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## Packing up the Past: Vicki Baum's Quest for Heimat

### Zapakować przeszłość – Vicki Baum w poszukiwaniu „Heimatu”

**Abstract:** The best-selling Austrian novelist Vicki Baum took ship alone for America in 1932 but emigration soon became exile for the Jewish author. The feeling of 'Heimatlosigkeit', or rootlessness, which oppressed Baum at that time was emotional and spiritual rather than physical. Child of a Jewish immigrant family in the anti-Semitic society of nineteenth-century Vienna, Vicki Baum had long questioned the loci and the politics of Heimat, a German term whose significance far exceeds the simple definition of home or homeland. Cut loose from Heimat, she began her travels to far-away destinations, seeking to identify a common humanity and the universal moralities which could guide Europe to a better future. She wrote her travel experiences into novels which allowed her to narrate the landscapes and customs but also the inner lives of the people she encountered. A long-standing belief in the inauthenticity of verbal communication encouraged her to transcend linguistic barriers with confidence but it was her gender, she believed, which enabled her to share and interpret other cultures. Commonality rather than difference is the focus of her travel-letters and their fictional transpositions. Focusing on Baum's experiences on Bali seen in a postcolonial perspective, the article argues that the island was for the novelist a space of transcendence, where the inhabitants held on to values already lost in Western societies.

**Keywords:** Heimat in exile, transcendental homelessness, therapeutic journeys, travel letters

**Abstrakt:** W 1932 roku bestsellerowa austriacka pisarka Vicki Baum wyruszyła w podróż statkiem do Ameryki; dla żydowskiej autorki emigracja szybko jednak przyjęła postać wygnania. Świadomość utraty ojczyzny – „Heimatlosigkeit” – oraz poczucie wykorzenienia, które prześladowały wówczas Vicki Baum, były jednak bardziej emocjonalne i duchowe niż czysto fizyczne. Jako dziecko żydowskich imigrantów w antysemitkim społeczeństwie dziewiętnastowiecznego Wiednia Baum wcześniej zaczęła dociekać, co tak naprawdę znaczy „Heimat”, który pojmowała jako znacznie wykraczający poza ramy prostej definicji domu czy ojczyzny. Odcięta od Heimatu wyruszała w dalekie podróże w poszukiwaniu wartości i moralno-etycznych wskazówek, które pomogłyby międzywojennej Europie zbudować lepszą przyszłość. Spisywała swoje doświadczenia w powieściach, w których przedstawiała zarówno krajobrazy i zwyczaje, jak i wewnętrzne dylematy społeczności, z którymi się stykała. Wieloletnia nieufność wobec komunikacji werbalnej popychała ją ku przekraczaniu barier językowych, choć w jej własnym mniemaniu to jej płeć najbardziej pomogła jej w interpretowaniu i zrozumieniu innych kultur. W listach i tworzonych na podstawie doświadczeń z podróży dziełach skupia się bardziej na cechach wspólnych dla wielu obcych sobie kultur niż na różnicach. Analizując balijskie przygody Baum z perspektywy postkolonialnej, w artykule pokazano, że wyspa stała się dla autorki miejscem transcendencji, w którym mieszkańcy posługiwali się wartościami nieobecnymi już w kulturze zachodniej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Heimat na wygnaniu, transcendentalna bezdomność, podróże terapeutyczne, listy z podróży

I am absolutely certain that I will travel as long as my legs, heart, head and eyes still allow me to do it (Baum 1949a).<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In 1931, the Austrian novelist Vicki Baum (1888–1960) took a break from her editorial position at the Ullstein Press in Berlin, attracted to the USA by the prospect of commercial success. Observing the increasing power of National Socialism in Germany, and already a hit-author in Hollywood, she chose to stay. By 1935, as a writer of Jewish ethnicity writing novels of modern urban life and liberated women, she could no longer return to her homeland. She had become one among increasing numbers of German artists and writers seeking sanctuary and employment around the film studios of Hollywood. Despite her attempts at conformity and assimilation, she was identified with the German Exile Community. After the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, she was officially classified as “Enemy Alien” despite having gained American citizenship at the earliest opportunity in 1938.

## Heimat

The feeling of ‘Heimatlosigkeit’, or rootlessness, which oppressed Baum at that time was emotional and spiritual rather than physical. Child of a Jewish immigrant family in the anti-Semitic society of nineteenth-century Vienna, Vicki Baum had long questioned the loci and the politics of Heimat, a German term whose significance far exceeds the simple definition of home or homeland.

