

A Thousand Singing Voices: the Power of Javanese *Macapat*

by Asita Majdi, with Linda Hibbs

Asita Majdi is not someone who usually sings macapat, but when a contest was launched by the Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, asking anyone to write and sing a macapat verse to help ease the stress of the coronavirus, she and her friends and many others from all walks of life were keen to take part. The contest was about more than doing something to help with the COVID-19 situation—it showed an appreciation of traditional Javanese culture and a desire to work together using this form to provide hope for the resolution of the pandemic. Every participant received a letter of appreciation from the Sultan of Yogyakarta. I asked Asita to tell me about her experience participating in the macapat contest. Here is her story (translated from the original Indonesian). —Linda Hibbs

When was the contest and who organized it?

The macapat competition was organized in April of 2020 by LAURA (Anthropology Laboratory for Research and Action) in the Culture and History Faculty of the Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta. The contest was called “A Thousand Singing Voices: A Show Of Cultural Strength To Ease The Stress Caused By COVID-19.”

What was the goal of the contest, and what were the requirements for entering?

It was a cooperative effort to help provide calm during the feeling of panic at the start of the pandemic by confronting and at the same time managing the crisis in a cultural way. The aim was to create a road out of the pandemic crisis by using collective belief in oneself via traditional song.

A poster distributed via social media was a public invitation for anyone to write macapat verses with this theme. The requirement was to write verses and submit a video of people singing it. Each verse had to have four lines, written in the macapat meter Maskumambang, and using the melody and rhythm for that poetic form.

We were asked to create the macapat with the feeling and character of each individual language—it could be Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, Sasak, Betawi, Maduranese, Indonesian, or other local languages—so many voices would become one voice. The idea was that by singing together, the prolonged pandemic could be abated and there would be a return to some kind of normality. And in singing together we were also praying for Indonesia’s welfare.

Why did you want to participate?

I joined the contest because I like the texts of macapat.

Maskumambang Buminata

*Mangsa iki aja sira kumawani
Nantang ing bebay
Lelara kang andrawasi
Eling kanca nulung tangga*

*Prayogane njaga awak nata ati
Seger bungah waras
Nenuwun munjuk ing Gusti
Wekasan pageblug musna*

by Apriastuti

At this time do not be foolhardy
By challenging the danger,
The perilous disease,
But remember friends and/
come to the aid of neighbors

It is best to watch over yourself
and put your heart in order,
Feeling fresh, happy and healthy,
Praying and asking the Lord
That the plague should finally be wiped away.

(Translated from the Javanese by Prof. Stuart Robson.)

The verses are very deep and meaningful and contain philosophical knowledge about human existence. Sometimes these songs include prayers of hope for the world, to make a situation better. It’s this that I like. Apriastuti, who taught Javanese literature at UGM and is now studying medicine in the Netherlands, invited me and other friends who had studied in the anthropology department to join the competition. I had already read the announcement and I knew I really wanted to enter, but was not able to create or write the lyrics. I was a only a singer! A couple of us sing in other contexts but not everyone was used to singing, especially in recent years. But we all thought it was a good idea to try. Not all of us still live in Yogyakarta, so we knew we would have to coordinate the video via the Internet so that those living in Jakarta, or even as far away as Yangon in Myanmar, could be part of this project.



Asita (left) and the other members of her group.

Who wrote the verse your group sang?

The verse we sang—each person doing just one line—was written by Apriastuti, because she understands the rules for creating traditional Javanese macapat. She chose pelog for our entry as it reflects a sad or emotional mood, suitable for this style of macapat. The notes of pelog are also easier to sing if you are used to popular music.

I have known about macapat since primary school; our performing arts teacher had special books about it. I have sung in choirs and in small groups and many styles, but I don't normally sing macapat.

How did you make the recording?

For practice, each person was sent a video with Apriastuti singing the verse, so that we could each learn our notes. The process required two mobile phones, one to record our own singing, and another for listening to the recording we were following. Of course we didn't have any musical instruments to accompany us, we just sang a capella. The video was made up of recordings of each person singing individual lines, which were edited together by Apriastuti's husband.

You said you like listening to the macapat being broadcast by the Kraton Yogyakarta. Do you think these particular macapat presented by the Kraton are important because they are a response to COVID-19 or because they help you understand Javanese culture?

Both. I have been inspired by the performances of macapat that are being broadcast on YouTube every Sunday by the Kraton Yogyakarta. It is a way for me to enjoy traditional culture. I feel the depth of thinking of the composer, conveyed by the beauty of the rhythm of the language, and the serenity of tembang macapat as it expresses the harmony between beauty and wisdom, the teachings of noble reasoning, and a picture of our journey in life from birth until death. The singing of macapat can also reduce the psychological impact of experiencing unease and difficulty; people feel calm after singing. It is about hope—new hope. It is important to understand Javanese culture; one way is through listening to traditional poems. The philosophy of life that shapes the customs and traditions of Java is embedded in the macapat songs. ▀

[Listen to Maskumambang Buminata Laras Slendro Pathet Nem,](https://www.gamelan.org/balungan/balungan14/media/asita.mp4) sung by Asita (first singer on the video) and her friends.
<gamelan.org/balungan/balungan14/media/asita.mp4>

Posters for the competition. Top: “Maskumambang reminds us of the Javanese philosophy that all people are connected to nature through the cycles of life.” Bottom: “There are already 972 submissions, and we are still waiting for your entry! There is a special prize for the best one!”