

MEMOIRE

Enculturation and Cross-Cultural Experiences in Teaching Indonesian Gamelan

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A Note On Gamelan

A *Gamelan* is an Indonesian indigenous “orchestra” largely composed of struck metallophones in the shape of gongs and slabs. Unlike the Western usage of the term orchestra, however, the word “gamelan” refers to the instruments that make up the ensemble. Although similar ensembles may be found in other parts of Southeast Asia, gamelan is primarily the musical culture of Java, Madura, Bali, and Lombok.

Three types of metal (or metallic alloys) are commonly used to make gamelan. In order of preference, a gamelan set may be made of bronze, brass, or iron, although bronze is the most preferred. In addition to the choice of material, an owner’s wealth and taste may be factors in determining the number of instruments, how big or small each is to be, the motif of the decorative carvings, and the painting of the instruments’ frames. Traditional constraints, however, prevent individual preference from becoming bizarre personal expressions.

Although different gamelan may vary slightly in their tunings, all gamelan must be in one of two basic intervallic structures, namely, the 5-tone *sléndro* or the 7-tone *pélog*. Neither of these tunings is compatible with the Western music tuning system. For this reason, gamelan may sound “out-of-tune” to those with a deeply rooted sense of Western tuning, causing reactions ranging from a pleasant surprise to perhaps complete dislike.

In Central Java, regardless of the size, a gamelan set would include four groups of instruments: (1) those which carry the main melody (*balungan*), (2) the accentuating instruments, (3) the elaborating instruments, and (4) a set of drums, which functions as an audible “conductor.” The number of actual instruments in each group may vary from one gamelan set to another. Vocal parts may be either featured solos or included, like any instrument, merely to enrich the musical texture.

Although most of the instruments have one function in the ensemble, a few may be required to perform more than one role in the structure of the music. Thus, for

example, the primary function of a *saron* (a set of 6–7 metal slabs mounted over a trough resonator) is to carry the main melody, although on some occasions it might “elaborate” on the basic melody. The *kendhang* (laced drums) may function as a tempo and dynamic leader at one moment and as a dance accompaniment the next. The *kenong* (horizontally mounted medium size gongs) and *kempul* (vertically hung medium size gongs) may provide accentuation for one piece and act as movable drones for another.

Unlike Western composers, Javanese composers of traditional music do not have the freedom to vary their musical functions beyond this traditional range. On the other hand, again unlike Western musicians, Javanese performers have the freedom to “develop” a theme, to edit a piece, to drastically vary the tempo and dynamics, to “improve” or improvise on the music as they play it.

A type of cipher notation has been developed for gamelan instruments, but traditionally musicians did not rely on it much. Rather, while playing soft sections, they listen to the melodic leadership of the *rebab* (two-string spiked fiddle), and when playing loud sections, they rely on the *bonang barung* (a set of 10–14 small gongs horizontally mounted on a rack in two rows). Instruments such as *celempung* (zither), *suling* (flute), *gambang* (xylophone), and *gendèr* (thin metal keys mounted over tube resonators) perform what is generally referred to as “improvisation.”

Just as traditional constraints limit the shape, size, and tuning of the gamelan, preventing it from becoming an individual expression, they also restrict musicians from improvising wildly, and restrict composers from expressing personal feelings at will (with the notable exception of several experimental compositions in recent years). The same rules apply to other Javanese performing arts such as dance and theatre. Thus, performing artists do not express personal feelings, but, rather, perform their personal interpretations of the tradition.

Introduction

I wish to thank the Festival committee for bestowing on me the honor of presenting the keynote address at this auspicious event.¹ Except for my improved facility in the use of the English language, it would have been an easier task for me to write this paper in the 1960s, because then I was considered a gamelan expert. Mantle Hood defines an expert as “someone who knows something that nobody else

