

PROFILE

Two Experimental Gamelan Makers Respond to a Changing Environment: Muhammad Sulthoni and Sigit Pamungkas

by Sean Hayward

Background

Widely regarded as one of the foremost centers for classical gamelan, Surakarta (Solo) is also home to an extraordinary variety of experimental and contemporary arts. For many artists in Solo, interacting with Central Javanese gamelan music and its related art forms is not necessarily a choice, but a predetermined foundation. Creative goals are often pursued through the gamelan by default as it already forms the sonic backdrop of artistic life. As Solo changes, the place and function of gamelan is also evolving and expanding.

Alongside these expanding contexts, innovations in instrument design are precipitating further sonic developments that respond to changes occurring in the environment. The effects of globalization, technological development, a growing population, worsening pollution, and an increased speed of life are readily apparent in Solo. For example, the river whose beauty was immortalized in the song “Bengawan Solo” has slowly filled with plastic. In wayang, the *gara-gara* (comedy sections, typically in everyday Javanese language) become longer as the audience’s linguistic fluency with high Javanese decreases and the pressures to keep the audience engaged increase.

Many Solo-based artists are finding new ways to respond to this changing environment. In December of 2019, I had the opportunity to interview two such artists working on the construction of experimental gamelan instruments. Their collective work represents two different, highly personal approaches.

Muhammad Sulthoni

I met Muhammad Sulthoni in his workshop in Mojosongo. It was filled with plastic bottles, old gas canisters, a broken down bed frame, and other assorted “garbage.” Born in 1976 in Tanjung Karang on the outskirts of Yogyakarta, Muhammad Sulthoni is known colloquially as “Konde” (hair bun) due to his earlier penchant for keeping his dreadlocks in a bun wound on top of his head.

Mas Konde is one of the founders and driving forces behind a group called Wayang Sampah (trash wayang), a performing wayang collective in which all of the puppets and most of the instruments are made



Muhammad “Konde” Sulthoni, creator of Wayang Sampah.
All photos by Sean Hayward.

entirely from trash and recycled materials. I asked Konde about the inspiration for his work.

“Originally, I was a lover of nature, spending much of my time in the mountains. One couldn’t help but notice the quickly growing amount of trash, especially plastic. As an artist, I was working mostly on Wayang Beber at the time. During the process of making the scrolls, we were using chemical coloring processes and the excess color was ending up in the rivers. When I noticed this, I became interested in studying natural colors. As I continued working with these natural materials and traveling to the mountains, I became more interested in wayang.”



Toothbrush tuning pegs on Konde's rebab

I started making wayang puppets from discarded materials in 2014. Once we started performing, friends suggested that the performances should also be accompanied by instruments made of trash. I was certainly interested in the possibility, so I started to experiment. The first instruments we made were drums, from PVC. Soon I started making other instruments such as membrane flutes using plastic bags."

Other instruments produced for Wayang Sampah include a bonang made from discarded gas tanks, another bonang-like instrument made from air-pumped plastic bottles, a spring gong, a rebab made from paint cans and toothbrush tuning pegs, and two saron with keys made of windshield glass, among others.

These instruments stem from the concept of found objects, and in turn, found sounds. I was curious about the motivations for the instruments and puppets of Wayang Sampah, and asked Mas Konde about the goals of the group and how they operate.

"I want audiences to see what we do with these recycled materials, and inspire them to think



Saron keys made from recycled glass (in progress)

creatively, and think about what they can do instead of just throwing things away. Wayang Sampah operates as a collective. Sometimes one member might create a storyline, but usually they are created as a collaboration. Our performances are often much shorter than a traditional wayang, usually only about an hour, and they focus on themes of environmental protection. Often, we hold workshops for general audiences from kids up to adults, so that they can learn how to make puppets from plastic too."

The function of the instruments, wayang, and story lines all work together to educate and inspire the public. According to Mas Konde, the primary goal is to encourage people to think more carefully about their relationship to their trash. More fascinating still was that Mas Konde views this as a continuation of the typical role of wayang in Javanese society.

"In traditional wayang, we learn about the relationships humans hold with each other, with nature, and with the Creator. With Wayang Sampah, we continue working with the same concept, focusing on this



Bonang made from recycled gas tanks

particular element of our environment. We often hold performances in environmental communities and schools, sometimes on campuses as well, to try to educate the public and directly reach as many people as we can."

The creation of trash instruments for Wayang Sampah began in 2016. Although the group was still relatively young, Wayang Sampah received a grant from the nonprofit group Ruang Kreatif for the development of new work, including a performance at Galeri Indonesia Kaya in Jakarta on March 29th 2019 and the construction of new instruments and puppets.