<sup>1</sup> Translated. All translations of Baum’s correspondence from the original German are by R. Simpson.

The word had been tension-ridden since conflicts between regional and national identity arose following German unification in 1871. In the 1890s, rejection of the perceived evils of modernisation and urbanisation encouraged the artistic ‘Heimatkunst’ movement, rooting the German spirit firmly within pastoral landscapes of the past. The First World War asserted patriotic concepts of a national Heimat and, following Germany’s defeat, popular Spiritualism, esoteric philosophies and religions, proposed a Heimat beyond the grave in which the millions of recent dead could find peace. Under National Socialism, novels like those Baum characterised as “Blood and Soil, Fatherland and cow-dung” (1987, 353), elaborated a pseudo-historical definition of a German-speaking Heimat based on selection and exclusion of all whose racial, political, cultural or sexual orientations were deemed unsuitable. The word became tainted by association but, as the century progressed and turned, the concept was continually revived, de-politicised, re-politicised, linked to immigration debates and claimed by environmental movements.

Blickle’s definition of Heimat as a cultural trope, where “language, identity, geography, politics, and notions of self (...) intermingle” (2002, 8), attempts to unite the many threads of analysis. Eichmanns concludes that the “multilayered connotations seem to defy any comprehensive explanation” (2013, 1). Nevertheless, the prominent role of Heimat in German-speaking cultures of the last centuries makes it central to any discussion of the work of exiled writers. Baum’s definitions of Heimat are contradictory, ranging from sentimental descriptions of Christmas past (Baum 1941) to esoteric concepts of a spiritual home (Baum 1965). They reflect what Sebald suggests is a common experience of Austrian Jewish writers in delineating Heimat – “a complex state of illusion which is aware of its own untenability” (2016, 5).

Working in the Hollywood film industry from 1935 onwards, Baum was in a position to both investigate and indulge visions of Heimat. Her own life on the paradisaical California coast was, however, set in a context of exclusion on both sides of the Atlantic. Her former European Heimat was destroyed by persecution and war and her dissatisfaction with the

ethos of Hollywood increased as she observed and experienced its ruthless workings. Despite her determined efforts to maintain the culture of an Austrian home in California, the exile's ambivalence towards a domicile which was both her salvation and her adversary was for Vicki Baum, as for many other notable escapees from Nazism, not negated by present prosperity. While fully committed to a stable home and family, a state of emotional homelessness shadowed her present life, and she sought consolation in voyages abroad.

Although the epitome of Modern Woman, according to popular cliché, she considered American modernity as philistine and superficial, bringing an ethnocentric European viewpoint with her to the New World. She wrote to her husband, Richard Lert, on her American portable typewriter, explaining her longings for the culture she recognised as home:

The constant feeling of standing on the ground of ancient cultures that have shaped not only objects but also the people themselves and their faces. The lack of this emotion often makes America feel very empty. North American Indians have hardly developed beyond the Stone Age and the colonists were also (...) Philistines (Baum 1949b).

She chose to counter current unease by taking advantage of American ease of travel to reach remoter and wilder destinations which, she believed, offered alternatives to Western civilisation. She was driven by a deep dissatisfaction with the industrial capitalism which she interpreted as dominating American cultural attitudes. In Europe also, it had recently exposed its ugly face in a World War waged on a preternatural scale.

The immediate reasons for her voyages were various: escape from the oppressive demands of family and work, extra-marital liaisons, and a vigorous restlessness, "gipsy-like and restless" (Baum 1959). In the USA and Europe, she had a public reputation to maintain and travel allowed her to explore unconventional outlets for her energies. Her frequent correspondence with husband and sons, left back at home as she made her way around the world, expresses the tension between her will for escape and her attachment to home and family:

My Dear, I am often homesick for the violets. This homesickness is of course not great enough to destroy my taste for travel. I would like to tell you, however, how thankful I am that you let me tootle around the world so much (Baum 1959).

## Travel as therapy

Travel to faraway places where she could act according to what she construed as her own identity was therapeutic, freeing her from definitions of home and nationhood with which she had little sympathy. The isolation which she had experienced since childhood and considered an inevitable adjunct of the creative literary mind, found consolation in foreign environments where she could experience social engagement without commitment.