knows anything about.”² Things have certainly changed since the 1970s. During the last thirty years gamelan students and aficionados have put their efforts into serious studies of Indonesian music and its related arts, and they may be better equipped than I at articulating cross-cultural experience in gamelan. Furthermore, as one of my gamelan colleagues once wrote to me, the playing field has changed. Indeed it has come to the point where many gamelan musicians both in Java and abroad feel quite left out and inadequate as soon as they stop playing gamelan and start talking about it. Owing to the creation of a gamelan list-serve on the internet, it is difficult to find a subject which has not already been discussed through email. Information about gamelan has been distributed freely, revealing all the secrets that experts used to hold dear in order to maintain their status. Nevertheless, I may still be able to contribute something to this Festival by giving you an eyewitness account of the performing arts during the Indonesian revolution in the 1940s³ and the cultural evolution during the 1950s, and by sharing with you my earliest impressions of American culture. Although eyewitnesses are not always reliable, they can often provide corroborative material. And so that is my first goal today. My second goal is to share with you my cross-cultural experience of teaching Javanese tradition in the USA in the 1960s. I apologize if I am somewhat autobiographical, but this is my device to give credibility to my story.

I must say that, initially, the idea of teaching Javanese court music in Los Angeles, the city of John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, was so incongruous that it was mind boggling. Of course, I learned later that Los Angeles, as any metropolis, could afford to contain many different worlds simultaneously in the same city.

Early Years

I was born in a Moslem family where involvement with gamelan activities, which was often associated with poverty, was discouraged. But as fate would have it, in 1937, when I was three years old, our family relocated inside the one square kilometer castle of Sultan Hamengku Buwono VIII of Yogyakarta,⁴ where many commoners took up residence in their humble houses alongside aristocrats in their elegant mini-palaces. Our house was kitty-corner to Prince Hangabehi’s manor. Although he was the first born, Prince Hangabehi did not have the right to the throne of Yogyakarta because he was born of a concubine. Nevertheless, among the Yogyanese nobility, his wealth was perhaps second only to the Sultan himself. His *pendhapa*⁵ (pavilion) alone was over 600 square meters. In another hall he kept his own beautiful set of gamelan on which the finest musicians would play several times a week. He had five or six chests, each containing about 150 of the most intricately carved and meticulously painted wayang kulit,⁶ that rivaled the Sultan’s collection. In this hall special musical celebrations of the highest quality were staged, free of charge. Unlike in Bali, where gamelan is an

integral part of the life cycle, by the 1940s in Java, gamelan was already detached from day to day routine, and was considered irrelevant to the validation of ritual acts such as circumcision, marriage or funeral. In Java, the opportunity to learn gamelan or even simply to be exposed to gamelan performances was not as readily available to most children as it was in Bali. Living across the street from Prince Hangabehi’s estate then was indeed a distinct advantage for me, culturally speaking.

Even more fortunate for me, Prince Hangabehi leased a structure on the front section of his property to a Dutch radio station. The studio was wide open on one side so that one could listen to their recorded as well as live music broadcasts. It was from this studio that I saw and heard live performances of florid Qur’an readings⁷ on Fridays, Protestant choral groups on Sundays, jazz quartets, the royal brass band, popular *kroncong*,⁸ traditional Javanese opera (*langen mondoro wandoro*), traditional shadow puppet theater (*wayang kulit*), popular folk theater (*kethoprak*), Javanese sitcom shows (*dhagelan*), and *uyon-uyon*.⁹ I also had the opportunity to hear light classical Western music, opera arias, John Philips Sousa’s marches, as well as music from different parts of Indonesia on 78 rpm recordings. Later, during the Japanese occupation, we learned Japanese songs at school, although they were mostly *gunka* (war songs). Thus, although I was not born in a musical family, I was raised in musical surroundings. Unknowingly, I was introduced to a study of music, which about ten years later was dubbed “ethnomusicology.”

Additionally, my house was about 300 meters away from the Sultan’s palace where he staged the highest quality and most formal, almost ritualized, performances of Javanese music, Javanese wayang kulit and Javanese wayang wong¹⁰ (dance-drama). There was even music to accompany the Javanese honor guards as they marched for duty twice a day. At the beginning of the 1940s under the reign of Sultan Hamengku Buwono IX, the performing arts tradition of the royal court was still very much alive. The Sultan carried on the practices of his father from the previous decades, although with a little less splendor and expenditure. By the 1940s, unlike previously, dance-dramas lasted only about five hours rather than two to four days, and employed only 100–150, rather than the over 400 performers of earlier times.

