

Research

# Gender Identity and Social Perception in Balinese Performing Arts: Cross-Dressing Practices and Their Impact on Artists' Mental Health and Social Acceptance

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## Abstract:

Cross-dressing in performance traditions is a global phenomenon that reflects complex intersections between gender, identity, and social norms. In Balinese performing arts, cross-gender performance are both longstanding convention and where social identity is negotiated. This study explores two such roles in Calonarang ritual performance: the comedic Liku and the antagonistic Matah Gede. Using qualitative methods—including semi-structured interviews with performers and analysis of textual and recorded performances—the research explores the sociocultural framing of these roles. Matah Gede is typically performed by heterosexual men of high social standing, often priests, whose cross-gender portrayals are ritually sanctioned and widely accepted. In contrast, Liku is often performed by queer-identifying individuals of varied social status. These performers describe the role as both a form of artistic expression and a socially sanctioned outlet for gender fluidity, with some noting its positive impact on their mental well-being.

The study argues that gender in Balinese performance is not merely representational but performative, ritualized, and relational—capable of both reinforcing and subverting social norms. Beyond Bali, these findings contribute to global gender studies by showing how traditional performance can provide culturally legitimate spaces for queer expression and emotional resilience in conservative contexts. This research thus enriches broader conversations around identity, embodiment, and the mental health dimensions of performance.

**Keywords:** Gender identity; Social perception; Balinese performing arts; Cross-dressing; Mental health

## 1. Introduction

Cross-dressing in performance has been a recurring and complex phenomenon across global cultural histories. Far from being merely theatrical or comedic, it offers valuable insight into how gender roles are socially constructed, challenged, and negotiated. In many traditions, cross-gender performance is not only accepted but institutionalized, reflecting deeper cultural logics surrounding identity, representation, and social norms.

Historically, theatrical practices have often relied on gender crossing as a means of fulfilling performative needs, especially in societies that restricted participation based on sex. Cross-dressing which can be defined in its simplest form as “the act of wearing items of clothing not commonly associated with one’s sex” (Ben-Iheanacho et al., 2023, p. 390). In Elizabethan England, for instance, the prohibition of female actors led to all roles, including those of women, being portrayed by men (di Laurea, 2023). Similarly, Japanese Kabuki theatre institutionalized the role of *onnagata*, male actors trained to perform highly stylized female characters (Isaka, 2023). These cases demonstrate how cross-dressing in performance can emerge from social constraints while simultaneously cultivating its own aesthetic traditions and symbolic meanings.

In Southeast Asia, analogous practices have also been part of long-standing cultural repertoires. In the Lenggur Lanang tradition of Banyumas, for example, male dancers perform female roles with femininity not only tolerated but celebrated (Hartanto, 2016). Such forms suggest that gender, when performed through the arts, can be rendered fluid, liminal, and deeply symbolic—an idea that resonates particularly in the context of Balinese performing arts.

Historically, Balinese performing arts during the era of the kingdoms were marked by gender exclusivity. Classical genres such as Gambuh, Topeng, and Arja were originally performed exclusively by men, even when the narratives included female characters (see Bandem, 1983; Dibia, 1992; Saba, 2002; Prasetyo, 2018). Significant shifts began to emerge in the early 20th century, as women increasingly participated as dancers and performers. Female roles that had previously been portrayed by men were gradually assumed by women, signifying a transformation in gender representation on the performance stage. Over time, even roles traditionally considered the exclusive domain of men—such as puppeteers and mask dancers—began to be recognized as artistic professions accessible to women (see Coldiron et al., 2015; Goodlander, 2010, 2012, 2016; Singarsa et al., 2024).

In Bali, cross-gender performance holds a distinctive position, situated at the intersection of ritual, community life, and artistic expression. Rather than functioning solely within the domain of entertainment, performance in Bali often serves spiritual and ceremonial functions, embedding gendered enactments within a broader cosmological and ethical framework. Here, gender is not only portrayed but also dynamically negotiated—performed in ways that reflect both cultural continuity and personal expression. These performances challenge binary understandings of gender by foregrounding flexibility, ambiguity, and transformation.

This study focuses on the gender dynamics within Balinese performing arts by examining specific instances of cross-gender performance, especially within the context of ritual drama and dance. Two prominent figures are central to this analysis: the comedic Liku character and the antagonistic Matah Gede in Calonarang performances. Both roles are traditionally performed by men embodying female personas, and their portrayals often carry complex affective, social, and symbolic weight. The Liku, often humorous and grotesque, navigates the tension between ridicule and familiarity, while the Matah Gede, embodying witch-like power, destabilizes conventional female archetypes.