She travelled extensively, usually alone but meeting resident friends and acquaintances at her destinations. Their greater local knowledge allowed her to experience far more than a tourist's view and in very little time. In 1935, she briefly visited Shanghai. Notelmann notes that the visit lasted only three days, but in that time, she achieved an in-depth picture of the city which allowed her to write the lengthy and detailed descriptions of its mores, manners and history that appear in her novel *Shanghai* 37 (Notelmann 2002, 223).

## Journalistic travel-writing

There is a clear distinction between the explicit accounts of Baum's travels, whether written by herself or by journalists, and the transposition of her travel-experiences into the fictional contexts of her novels. Her publishers made sure that opportunities were presented for positive publicity for their best-selling author. "Baum the world-tourist" became part

of a public image which asserted Baum's authoritative status as one who knew and understood the modern world and could thus interpret it for a popular readership.

Visiting other lands widened the reference-points of her fiction beyond the urban world of European capitals, which was the subject of her popular novels. Having always been convinced that it was important to ground her writing in direct personal experience, she sought to live the lives she wrote about. The title *Vicki Baum: Student of Life* heads a newspaper article which proclaims:

she spends hours behind the scenes in a department store. She waltzes and fox-trots in the dance-halls where the window-dresser's newest assistant might dance with the junior clerk from the ribbon department. She visits cheap boarding houses under the pretext of renting a room (n.a., 1930).

The same curiosity to experience how others lived drove her into the paddy fields of Bali, the brothels of Shanghai, the formal gardens of Japan and the wilds of Mexico. In Paris, she remarks, "As long as one goes around as a tourist and gazes at attractions and looks for experiences, one never really lives there" (Baum 1949c).

Despite her concern for publicity, Baum complained frequently about press reports which she considered trivialised her work. The captions for newspaper photographs of Baum on Hawaii claim, "Vicki Baum is learning Hula on visit here" (Allen, n.d., file 104) and, "[s]he tried to learn the poi dance of the New Zealand Maoris during her short visit there" (n.a., n.d., Newspaper cutting, file 104) Baum's predilection for dance as both observer and participant was well-known, but her professional background in music and general unwillingness to discuss it in such journalistic contexts casts in doubt the authenticity of a further report: "Miss Baum thinks she sees resemblances between the music of Hawaii and that of her native Austria" (n.a., n.d., Newspaper cutting, file 104).

She was not, however, averse to taking a popular stance which she later rejected in more serious writing. Her own magazine article *Aus der Sahara mitgebracht* is written in a tone of sentimental kitsch, utterly unlike

the clear-eyed sardonic analysis of her autobiographical writing. It records a trip to Fez in Morocco and is accompanied by a current publicity photograph of a coy Baum, suitably made-up and coiffed, holding a desert fox (Baum 1930c). The article describes how she bought the small animal from a street-vendor then smuggled it home to the USA, hidden in her large muff. Despite a genuine concern for animal life, which she mentions in other contexts (Baum 1987, 156), this article, written ostensibly for the women's magazine *Die Dame*, describes the wild creature as a soft toy and fashion accessory, “[l]ast year, Desert Foxes were all the rage in London’s most exclusive circles” (Baum 1930c).

Another article on her travels in North Africa is more humorous, making fun of her own desire to see what life was really like behind the tourist attractions (Baum n.d., *Ein einfaches Butterbrot in der Sahara*). Local guides promised her a totally authentic camel trip into the desert, as experienced by its nomadic inhabitants, ending with a night in a Bedouin tent. As a wealthy woman, she paid their exorbitant fee for what she believed to be a unique experience. In the event, she finally realised that her camel was being led repeatedly around a desert circuit which never went far from the town, and her night under canvas was furnished with all conveniences which were considered appropriate for a European lady. She ruefully accepted that on this occasion she had been outwitted and exploited.

She persisted in the attempt to make her journey more than a holiday. A letter to her husband from Fez is accompanied by a sketch of town, showing the layout of its districts. Even in this very personal correspondence, she insists on the authenticity and reliability of her narrative. The strange tumultuous life of the town’s ancient streets and markets and the vibrant humanity which inhabited them held her attention. She felt that this time she had achieved her aim, considering herself to be a rare European visitor gaining privileged access to a virtually-unknown area, “[Fez is] an incredible, bewildering, seething, colourful, noisy, stinking old Arabian town in which no European ever sets foot” (Baum 1930a).