During the actual dance-drama performances, the high ranking Javanese and European personages would have the best seats in the house, sitting comfortably next to the Sultan, receiving sumptuous refreshments before and during the performance. The only obstructions to their view were the pillars supporting the roof of the *pendhapa*, and the occasional passing of royal servants bringing refreshments. Those events were glamorous—if you happened to be an invited Caucasian guest or very high ranking Javanese official. No doubt this was the kind of show that the art historian Claire Holt¹¹ saw from a good vantage point. Native commoners, however, stood

about twenty meters away from the stage, separated by a sturdy bamboo fence. Male and female audiences were also separated from one another with another heavy bamboo fence, with the female side having a slightly better viewpoint than the male. From where I stood, as a short ten year old boy, it was like watching a show from the wings, twenty meters away.

Among performing artists there was a high level of professionalism in the sense that dancers were trained for specific roles, such as refined dancers, strong dancers,¹² and female characters. Dancers were chosen by their appearance, then trained to dance the appropriate character. It should be noted that in the Yogyanese wayang wong of that time, all roles were performed by male dancers. Dancers received monetary and other kinds of compensation, and the stakes were high—I knew of two artists each of whom was awarded one of the Sultan's daughters as a wife. Being sons-in-law of the Sultan meant they also received appropriate rank and salary, as well as places of residence commensurate with their new status. Short of this level of reward, a good performance might lead to advancement in rank in the royal service.

In the 1940s my location inside the castle was an excellent place to learn the context of the various levels of Javanese speech. We spoke Javanese in different modes according to whether it was with our friends, our elders and superiors, villagers, or with the "blue bloods." Our language reflected a highly stratified society, and reinforced that society's inequalities, a fact that did not sit well with the philosophy of a democracy. And so it was understandable that the forefathers of today's Republic of Indonesia, in spite of the fact that most of them were Javanese, rejected Javanese as the language of the new society, and chose, instead, a lingua franca based on the Malay language.¹³

Prince Hangabehi's gamelan was treated with great reverence, even though, having been made in the late 1930s, it was a "young" gamelan. Because children were not allowed to handle the instruments, all my early gamelan learning had been non-participatory.¹⁴ In fact, a traditional Javanese dance school, Krido Bekso Wiromo, was located about half a kilometer west of my house. It had been founded by two princes, Prince Tedjokusumo and Soerjodiningrat, who in 1918 decided to offer court dance to the public. They did not accept any student under ten years old; and anyway I felt too humble to presume to enroll in this dance school. In short, as a child, I was only a passive observer of Javanese traditional performing arts.

A historical shock took place when Yogyakarta was invaded by the Japanese Imperial army in 1942. The invasion was preceded by an attack by two Japanese bi-planes throwing grenades at the local munitions dump. There was no danger for anybody living further than a kilometer from ground zero. Upon the completion of the invasion of Yogyakarta, some of the dance and the musical

activities in the kraton¹⁵ were resumed in a more modest way. As the war went from bad to worse for the Japanese, the economic state of the royal palace became so grave that it could no longer afford its patronage of the performing arts. It was fortunate that the court arts of music and dance had already been introduced outside the walls of the kraton, where Javanese traditional performing arts now flourished among commoners.

My own opportunity to learn Javanese traditional dance did not come until 1946 during the Indonesian struggle for independence. My homeroom teacher told us to learn dancing as an extracurricular activity in order to refine our behavior. God knows, we needed it! The opportunity was such an honor. Because I was of small build and extremely trim, I was taught the *alus*, or refined, style of dance. When I was not dancing I learned the accompanying music by imitating the skeleton crew of gamelan musicians hired especially for the dance practice. This was how I learned to relate the music to the dance.

In 1947 as the Dutch reclaimed more and more of the Indonesian territory, refugees from different parts of Indonesia came to Yogyakarta, the provisional capital of the Republic of Indonesia. Yogyakarta became a metropolitan town. When the territory held by the newly proclaimed Republic of Indonesia was blockaded by the Dutch, the economic situation turned from bad to critical. Performing arts became one of the first casualties. Because people could not afford professional entertainment, they formed amateur gamelan groups instead—I use the word "amateur" here in the best sense of the word, meaning "one who loves." Prior to Indonesian Independence gamelan playing had been largely the domain of professionals. In Yogyakarta an important exception to this rule was the previously mentioned nationalist school that taught its students to play gamelan. As we struggled for our independence there was also a proud sentiment that gamelan art was a worthy heirloom from our ancestors, something that we must not abandon. Furthermore, many Javanese high school and college students loved gamelan activities, but they did not want to be professional, or, perhaps more accurately, to become musicians for hire. To paraphrase a great choral conductor, "gamelan, like sex, is far too important to be left to professionals."