"This performance project was very important for many reasons. This was the first time that Wayang Sampah was performed with instruments made exclusively from trash. Before, we often played with trash instruments combined with Western instruments or existing traditional instruments. We've never had any written, formal compositions as such, and the trash instruments did not have very specific tuning systems or scales, so the combinations were always done by experimenting directly and finding what worked the best.

Now we are going to make a much more complete set of instruments, tuned in pelog. In addition, for this project, we have to make 200 wayang puppets for an installation in the gallery. We hope that our performances can inspire audiences to



Sigit Pamungkas, metalworker and gamelan maker

become more aware of their own actions and trash production, ideally even become more actively involved in protecting their environment. Here, it is very difficult to change people's mindset. We have to be very persistent. Honestly, we hope that after a while people will feel embarrassed when throwing their trash on the ground and start to change their habits. The challenging thing is that if they only watch a performance once, they are impressed, think about it in the moment, and then go back to their usual ways."

Sigit Pamungkas

I met Sigit Pamungkas at his home in Solo and we traveled together to his father's house in Sukoharjo. Mas Sigit was born in this house, in Pundungsari village (about 40km south of Solo) in 1986. Upon arriving at the traditional house, an open door reveals numerous gamelan and boxes full of wayang, all waiting to be sold.

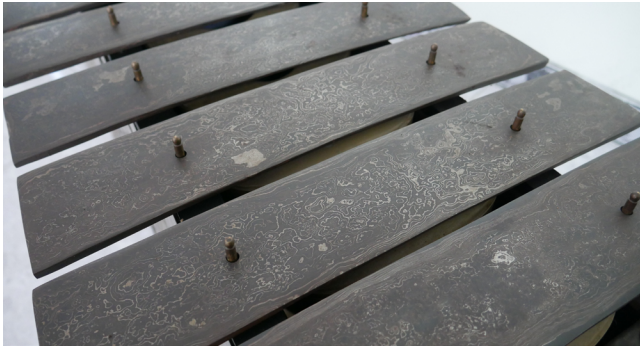
Sigit was born to a family of dhalang, including his father and three siblings. Aside from performing as dhalang, they all are engaged with gamelan arts in various ways, constructing and selling both wayang puppets and gamelan instruments. Quite by accident, Mas Sigit found himself more closely connected to the visual and material arts, which influenced his designs when he returned to gamelan construction.

Mas Sigit—in addition to owning a cafe in Solo (Bukuku Lawas) and selling rare books—has produced two gamelan from unconventional materials. I spoke with him about his background, motivations, and the process of creating these instruments.

"After high school, I wanted to become an actor. I applied to the television department at school, but I was rejected twice. Eventually, I looked and saw that



Gong Komodhong, made in the form of an elephant from mahogany frame and pamor keys



Pamor keys of Sigit's gambang gangsa

there was a department that had only four applicants: craftsmanship. The lecturer told me to just sign up and that later we could get drunk together. I liked the sound of that so I signed up without even knowing what it was, and I thought it would be pretty relaxed. As it turned out, it was hard work and I didn't like the program very much. However, there was an extracurricular class for making kris (traditional Javanese daggers).

Because I had been around kris since I was a child due to my father's profession, I was very interested. My studies in school became secondary to my study of kris. Almost 24 hours a day, I was there working and sleeping on campus. To make some extra money, some friends and I started making accessories and jewelry from the same material.

The decision to eventually make gamelan was quite natural, because I had also been around gamelan from a young age. Previously, the artist Hajar Satoto also made a gamelan from pamor, but the form was still completely traditional. I felt it was interesting but could continue to be developed further and perhaps in a new direction. For my first gamelan, the frames were still made from wood (mahogany), but I developed their shapes in new ways. The process for making the keys from pamor is exactly the same as making kris."

Kris are made from pamor (a distinctive layered metalworking style used to make kris), and hold great



Kendhang ciblon in the form of an elephant

spiritual and philosophical power in traditional Javanese thought. I asked Mas Sigit about the process of discovering the right thickness and hardness for the keys, as kris are not produced with sound or resonance in mind.

"I didn't have to experiment much to find the right sound for the keys, because when making a kris, the craftsman will often flick the blade to test its strength. From this simple action, the maker already indirectly understands its resonance. The main difference between a pamor gamelan and a bronze gamelan is the character of the sound. For bronze, the sound is softer and more refined; for pamor, it is a little stronger and harder."