The frequent letters home to husband and sons from all her trips abroad describe the places and the people she was visiting in some detail.

It can be assumed that these letters, honest, spontaneous and thoughtful, are a more thorough record of her travelling days than those articles published in the popular press and mediated by reporters and editors. Close textual similarities between the family letters and key passages of description in the novels confirm the authenticity of the travel-writing which she presents in fictional form. Choosing to write her travel impressions and reflections upon them into novels allowed her further scope. She could then investigate and develop the insights gained from what she thought of as her singular experiences of varied cultures. It also assured her of publication for a large and avid readership. The ‘real life’ experience of a travel-writer underlies the fictional adventures of her protagonists.

## Travel-writing as social critique

Her novels are peopled with characters who, despite nationality, appearance and language, are identifiable by her varied readership as sharing the emotions and dispositions of their friends and neighbours. She never stayed in one place long enough to free herself from interpretive prejudices, nor was she interested in doing so, believing that her plots reflected essential human traits beneath their culture-specific manifestations. In seeking to define the forces which motivate her protagonists, her writing also exposes the greater influences which mould their lives. In *Shanghai 37* (1939), she investigates the progress of China from a feudal system of aristocracies and war-lords to the rise of Chiang Kai-Shek and the later move to a communist system. She complains bitterly that her publishers and reviewers chose rather to emphasise the ‘Hotel’ elements of its plot, rather than giving her any credit for more serious analysis:

As a matter of fact, it has nothing to do with a hotel and the title only cheapens it. The extract which published in “TODAY” has, in addition, left out all of the more important and better first section, in which the whole develop-



ment of East Asian politics was outlined. This, by its very nature, must have led to present-day Communist China (Baum n.d., *Autobiographical sketch*).

The novel *Kautschuk / Cahuchu, Strom der Tränen* (1943) was similarly publicised as a popular story despite its critique of the rubber industry's destructive effects on ethnic populations. She claimed to value this novel, with its powerful and emotional portrayal of abused workers, more highly than all her other work (Baum n.d., *Autobiographical sketch*). A later novel *Flut und Flamme* (1956) continues the theme of exploitation as the arrival of fishing and canning industries attracts, then disrupts, the lives of Mexican coast-dwellers.

The natural resources sought and exported by the industrial powers are, in themselves, objects of interest to Baum. Both *Kautschuk* and *Flut und Flamme* show Baum's fascination with the landscapes, flora and fauna of the lands she visited. The interactions between human and natural worlds frequently focus her attention and, as an enthusiastic and experienced gardener, she brings an informed eye to her investigations. The processes through which rubber is tapped, the growing of rice and the commercial fishing industry all become the subject of her scrutiny and detailed descriptions. Her fiction is firmly grounded in sensual observations. The squelching sounds of feet and hooves as they walk in the paddy fields, the iridescence of beetle wings in the sunlight, the weight of a flower-head as it bends on the stem, are described with an accuracy and simplicity originating in the author's direct experience of the landscape and its vegetation.

## Travel as research

She wrote and kept copious research notes and sketches for all her "travel" novels. For *Flut und Flamme*, she enquired about the layout of a sea-going yacht and its fittings from a sailing friend, who also explained

the details of game-fishing.<sup>2</sup> The geographical location, the buildings and the artefacts in use are far more significant than simply a colourful backdrop for Baum's plot-lines. The interaction of the human population with its environment revealed, she believed, universal truths about human nature which overcame the accidents of geography.

Baum made thorough photographic records of her journeys and, whenever possible, personal films. She took advice from Hollywood friends on cameras and techniques and chose carefully which photographs should be enlarged beyond the very small size of the originals. Photography suited her mode of apprehension, as she confirms in a letter to her husband, "The first fleeting impression in the strongest and then one must either stay there a year and gain more insights or go back home" (Baum 1949b).

She also bought the mass-produced sets of tourist photos as mementos of the natural and built environments in which her fictional characters would act out their lives, widening the accuracy of geographical reference beyond the limitations of her own journeys. The photographs she chose to enlarge were, more frequently, scenes with people and similar characters often appear in the descriptive passages of her fiction. She always emphasised in autobiographical statements that her novels told the genuine experience of humanity, and that she refused to sacrifice veracity to her publishers' commercial intent (Baum 1987).