Changing Times

On December 19, 1948, the Dutch assaulted Yogyakarta. They occupied the city for six months. During the occupation we were deprived of any kind of cultural activity, and there wasn't much that one could do for entertainment. No library was open that one could go to, no newspaper or magazine that one could read. To pass the time Prince Hangabehi, who had suffered from advanced diabetes and was technically blind, used to ask me to read aloud for him from some of his wayang story books, which were written in Javanese script. Considering that many young people of my age used Latin script exclusively and

lost the ability to read Javanese script, these experiences helped me maintain my facility and validated for me the importance of knowing Javanese script.

After the revolution in 1946, Prince Hangabehi became more generous with regard to the use of his palace and its facilities. Now he allowed people of our kampung¹⁶ to learn to play Javanese music on his excellent set of gamelan. Unfortunately, my first gamelan teacher was quite secretive with his knowledge, a rather common attitude in those days. For example, in a demeaning way he would discourage us from learning anything beyond pieces in simple structures, saying that anything more complicated might lead to insanity, as we stretched our intelligence beyond its capacity.

Most professional gamelan players were illiterate, as were most people were in those days. My criticism about professional gamelan players at that time was that too many of them lacked musical ambition and had the attitude of "Ngénee waé wis payu," meaning "It sells as is, so why improve on it." Many also had very lax attitudes towards drinking, gambling, and womanizing.

Amateurs, on the other hand, were by and large better educated, though possibly less musically talented. Being literate they could easily read cipher notation which helped them remember the pieces; but at the same time, this signified that they were non-professional. Nonetheless, these amateurs were vital to the maintenance and

nurturing of gamelan tradition up until the 1950s, when the government established academies for traditional music, adopting Western-styled approaches to education in the performing arts.

With the establishment of these new schools, and the formation of the Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI), gamelan orchestras the Government created excellent job opportunities for top-notch traditional musicians. The four RRI studios in the cities of Jakarta, Semarang, Surakarta and Yogyakarta hired over 120 Central Javanese gamelan players and vocalists. Javanese and Western musicians, folk drama actors, and comedians would audition to join the rank of performing artists of the RRI. By providing employment for these artists, the Indonesian government became a patron of the performing arts, a role that had formerly been the domain of the various royal courts.

Many of the leaders of this movement were actually successful professionals in other, non-arts fields, such as Ki Hajar Dewantara, educator and founder of Taman Siswa school. There was also Professor Dr. Sudarsono, a Professor of History at the Gadjah Mada University. He was the founder of the Akademi Seni Tari (ASTI)¹⁷ in Yogyakarta. Doctorandus Gendhon Humardani, an anatomist and lecturer at the Gadjah Mada University's Faculty of Medicine founded the Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia (ASKI)¹⁸ in Solo. Mr Suhartoyo, who was very

A gender lesson. From left: Mantle Hood, Norbert Ward (Susilo's English teacher), Hardjo Susilo.



active in the dhalang¹⁹ (puppeteer) organization became Government Under-Secretary of Human Resources and later Ambassador to the United Kingdom. In time, these newly established performing arts academies produced a new breed of artist-scholars, the professionals and creative forces who are the present day carriers of tradition.

In the USA the impetus for gamelan activities originated from gamelan musicians and scholars such as Mantle Hood, Lou Harrison,²⁰ Samuel Scripps²¹ and others. And to the many students of gamelan outside of Indonesia including many of you here this evening from different parts of the world, to you all, I say that I am eternally grateful for your help in perpetuating this beautiful traditional music.