The first gamelan Mas Sigit produced, while pursuing a bachelor's degree at ISI Surakarta, was a *gamelan gadhon* (a chamber ensemble of a few instruments) with mahogany frames and pamor keys. Each of the instruments was designed in the form of a fantastic creature, inspired by the shape of an elephant. After seeing the gamelan and asking about the inspiration for these shapes, I was interested to learn that his ideas came from contemporary visual arts and the symbolic meaning of elephants, and that he was trying to appeal to particular audiences.

"When making the frames, I wanted to design something that was equally compelling for people of all ages including children, as the form of a traditional gamelan feels very "adults only." For my first gamelan, I drew inspiration from the elephant, first because of its aesthetic characteristics and second because it has heavy philosophical implications. Ganesha (the elephant-headed god of Hinduism) is the god of science and I felt that my work was teaching about a new science, the science of making gamelan from pamor.

Once the frames were finished, I left the gamelan in my friend's house. When I arrived at his house one day, there were children playing on the frames. This is exactly what I wanted. The form invites the curiosity of children, and only once they are close do they have the opportunity to ask and discover that these are gamelan instruments, hopefully sparking their curiosity about gamelan itself."

Mas Sigit notes that for many young people, kris and pamor are associated with deep mystical and spiritual beliefs. For many in Java, this actually makes them frightened and want to stay away. By making accessories and other objects, including gamelan, he wanted people to feel excited and to feel a greater freedom to approach these materials and even experiment with them.

The second gamelan that Mas Sigit produced while pursuing a graduate degree at ISI Yogyakarta was a *gamelan cokedan* (small ensemble of four instruments, often played by street musicians), with frames made entirely of brass and keys made again of pamor. The frames for this set are also creatures of fantasy, this time inspired by the form of a dragon.

This set includes a kendhang made from brass. When one sees this gamelan for the first time, the visual aesthetic



Gender barung in the form of a dragon.



Meticulously hammered details on Sigit's slenthem



Dragon's head on the gender panerus

is immediately striking. The question almost always follows, "But how does it sound?" According to Mas Sigit, searching for an effective sound was an absolutely critical and inseparable part of the creation.

"This project was aimed at both visual art as well as sound. During the process of making the metal kendhang, it was very difficult to get the sound right. I kept trying different things for three months until I found a solution. Later if I get the chance to make another gamelan, I'll certainly have a chance to improve it further. For my second gamelan, because the frames are made of metal I decided to use individual resonator tubes for all of the instruments."

I asked about how these works have been received in Java by other artists as well as the general public: it seems that the response from musicians has been generally positive. However, Mas Sigit is no stranger to mixed opinions and the occasional criticism.

"My thinking is relatively simple: I want to reintroduce the gamelan. There is certainly an influence from contemporary visual arts culture, but sometimes I'm confused. After graduating, I went to Yogja and wanted to have a solo exhibition. I met the director of an important contemporary gallery and showed him the gamelan I had made. He responded that 'the materials are contemporary, but the form is still traditional.' He felt it was not yet contemporary enough. This was very stressful for me, instead I ended up making a variety of other objects that were more acceptable for this standard. I come from a traditional background and I enjoy contemporary art, but sometimes I feel some sense of inner conflict. Once I made a series of maybe fifty kris in strange shapes, twisting, bending, etc. My concept was to bring a dynamic, visual aesthetic to the creation of kris. Some people ended up feeling that I wasn't respecting

traditional culture. There was a lot of discussion around that point. The truth is that I want to bring forth the existing philosophy of kris through my own visual imagination."

Mas Sigit is hoping to sell these gamelan, so that he can continue producing more in the future. For both of these sets, he funded the construction himself through his work selling rare books online. Mas Sigit says he still has many ideas for future gamelan, but until these are sold, he will not have the financial resources to create them. Thus far, these sets have also been used for performances in various galleries in Java as well as in ISI Surakarta and ISI Yogyakarta.

Conclusion

Neither Mas Konde nor Mas Sigit speaks with a lofty idealism. Both view themselves as proceeding humbly, developing the traditional arts of their culture in their own way, from their own point of view. The forms of their work can be seen as a response to a changing environment; for Mas Konde, he is searching for a way to help people rethink the trash they produce, and for Mas Sigit the goal is to capture the imagination of people in any age group, and bring them closer to gamelan again. The contemporary art of today becomes the traditional art of tomorrow, and even within the world of those forms that we consider "traditional," new approaches are emerging on a regular basis. In their own way, these artists are trying to reintroduce the gamelan and create a positive change, a shift in the way we view the form. ►

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