

ESSAY

Does a Composer of Contemporary Gamelan Need a Regional Identity?

by I Wayan Sadra

It has been thirty years since I left Bali. I spent seven years living in Jakarta, and since 1984 I have lived in the Central Javanese city of Solo. For a long time I was active as a composer, as well as a musician. In 1996, I started working on a composition for dance accompaniment. The process took place in the Balinese village of Sukawati, so some of the musicians involved were from that village and the surrounding area.

I still clearly remember hearing the whispers among my fellow musicians when I showed them one particular part of the composition. They commented to one another, in lowered voices, that I was no longer Balinese (“*Beli Sadra sube Jawa ne!*”)[Sadra has become Javanese!]. They were secretly saying that I was no longer a part of their community; they saw me as an outsider. They no longer considered me to be a part of the Balinese community, including the community of artists whose works are based on the traditional repertoire of Balinese music. I was sure, however, that my musical ideas were founded on the existing traditions of Balinese music.

A similar situation occurred when I was writing a musical composition for Javanese gamelan in Solo, and most of the players were Javanese gamelan musicians. When I was in the process of setting out my ideas and explaining the material for a particular set of musical patterns, I heard some of the musicians comment: “*Baline metu*” [His Balinese side is showing]. Perhaps this comment shows that they were aware I was using a number of musical idioms from Balinese *karawitan* [traditional gamelan music]. They knew this



because they were able to make assumptions based on their existing references. Several of them were Javanese musicians who also had experience playing gamelan *Gong Kebyar*. They were familiar with at least a number of musical idioms from this popular ensemble.

From these two examples, it is apparent that I am in a position in which my musical identity is unclear. In Bali I am no longer considered purely Balinese, because I have been influenced by musical elements foreign to Bali. I am also considered to have included some unexpected compositional ideas. My colleagues in Java, on the other hand, do not view me as an entirely Javanese musician, as they generally do other Javanese players.

The comments that these musicians made seem to have placed me in some kind of peripheral area of what is understood to be traditional music with its clearly defined identities. I also experienced a similar process of identification that was used as a parameter for measuring my existence in relation to a “loss of traditional identity,” when a reporter from *Kompas* newspaper commented on a

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performance of one of my compositions at *Gedung Kesenian Jakarta* during the Indonesian Art Summit in 2004. He wrote that I was an artist who had betrayed his own tradition. Perhaps he failed to see or hear any Balinese musical elements at all in the work. He saw only that my name was a Balinese name. Likewise, the reaction of a number of elderly Javanese artists and cultural observers was to describe my composition as damaging or destructive, and they even threatened to cut off the electricity if I continued with my performance. I experienced the same thing at SMKI [now ISI] Yogyakarta in 1984, when as part of performing my composition *Otot Kawat Balung Besi* [lit. Muscle String Bone Iron] at *Taman Budaya* [cultural center] Solo in 1995, I dragged a gong around on the stage floor.

In order to become the composer that I now am, I developed a foundation in “contemporary gamelan” compositions. Yet with all humility, I believe that I am quite capable of playing various musical instruments of the Balinese gamelan—from popular ensembles such as gamelan *Gong Kebyar* to classical genres such as *Gambuh* and *Gender Wayang*—as well as a number of other traditional Balinese musical styles. I acquired these skills while I was a student at KOKAR [*Konservatory Karawitan*] in Bali, by studying with a number of Balinese maestros, and subsequently also by playing with Balinese friends in Solo. However, regarding my ability to play the Javanese gamelan, I admit—and my friends from ISI agree – that I am not capable of playing any instrument well, not even the *mbalung* (i.e. *balungan*) instruments which are viewed as the easiest instruments for most musicians.