## Liebe und Tod auf Bali

The determination to balance popular appeal with a travel-writer's account of a foreign land is particularly evident in her Bali writings. The

<sup>2</sup> "Through Bill Berggreen I found here the man who is the only, the best and the most experienced shark fisher of all Mexico and who was also first officer on that yacht where my captain Hofmann and Countess de Frasso had their shooting bout. Today I had him here for hours and wormed every shed of information out of his good simple Irish soul" (Baum 1930b).

novel *Liebe und Tod auf Bali* (1937) was published when the island was becoming a holiday destination for the rich and famous as well as the focus of serious academic research. The successful film *Legong, Dance of the Virgins* (de la Falaise 1935) had been shot on location in Bali and featured an all-Balinese cast. The visual extravaganza with very little plot is primarily designed to excite audiences by pictures of half-naked young girls performing a traditional Balinese dance.

Baum's story, by contrast, centres on events leading up to the massacre of the Badung royal family, its courtiers and feudal retainers by Dutch colonial troops in 1906. Her personal research, including obtaining and keeping an original report of the event written in Dutch by a military official (n.a. n.d., *Hollaendische Berichte*), indicates a serious attempt to gain a balanced vision of the slaughter. She names the resulting novel as one of her "greater, more important and, incidentally, in terms of editions, even more saleable novels" (Baum n.d., Letter to Richard Lert). It was her voyage to Bali in 1937 which, she claims, rescued her career from the comparative doldrums into which it had fallen when the excitement over her hit novel *Menschen im Hotel* and its filmic version *Grand Hotel* had waned. She writes to her husband, "Dearest, If I had not gone to Bali then I would be sitting here today a ruined, jobless screenwriter and had I not gone to America then we would all have gone down the drain" (Baum n.d., Letter to Richard Lert).

The acknowledgement of her vulnerable position as a Jewish writer whose origins lay in an Austria about to be annexed by the Third Reich lends particular poignancy to a novel based on large-scale massacre. Her investigations of Bali were guided by an introduction from her old friend Salka Viertel to Walter Spies, "who gave me the wisdom of having lived there 12 years" (Baum 19?). Spies could offer an "insiders" access to the island and its inhabitants and, as she writes, "So I get to see things that otherwise nobody sees" (Baum n.d., Letter to Richard Lert). He was the source not only of Hollywood's fantasies of an island paradise, as he became the guide for its star-visitors, but also for the anthropological work of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, leading anthropologists of the day. In addition, Baum pursued her own researches, visiting a

leper colony on Bali and speaking to its inhabitants, trying to “form a picture of their state of mind” (Baum n.d., *He was not exactly a dwarf*) for the outcasts of her novel.

On arrival in Bali, Baum had been charmed to find a life which she found largely free from European influences. She remarks on the young men’s preference for Western shirts and attachment to bicycles but considers that, since the Badung massacre, “the mode of life has changed very little in the Islands” (Baum 1935a). She writes, “I don’t intend to play up the period between 1910–1920, but rather, the strong atmosphere and color of the Islands” (Baum n.d., Excerpt from a letter) In light of Bali’s colonial history, she is surprised by contemporary attitudes to the colonising Dutch. She found the island in a state of utmost celebration for a Dutch official visit. All roads were garlanded with flowers, flags were flying, and local lance-carriers were ready to play their part in the welcoming ceremony. The islanders’ easy and unquestioning acceptance of what the day brought forth was, for Baum, an enviable position, “When one has knocked around in the South Seas then one recognises how wise these lazy people here are. People like us can never be as happy” (Baum 1935a).

The Balinese ability to ignore the time-scales of their Western colonisers and visitors is recounted through the limited contacts between Balinese and Europeans which thread through the novel. Balinese patience and their tolerance for lengthy discussions and interminable waiting frustrates the busy Dutch officials. The sequence of the narrative, however, is set against the natural time-markers of day and night and the recurring cycles of the agricultural year. Baum is stressing the eternal context of an island life, whose rhythms are regulated by seasonal and cosmic movements rather than the mechanical measures of Europeans. On Bali, even the definitive periods of a human life, beginning with birth and terminating in death are regarded as uncertain and flexible. The infant is born into a continuum of past reincarnations and dies only to become a present, if inanimate, member of the family until the relatives have saved, perhaps years, for funeral festivities. Baum prefaces and punctuates her novel with quotations from the *Bhagavad*

*Gita* which presume the transubstantiation and migration of souls. Her characters embody its beliefs. Having redeemed the faults of their narrated lives, some finally reappear in new child-bodies which carry the distinguishable features of an ancestral heritage beyond physical appearance or genetic transfer.

