang: "Now it is said that Anoman journeyed to Alengka following the orders of Rama." The inner circle of *Caks* collapse backwards, and then sit up again.

Anoman is sent to tell Sita that Rama is on his way. At first, Sita thinks that Anoman is Rawana in disguise, but Rama has given his ring to the monkey general; when Sita sees it, she realizes that Anoman is on her side. She gives him a hair fastener as a token to take back to Rama. Anoman destroys the park where Sita is being held prisoner and leaves.

Sita: "You, monkey, maybe you are Rawana changed into a monkey like this."

Anoman: "No, Sita, that is not true. Actually I have been ordered by your husband to come here. Look at this. This is a ring from Rama." Anoman shows Sita the ring that Rama has given to him.

Sita: "You, Trijata, this is Anoman, who has been ordered by my husband Rama to bring his ring to me. You,

Anoman, take my hairpin to Rama, and tell him that I am always miserable here."

Anoman: "Yes, Sita, if that is what you say, I will follow your orders. Please take a rest in bed now."

Dalang: "Now Anoman gets very angry and destroys the park." To the accompaniment of monkey sounds from the Dalang and the *Caks* chanting "Pa, pun pa ka," Anoman destroys the park and departs. Then there is silence.

6 Meganada attacks Rama (2:19)

The scene shifts back to Rama, who is talking to his attendant, Twalen. While fighting Rawana, Rama has destroyed the chariot of Meganada, Rawana's evil son.

Rama, in Kawi: "You, Twalen, be careful and pay attention while you are going with me." For a moment the *Caks* are quiet, with their heads down, thinking, it seems. Then they take up the "Cak ... cak, cak" refrain while swaying.

Twalen: "Yes, I will never neglect your advice to me. Rama is now looking for his wife." Twalen cracks some rude jokes.

Meganada meditates and the gods give him a magic arrow which, when shot, turns into a serpent, trapping the enemy in its coils. Meganada enters with his attendant, Delem.

Meganada, in Kawi, "Now it is told that Meganada arrives. You, Rama Dewa, now watch out."

Rama: "You, Sang Meganada, you came at the right time. Now show your strength to me."

Meganada: "Now Meganada becomes very angry and shoots Rama with his arrow Naga Pasah. Then he shot Rama with Naga Pasah. Delem, I can tie up Rama and Laksmana with Naga Pasah."

Meganada shoots Naga Pasah (his magic arrow) at Rama, and the arrow turns into a serpent that coils around him. The *Caks* become the encircling serpent as the men in the inner row lie back in the laps of those behind them, forming a horizontal circle around Rama.

Meganada: "I did this because they destroyed my chariot."

Delem, translating: "I did this because they destroyed our horse cart."

Meganada: "Now that I have tied them up I am going to report this to

my father." He leaves.

7 Twalen and Delem (2:13)

As the *Caks* lie still, there follows a comic scene between Twalen and Delem, with a great deal of horse play.

8 Rama's Liberation (8:05)

The *Tukang Kekawin* introduces the next scene in Kawi: "When Rama was staying there...." (This phrase refers to the fact that Rama is still trapped by the serpent.) The *Caks* remain silent.

Twalen, to Rama: "People are very proud of you on the battlefield."

Tukang Kekawin: "There is a lot of talking among the gods."

Twalen: "All of the Nawa Sanga gods are talking about this."

Tukang Kekawin: "The gods feel pity for Rama."

Twalen: "From the heavens the gods feel pity for him."

Tukang Kekawin: "A blast of wind from his wings accompanies the arrival of Garuda as he comes to eat his food." The chorus makes guttural sounds, imitating the wind; with their arms around each other's necks, the *Caks* in the inner circle shake, as though

blown by the wind.

This brings the magic bird Garuda upon the scene to rescue Rama. As Garuda enters, the outer circle sits up, and begins chanting.

Rama: "You, Sang Paksi Raja [Garuda], you can eat the serpent which binds me, now you may go home to Wisnu Loka." Garuda devours the serpent, liberating our hero. The inner circle around Rama breaks apart and sits normally.

9 Final Scene (4:35)

In the final scene, Sugriwa enters. The *Dalang* says: "Now it is mentioned that Sugriwa arrives."

Sugriwa: "Excuse me, Rama, I am the King of the Monkeys and want to talk to you."

Rama: "You, Sugriwa, please destroy Alengka."

Sugriwa: "Yes, Rama, let me destroy Alengka according to what you said." Rama leaves.

Sugriwa: "Sugriwa has pity on the monkeys that were tied up by Naga Pasah." The central *Caks* lie back in the laps of those behind them.

Sugriwa: "Sugriwa feels happy and invites all the monkeys to go to Alengka."

The *Caks* separate into two groups, representing the opposing armies, with the back row standing.

Sugriwa calls out: "You, Meganada, why do you hide yourself in the clouds? If you are very brave, come down and fight with me. If you miss one thing in the fight, your neck will be cut off."

Meganada appears, and challenges him: "You, Sugriwa, if you are so powerful, let's fight."

Sugriwa and Meganada fight, as do Twalen and Delem. With a final climax of rhythmic chanting, the performers leave the stage with their hands up in the air, vibrating intensely.

Producer and Engineer: David Lewiston

Notes and Libretto: Fred B. Eiseman and David Lewiston

Technical Associate: Cliff De Arment

Field Associate: Maria Bodmann

Mastering: Paul Zinman and David Starobin

Cover Photo: "Transformation of *Kecaks* into monkeys" from *Dance and Drama in Bali*. By permission, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1938

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