While such practices are culturally embedded, they also provoke critical questions about how artists who embody these roles are perceived in contemporary Balinese society. As Balinese culture continues to evolve within a globalized and increasingly conservative socio-political environment, performers who regularly cross gender boundaries may face stigma, misrecognition, or psychological strain. This study therefore considers not only the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of gender performance but also its social and mental health implications for the artists involved.

By tracing the historical, cultural, and psychological layers of gender-crossing performance in Bali, this research aims to contribute to broader discourses on gender performativity, cultural resilience, and the role of the arts in mediating social acceptance and identity formation. It invites a rethinking of how traditional art forms both reflect and shape contemporary understandings of gender and selfhood in an increasingly plural yet contested cultural landscape.

## 2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach that integrates performer interviews with textual and performance analysis to explore the intersections of gender, identity, and cultural practice in Balinese performing arts. Data collections were conducted by the authors between 2024 and early 2025 in Bali through semi structured interviews in the Balinese and Indonesian language.

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with dancers who have undergone extensive training and are widely recognized for their portrayals of the characters Liku and Matah Gede, primarily in the Gianyar and Denpasar regencies. These performers were selected not only for their technical expertise but also for their embodied knowledge of cross-gender roles within Balinese performance traditions. While the Matah Gede dancers are heterosexual, most of the Liku dancers identified as queer and requested anonymity in this research. The ages of the interlocutors ranges from 20 to 55 years old.

In addition to the interviews, the research includes close analysis of recorded performances to examine how gender expression is constructed and communicated on stage. This analysis is further supported by an extensive review of relevant literature, including scholarly works on Balinese dance, gender theory, and ritual performance. Together, these methods provide a contextual and interpretive understanding of how performers negotiate social identity through artistic practice, and how cross-gender roles operate within the broader socio-cultural landscape of Bali.

## 3. Results and Discussions

### 3.1 Cross-Gender Embodiment in Calonarang: Ritual Authority and Symbolic Liminality

Among Bali's most renowned ritual dance-dramas, Calonarang dramatizes the legend of Ni Calonarang, a powerful widow and practitioner of witchcraft who unleashes destruction upon the kingdom of Daha (Bandem & deBoer, 1995). Central to this performance is the figure of Matah Gede, a terrifying manifestation of Calonarang's supernatural forces. The name Matah Gede, meaning "half-cooked" or "not fully formed" (see also Wirawan, 2019; Pratita, 2020) captures the liminality of the character—occupying a space between the human and the supernatural, the domestic and the chaotic, the gendered and the indeterminate.

Portraying Matah Gede requires not only mastery of dance technique but also an ability to navigate formal linguistic registers, as the character often speaks in kawi (Old Javanese) poetic verse. Traditionally performed by senior male artists, often those with ritual or spiritual authority, the role reflects a broader cultural logic where certain spiritual and aesthetic responsibilities are encoded through gendered expectations. Despite the character being female, no documented instances of women performing Matah Gede exist—highlighting a culturally sanctioned convention of cross-gender ritual embodiment. This exclusivity is not arbitrary. Within Balinese performance cosmology, embodying Matah Gede is not merely an act of representation but one of invocation. The performer is believed to temporarily channel a supernatural force that must be contained, respected, and ritually managed. As such, the performer must be someone deemed spiritually "capable"—a status often aligned with male practitioners such as *balian* (traditional healers) or individuals with a priestly lineage. In this context, the act of cross-gender performance is not only legitimate but essential: it embodies both symbolic inversion and spiritual responsibility.

What emerges here is a ritualized construction of femininity—an idea of the female not simply as a gendered subject but as a force, a symbolic embodiment of power, danger, and transformation. Ironically, this potent representation of female power must be enacted by

male bodies, perhaps as a form of symbolic containment. Thus, the cross-gender portrayal of Matah Gede reveals a layered discourse: femininity as a site of power, mediated through masculinity for the sake of cultural, ritual, and social stability.

While the portrayal of Matah Gede is ritually sanctioned and socially honored, performers still navigate intense emotional and psychological demands. The role requires not only technical skill but also a capacity to internalize and convey symbolic terror, power, and otherness—often leading to a heightened state of affective engagement. For many senior performers, this embodiment affirms their spiritual authority and cultural value, yet it can also induce emotional strain due to the gravity and complexity of the character. Although performers of Matah Gede may not face the same social stigma as those portraying Liku, they still engage in cross-gender embodiment that challenges personal and public understandings of identity, often in ways that affect their inner emotional life and social self-concept.

### 3.2 *Arja and the Evolution of Cross-Gender Performance*

While Calonarang performances reveal how cross-gender performance is negotiated through ritual authority and spiritual symbolism, the case of Arja illustrates a more accessible, community-based context in which cross-dressing practices shape performers' social standing and personal identity. Here, the impact of gendered performance extends beyond ritual significance, touching directly on questions of mental health, identity expression, and public reception—especially among performers whose gender identities diverge from heteronormative expectations.