I do not mean to apologize for the fact that I am still incapable of playing the Javanese gamelan. There is a reason for my stupidity in this area. When I moved to Solo in 1984, I was already quite old and my memory was poor. By that time, I had already had a number of opportunities to write compositions for karawitan. Therefore, I had no wish or ambition to learn Javanese karawitan to the extent of becoming a virtuoso musician. My habit of listening to *karawitan* on a daily basis, from the time when the campus was still in Sasonomulyo [in the Kraton Surakarta] to the time it moved to its new location [north of town] in Kentingan, was more important to me as a compositional reference. Listening to Javanese *karawitan* [classical Javanese music] was more a means of sharpening my senses or sensitivity in connection with the world of creation—my perception of every kind of *gendhing* [Javanese piece] I heard was shaped by my background and interests as a composer of “contemporary gamelan” music. In order to use elements of traditional Javanese or Balinese music in my creations, I have often attempted to capture what I consider to be the most essential elements, the core or essence of a *gending*, whether a portrait of the social life of a community, or a musical problem that can be taken and used as the starting point for one of my compositions. This is perhaps why people sometimes think of my works as highly experimental, or, in other words, “obscure.”

An early idea of the existence of sound and noise in human life, for example, may be represented by breaking an egg onto a hot iron panel [as in my composition at the Telluride Composer-to-Composer Festival in 1990]. In fact, this conceptualization has a basis in a particular part of the traditional Javanese wedding ceremony in which the groom steps on an egg, and also in the Balinese tradition of *nyambleh* (ritual sacrifice of roosters).

In the tradition of *klenengan*, each Javanese *gending* poses an individual set of compositional problems. This perplexes me so much that I have to ask: to what extent do certain musical elements need to come together to be considered a traditional Javanese *gending*? Every piece gives me a unique impression. In my experience, and considering the existence of compositions in every tradition in Indonesia, I have found something especially characteristic of Javanese music: the pieces flow along with many variations that give an impression of spaciousness to each listener. This polyphonic system is firmly established and dominant. Every instrument has a distinct function, but when they are connected to each other they are so strong that they create a specific sound world. The sense of emptiness in the slow tempo creates a space so compelling that the audience is drawn in, responding to the sound of an instrument they imagine they could master. The music gives everyone an opportunity to spontaneously experience a certain feeling of melodic unity. I have not found any other music in the world that allows listeners to follow and connect with the music to this extent. The composition of Javanese music is so perfect that I think it is one natural creation that is sublime and amazing.

I have found, however, a contradiction in Javanese music. When a piece is presented in a different time and place, removed from the its original context of community, and is shown as a “performance” with modern staging, the aura of perfection is lost, and the music no longer communicates. I have also never had such a transcendent experience with recent Balinese gamelan styles like *Gong Kebyar*, or other Indonesian regional musics—where the music is so hypnotizing that our consciousness is altered—we are not even aware how deeply immersed we are, and suddenly, the piece has ended.

I think that some classic Balinese gamelan music like *Gambuh*, seven-tone *Semar Pegulingan* gamelan, *Gong Gede* and other ancient music with very slow tempos might possibly create the experience one finds with Javanese gamelan. What a shame that music with these qualities has become so rare in Bali. It takes a combination of many factors to coalesce into a one-of-a-kind music with a singular character and unique identity.

New music prioritizes time above all. The shorter a composition, the better. This has given rise to a classification (although I have no idea who invented it), that Javanese music is considered meditative, while Balinese music is seen as dynamic. To tell the truth, I think this results in the hegemony of an aesthetic model that legitimizes cultural

stereotypes: Bali is dynamic, Java is meditative. In Bali, the practice is for gamelan musicians to move while they are playing, in a kind of dance that is an extremely important part of gamelan performance. In Java we are criticized by the senior musicians if we move playfully while we are playing Javanese gamelan. At the very least we must remain calm, expressionless, and fully focused.