Pre-dating the anthropological researches of Margaret Mead, Baum describes a culture where “Bachofen’s vision of a trinity of the erotic, death and religion” (Dörr 2007, 56) dominated daily lives which followed, in their essential features, the same ancestral paths, which, she implies, European culture had long ago abandoned. She shows the rational, technological society of European colonists, driven by trade and expansionism but ideologically adrift, dismantling the superior, intuitive and imaginative order of the old Bali. Contemporary observations in Germany were confirming the genocidal potential of European civilization, and Baum, whose family and friends were among the victims, wrote colonial brutality with conviction. Dutch colonial representatives on Bali, symbolically trapped in their formal and excruciatingly uncomfortable tropical uniforms, become increasingly uneasy as European culture is outraged by local customs. Their discomfort is set dramatically against Balinese contentment, to embody the gulf between the harmony of the traditional life and the fractious misery of modernity.

## The failure of words

Baum’s willingness to immerse herself in the esoteric aspects of Balinese society was accompanied by a long-standing belief in the inauthenticity of verbal communication. She was convinced that life forms communicated most truthfully on instinctive physical levels, for which words were inadequate and possibly traitorous. This conviction allowed her to transcend linguistic barriers with confidence and form relationships with foreign others which she, at least, understood as insightful. On Bali

she was, she claims, usually accompanied by a local child who adopted her and led her around like a long-lost relative despite the lack of a common language. Her novel shows the author's familiarity with the games and interests of a Balinese childhood apparently gained from the relationship.

## Women's lives

Baum regarded gender as a defining feature of her writing. Biological commonality overwhelms the differences of language, culture and religion, she asserts, and an instinctive female communicative capacity enabled her to understand and interpret other women's lives. Writing male characters of all races with the tolerant disdain she extends to her own family in autobiographical accounts, she views women as the bearers and protectors of life, carrying a biological, but also cultural, past into the future. Her fictional Balinese women, who maintain all aspects of the island's physical welfare, also tend its household shrines, supporting the belief systems which structure island life.

## The unity of life on Bali

Baum writes the non-verbal communication she observes between the Balinese and the life-forms which surround them in symbolic as well as explicit terms. In the natural landscapes of Baum's fictional Bali, women bloom, ripen and die like flowers, merging into the animal and vegetable lives alongside which they live so closely (Baum 1964, 134). The leprosy which inflicts her dancer manifests first in his ear, which becomes like a heavy rotten bloom as the illness brings the human towards dissolution and return to the common resting place of earth.

The peasant family of her novel treat the family buffalo as one of themselves, considering and respecting its feelings: “the cow was being difficult so Pak coaxed her with the names of Sister and Mother” (Baum 1964, 23). In Baum’s letters she writes her own relationship to her garden in the same terms, assigning personalities and individual lives to her flowers, particularly a Frangipani tree, whose struggles for life and constant demands for care are frequently mentioned (Baum 1958). She records talks to her own trees and plants, encouraging them to survive and flourish despite being transplanted, like herself, into a foreign soil and hostile climate. Her statements and images transcend species-barriers, making fluid the rigid human/animal distinctions of first Christianity then scientific rationalism, to stress relatedness with the natural world rather than difference. The sense of being at home in Nature which she mentions from her childhood memories (Baum 1987, 23) alleviates her personal isolation.

It was Walter Spies who organised the performance of the Barong dance, a climactic event in the novel. The fictional description follows, in an almost word-for word account, a letter written to her husband following the event (Baum 1935b). Baum’s fictional narrator is describing the dance as seen through the author’s eyes and voicing the responses of Baum herself. The Barong dance exemplified for her the bringing together of human, natural and spiritual worlds, which she understood as a defining feature of Balinese daily life. The dance describes the triumph of good over evil in the terms of a conflict between human hero and monster. Baum points out the comic detail of the dancers’ trousered legs emerging from the animal costume, but she also stresses the beliefs which force the performance beyond pantomime. Baum’s letter, and the fictional account which transposes it, leave no doubt that Baum observed what she believed to be an extraordinary occurrence and which she interpreted as transcending rational explanations. She describes the scene in which dancers, in a trance-like state, stab themselves with sharp ritual daggers, drawing blood. Baum attributes their immediate recovery from their wounds to their ability to access subconscious physical powers lost to the Western world. Writing her fictional account from

the standpoints of both observer and dancer, she describes the process through which the dancer falls into the ecstatic state, moving beyond the normal limitations of a human body to share the conditions of being with the mythical beast of the dance and the spirit world it commands.