Outside the explicitly ritual sphere of Calonarang, Balinese traditional theatre also provides fertile ground for analyzing gender performance. Arja, a form of Balinese dance-opera that emerged in the early 19th century, originally excluded women from the stage, leading male performers to assume all roles (see Desiari, 2017; Sadguna, 2018; Desiari & Suratni, 2022). This early mode of cross-dressing was driven more by practical and religious constraints than by aesthetic preference. However, as women gradually entered the stage in the mid-20th century, Arja underwent significant gender realignments.

Dibia mentioned that, during the 1960s and 1970s, the Arja scene witnessed a notable shift: female performers began portraying heroic male leads, while male actors were relegated to secondary or comedic roles (Dibia, 1992). This reversal of normative gender hierarchy onstage revealed the genre's flexibility in accommodating and subverting social expectations. Rather than stabilizing gender binaries, Arja allowed for their creative reconfiguration.

In response to waning popularity in the late 1980s, a new format emerged: Arja Muani, an all-male troupe that foregrounded cross-dressing as a central comedic device (Saba, 2002). Here, the performative act of gender became a deliberate aesthetic and humorous strategy. Male performers donning female attire—often exaggerated in style and affect—revitalized audience interest by infusing traditional narratives with fresh visual spectacle and comic timing. This evolution marked a shift from necessity to theatrical choice, with cross-dressing recast as a mode of satire and social commentary.

In this recontextualization, gender performance became a key site of artistic identity and public engagement. For some performers, particularly those whose gender identity or sexual orientation diverged from heteronormative frameworks, Arja Muani offered a culturally permissible arena for expression. Rather than transgressing social norms outright, cross-dressing within Arja became a strategic practice: it allowed performers to negotiate personal identities under the protective guise of tradition and entertainment.

### 3.3 *The Role of Liku: Comedy, Queerness, and Psychosocial Negotiation*

One figure emblematic of this negotiation is the character of Liku, a flamboyant and often grotesque female role typically performed by men. Within Arja troupes—both mixed-gender and all-male—Liku has become a recurring and recognizable figure, associated with humor, satire, and social inversion. Often adorned with exaggerated makeup, high-pitched voice, and gestural excess, Liku appears to mock femininity; yet within this performance lies a more complex set of social, emotional, and psychological functions—particularly for performers who use the role as a channel for identity expression and emotional coping within a culturally sanctioned space.



For queer performers in particular, the Liku role operates as a culturally sanctioned outlet for expressing gender variance. In everyday Balinese society, where heteronormative expectations remain strong, individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles often face subtle marginalization or exclusion. However, within the codified space of performance and ritual frameworks, these same individuals may achieve visibility, acclaim, and even reverence. For many, this opportunity to perform Liku provides more than social validation—it becomes a psychosocial buffer against the mental stress of everyday marginalization, offering performers emotional relief, pride, and a sense of stability.

The social legitimacy of performing Liku does not lie solely in its comedic appeal but in its affective resonance. Audiences may laugh at Liku, but they also applaud, recognize, and celebrate the performer's artistry. This dual response—laughter and approval—creates a powerful psychosocial loop: the stage becomes a space where social norms are both enforced and subverted, where marginal identities are momentarily centered through humor, talent, and spectacle. This circulation of laughter and recognition functions as a form of community care—replacing shame with shared joy, and allowing performers to experience psychological affirmation within the bounds of tradition.

### 3.4 *Performance as Psychosocial Survival and Cultural Carework*

For many performers, particularly those identifying as queer or gender non-conforming, embodying Liku is more than an artistic act—it is a crucial form of mental health support (see also Wedastra & Lesmana, 2015). Cross-dressing in performance offers a rare avenue for self-expression and emotional validation in a cultural context where such expressions are often constrained. The theatrical space becomes a psychosocial refuge, allowing performers to explore aspects of their identity that may otherwise be repressed in daily life. Ethnographic interviews reveal that the experience of playing Liku often provides a profound sense of psychological relief. Performers describe the role as affirming, cathartic, and empowering, offering them a temporary yet vital sense of visibility and self-worth. Being seen and applauded—even within the safety of character—acts as a proxy for deeper social recognition, helping to mitigate feelings of marginalization and emotional distress. In this sense, the performance becomes a form of emotional survival—a protective mechanism that contributes directly to mental well-being.

This dynamic illustrates a form of psychosocial negotiation, wherein performers operate within traditional cultural limits while simultaneously pushing against them. The stage serves as a liminal space where identity is both concealed and revealed, where stigma is suspended, and where personal authenticity meets communal validation. Cross-dressing, in this context, is not merely theatrical—it is a therapeutic act. It allows performers to channel internal struggles into artistic form, offering an emotionally sustaining experience that supports their broader mental health and sense of social belonging.