How can a music be classified by what is only apparent on the surface? Can it be that these are the parameters we use? If this is true, then I have no identity, or I occupy a position that straddles different music cultures. I'm like a bastard child born without inheriting an identity from my parents. Looking at it this way, the rules of a tradition cannot limit my creativity. Maybe I'll become a renegade who doesn't hesitate to criticize musical or cultural norms that I believe are a violation of human rights. It is not only Javanese and Balinese music that influences my creative work, but all of the of music cultures in the universe. I think that traditional music is one achievement in the progress toward musical perfection that has evolved through a very long process.

The manifestation or crystallization of a perfect music needs more than a little time before a collective creation can be recognized as reaching a level of classical perfection. In playing a traditional music, say, Balinese, I really experience a definite sense of profound pleasure and peaceful enjoyment deep in my soul. That experience tends to be repeated each time I play, becoming stereotypically predictable. Now if I play a contemporary gamelan composition or other creative music, I have a different experience. I embark on a musical adventure to explore new sounds. I even use elements that are not present in traditional Indonesian music as resources in my own creative work. Life feels like it's always changing; maybe those changes are life itself. This is the most profound lesson we can get from contemporary music. In a world with this attitude, the possibilities are limitless. Instruments are only tools. Being contemporary is not about tools, it is a question of perspective.

Contemplating a creative life in the future, I acknowledge that in the fields of musicology and ethnomusicology, musical instruments (like gamelan) are always discussed in terms of certain cultural constructs/ concepts, regarding function, meaning, aesthetic values, and other jargon about the existence of instruments in human civilization and culture. This must all be erased or at least set aside in the future view of the contemporary composer. Every instrument represents a hallowed cultural idea that, to put it succinctly, must be abandoned. History has certainly given us examples of how to deal with this problem. When the Osing people of Banyuwangi play the violin, they do not conform to the practice of holding the instrument on the shoulder under the chin (as in a traditional western orchestra). When playing music for Gandrung, they rest it on their thigh instead. This is an example of how an instrument from elsewhere can be creatively adapted to the purposes of another culture, giving it a new function different from that of its origin. Initially, instruments or sounds are essentially

neutral, just free-form energies without shape, without function, without use, without value.

Going on, when culturalization and civilization appear in communities, those energies are subsumed in the creation of culture and are no longer free—they are confined by cultural norms such as rules in traditional music. The concepts of value, function, and symbolic meaning come into being, and the music culture applies the parameters that define its cultural aesthetics.

In contemporary gamelan, creativity questions and violates those rules. Contemporary gamelan desires change. Change is the highest point of creativity in the effort to revive the repertoire of traditional music as a musical source for contemporary gamelan. A symposium or discussion may question the nature of tradition, asking "Is contemporary gamelan a continuation of the gamelan tradition or a separate phenomenon?" In my opinion, both are possible, bearing in mind that the essence of "contemporary" is not concerned with the tools or objects but rather with attitudes and

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subjects. If we recognize the development of gamelan today, which has spread a long way from its original Indonesian habitat, we must acknowledge that gamelan has now become a world ensemble, and we must be willing to see that people from outside Indonesia look at gamelan as a set of musical instruments which are free from the burdens of a cultural tradition.

Gamelan is seen as a tool or a medium of expression, according to the cultural background of each musician or composer. The genetic factor is of course important in the development or growth of a number of individual styles in contemporary gamelan. In short, if we see that a particular music tradition is alive and thriving, in truth we are seeing something that is continually developing. On the other hand, if we see the existence of a music tradition is neither alive nor dead (*mati tak mau, hidup pun segan*), this means that it is stagnant, or even dying. A living tradition will always be changing and developing. This teaches us that we cannot classify a music tradition in a superficial way. A music tradition contains intangible elements that are difficult to apprehend with our audio and visual senses, elements such as an individual's spirit, desires, or ambitions. The positive contribution of contemporary gamelan to existing music traditions is only as a connection in the chain that persists in implementing the dialectics of change. Tradition and the past are references that can stimulate creativity. Composers of contemporary gamelan are highly aware of the history and background of the musical wealth inherent in traditional music, but there is not a single contemporary composer whose desire is to create traditional compositions. ■