Unlike the frivolity of previous press reports of her Hawaiian dancing, the Bali novel reveals Baum's more serious view of dance as a primary ritual which expressed the essential values of Balinese society. The moral equilibrium of the island society is asserted and maintained through myth and physically expressed through the forms of its dance. In her letter, she compares the enactment of the ritual originating in an ancient culture with contemporary Expressionist dance. The best dancers of the day, she writes, fail to achieve the skills of the untutored and illiterate performers of Bali, who believe utterly in the spirit world they re-enact:

This is the complete realisation of everything that Wigman and Niedecken dreamed of but didn't achieve. No Director, only an infinite tension in every finger of these village lads, the rhythms of a primeval culture, an authenticity. [In the West], months of rehearsals only create Art. It made a great impression on me (Baum n.d., Letter to Richard Lert).

In her travels round the island she observed the traditional work of artisans whose skills and techniques were derived from personal transmission as generation succeeded generation in the same trade. She writes them also into her novel in the character of a carpenter whose wood-carvings achieve the status of art for his European observers. Like the dancers, the skills of Balinese craftsmen transcend the utilitarian as they acknowledge their relationship to the material of their work and recognise a spirit shared with the natural forms they depict "all these villagers are also artists" (Baum n.d., Letter to Richard Lert) she writes. She finds in their work the confirmation of her views that Balinese society derived its enviable continuity from the transmission of shared systems of transcendental belief lost to the European interlopers.



## Solace in exile

Baum's novel suggests that it is the enduring stability of Balinese society and its beliefs which enables her characters to overcome the tragedies of their individual lives. They remain conscious of their place within an immutable cosmic order, overlooked by the spirits propitiated in the daily rituals of their lives. It was within this greater context that she aimed to place her own exiled life. Back in Hollywood, she cherished mementoes of her trips abroad. She set great store by the healing properties of a Balinese priestly ring and made offerings over a period of 25 years to a "bloodthirsty" wooden fetish brought back from her travels to New Zealand. Standing on the California shoreline, she writes of looking over the sea and imagining her Balinese friends waving greetings from their beaches collapsing temporal and geographical distance in her belief in an eternal and universal home. She maintained the convictions acquired through her travelling life in dealing with the circumstances of her own terminal illness and death. Insights gained from her experiences in environments which were entirely alien to her in ethnic, linguistic and cultural terms informed her later writing as she identified for herself a Heimat which was spiritual rather than geographical.

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Rose Simpson's first degree in English from York University was followed by a career in popular music (as the bassist and occasional singer in The Incredible String Band), teaching, arts administration and other sidelines. Following another first degree in French and German from Aberystwyth University, Simpson recently completed a PhD on the popular novels of Vicki Baum and Ina Seidel, considering the dilemmas of women caught in the conflict between modernity and the radical anti-modernism of National Socialism. In February 2021 her memoir *Muse, Odalisque, Handmaiden: A Girl's Life in the Incredible String Band* was published by The Strange Attractor Press.

Po uzyskaniu dyplomu z filologii angielskiej na Uniwersytecie w Yorku Rose Simpson rozpoczęła karierę w showbiznesie (jako basistka i wokalistka punkowej grupy The Incredible String Band), po czym powróciła na uczelnię i przez wiele lat pracowała jako wykładowczyni literatury brytyjskiej i historii sztuki. Użyła magisterium z filologii francuskiej i niemieckiej na Uniwersytecie w Aberystwyth, gdzie później obroniła doktorat poświęcony powieściom Vicki Baum i Iny Seidel w kontekście konfliktu między modernizmem a radykalnym antymodernizmem narodowego socjalizmu. W lutym 2021 nakładem niezależnego londyńskiego wydawnictwa The Strange Attractor Press ukazały się jej wspomnienia z czasów spędzonych z The Incredible String Band pt. *Muse, Odalisque, Handmaiden: A Girl's Life in the Incredible String Band*.

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