Thus, these performances constitute a form of cultural carework: affective labor that fosters resilience, fosters empathy, and nurtures the emotional health of individuals who often live at the margins of dominant gender ideologies. Through the character of Liku, performers can process and navigate the complexities of identity within a socially sanctioned space, thereby enhancing both psychological coping and cultural continuity.

### 3.5 *Gender Performance, Symbolic Order, and Social Reintegration*

The broader cultural significance of cross-dressing roles such as Liku and Matah Gede lies in their capacity to mediate between personal identity and communal values. In Balinese cosmology, performance is a ritualized expression of social and spiritual order, and gender is enacted through codified gestures, costumes, and vocal stylizations. Within this performative structure, gender becomes fluid, symbolic, and negotiable.

While roles such as Liku may be seen as humorous or transgressive, they carry substantial symbolic weight. Cross-dressing destabilizes fixed binaries by allowing male performers to embody traits associated with femininity—vulnerability, expressiveness, emotionality—within a space that shields them from direct censure. The structured nature of Balinese performance traditions legitimizes this enactment, rendering gender variance temporarily acceptable. This enables performers to experience moments of psychological

freedom and emotional release, reinforcing the role of performance as a space of mental health affirmation.

Though these performances are temporally bounded, their impact is long-lasting. Performers often recall the affective power of embodying Liku as a turning point in their emotional journey—where laughter, applause, and artistic success translated into greater self-acceptance. Importantly, audiences too become participants in this psychosocial exchange, extending recognition and appreciation that may not occur in everyday life.

Moreover, these cross-gender performances facilitate social reintegration for those who may otherwise be excluded. Artists whose gender identities or expressions deviate from the norm are reabsorbed into the cultural community through their roles, not by suppressing their difference, but by channeling it into ritual and artistic significance. Their gender variance is not erased—it is aestheticized and ritualized, thereby gaining symbolic and social value. Through the medium of performance, they access a form of social acceptance that supports not only their professional legitimacy but also their emotional and psychological well-being.

In this way, Balinese cross-gender performance traditions do more than preserve aesthetic and ritual heritage—they offer a resilient cultural mechanism through which individuals can sustain their mental health, assert their identities, and be meaningfully recognized by their communities. Performance becomes a vital therapeutic space—a cultural site where marginalized voices are given form, function, and the possibility of healing.

#### 4. Conclusions

Cross-gender roles in Balinese performing arts reflect the culture's inherent flexibility and adaptability in articulating gender expression, particularly within ritualized performance contexts. Far from being peripheral or comedic devices, roles such as Matah Gede and Liku serve as key nodes in the sociocultural and spiritual matrix of Balinese life. These roles exemplify how performance traditions not only reflect but actively shape evolving understandings of gender, identity, and belonging.

The character of Matah Gede, a fearsome female antagonist within the Calonarang ritual, is traditionally performed by older male dancers who often possess high social or ritual status, such as priests or *balian* (healers). Although the role represents a female figure, it is imbued with spiritual force and symbolic gravitas—attributes culturally associated with male ritual expertise. The portrayal of Matah Gede by male performers is not only accepted but ritually authorized and socially honored. This indicates that gender fluidity, when aligned with religious function and aesthetic convention, becomes a legitimate and even revered practice within Balinese performance culture.

Conversely, the character of Liku in Arja provides an alternative but equally significant space for negotiating gender expression—particularly for performers whose identities diverge from heteronormative frameworks. While Balinese society continues to be shaped by patriarchal and binary gender norms, Liku allows queer-identifying or non-binary individuals to participate in cultural life through sanctioned channels of performance. In such cases, gender expression is not only permitted but applauded, provided it remains embedded within the established boundaries of theatrical convention. For many performers, the opportunity to portray Liku offers not merely artistic fulfillment, but a vital form of psychosocial sustenance—enabling the negotiation of private identity and public recognition in a socially acceptable form.

In illuminating how gender is rendered performative, fluid, and symbolically charged on the Balinese stage, this study contributes to broader conversations on the intersections of performance, identity, and mental health. It reveals that traditional forms are not static relics, but dynamic, living frameworks through which individuals articulate belonging, negotiate social norms, and sustain psychological well-being. By offering structured yet expressive spaces for cross-gender embodiment, these performance traditions provide not only cultural continuity but also critical avenues for emotional resilience and mental health support—particularly for performers navigating marginalization or identity-based stress. In doing so, they reimagine the possibilities of selfhood, visibility, and community within a rapidly evolving cultural landscape.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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