New Perspectives

It was my encounter with Dr. Mantle Hood, then Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology at UCLA, that led me to my study at that University in 1958. My cross-cultural experience, however, began in 1955, when I met an American linguist, Norbert Ward, an amateur American folk singer who was doing research in Javanese language and who wanted to learn gamelan on the side. I was then a student at the Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, majoring in Western Literature, and a proud Javanese dancer and gamelan player, a dedicated amateur. Since I wanted to keep my involvement with the gamelan strictly non-professional, I thought I could be a much-in-demand high school English teacher in the day and a gamelan musician at night—I could have my cake and eat it too. And thus the exchange began with my American friend, Norbert, during which he taught me spoken English, I taught him spoken Javanese, he taught me American folk songs, and I taught him gamelan. By chance, at Norbert's house, I saw a book entitled *The Nuclear Theme as Determinant of Pathet in Javanese Music*.²² Its author was Mantle Hood and I thought, "Here is the book I have been looking for, one which could explain pathet, the Javanese musical mystery which had bothered me for too long." To the uninitiated, Javanese music can all sound the same, as does Western symphonic music to Javanese traditional musicians. By listening to the pathet, however, Javanese experts agree as to the subtle moods projected by different Javanese musical compositions, and thus are able to judge their appropriate placement in the context of a Javanese "concert" or theatrical presentation. My question was what is it in pathet that informed the experts to enable them to arrive at the same conclusion. Senior musicians could feel the pathet unerringly, but could not explain to me their thought processes. They told me that it was simply a matter of feeling. "If you cannot feel the difference, maybe it's because you are too young. Wait until you are old enough. If you still cannot distinguish one pathet from another probably you are lacking musical sensitivity." That kind of answer was simply not good enough for me. It was for this reason that Mantle Hood's book on pathet offered a great

deal of promise. Years later, after I learned how to read it, I realized that this book was able to give me some of the rational answers, but not all of the answers. To this day I still have not found a completely satisfying answer to the mystery of pathet, but the question no longer bothers me. Perhaps deep down I really want to keep it mysterious at some level.

In 1957, when Mantle Hood came to visit Krodo Bekso Wiromo, the dance school where I was then teaching, I decided to introduce myself. When I met him I was ready for a serious cross-cultural exchange. I don't know if I was one of those people who still had the mentality of former colonial subjects, or if I was overly sensitive and saw things that were not there, but I sensed that my acquaintance with Mantle Hood, a mature Caucasian professor with graying hair, was to open many doors. These were the doors to the gamelan conservatory, the palace library, to heads of villages, and to radio stations. This had never happened to me before. When I became his assistant and under his direction, I became acquainted with top-notch gamelan ensembles and gamelan teachers, opportunities that had not previously been available to me.

In the 1950s there was a gap between traditional artists and educated Javanese who could speak to the outside world in English. Typically, those who were versed

Dancing in the 1960s.



in traditional arts had very limited formal education, and those with formal education had little knowledge of traditional arts. Consequently, those with knowledge could not communicate beyond the traditional community, and those who could communicate with the outside world did not have the knowledge. An amateur such as myself was a useful bridge.

Realistically, I was glad to fulfill this function rather than striving to be the best *niyaga* (traditional Javanese gamelan musician) or the best dancer. Particularly, in regards to the latter, there was no way that I could be the most refined dancer, since even if I could have executed all the right movements, I had the wrong face for it. Javanese dancers, like actors, must learn to accept rejection when you are told that you are too young, too old, too short, too tall or—the one that hurts the most—not handsome enough! This is quite contrary to what we tell young people in America, that they can be anything that they want if they try hard enough. In Java you can learn any kind of dance you wish these days, as long as you pay for the lessons, but whether or not the public will accept your performance is a different matter. Even if your teacher let you play the role, an Indonesian audience will give you a hard time if you are physically unsuited to the role.

Prior to going to America I had been teaching first and second semester Javanese dance class at Krido Bekso Wiromo and was the musical director of two of their major productions. I had also been teaching gamelan at the teacher training school. I had six years of high school English, one year of college English and one year of private lessons in spoken English. My performance experience included the part of the evil king Rawana²³ in a Javanese dance opera revival, and the monkey priest Subali²⁴ in the Radio Republik Indonesia production. To make a long story short, Mantle Hood had a project that included the training of a Javanese musician in ethnomusicology. My formal and informal education qualified me to fill the slot. And at last I was to go to America to get training in ethnomusicology. To earn my keep I was to assist Mantle Hood by teaching gamelan and dance and help his research on Javanese performing arts.

Proudly I considered myself the best musician among dancers, the best dancer among musicians, and the best English speaker among dancer-musicians. However, my confidence in my ability to speak English was deflated almost immediately at the airport restaurant in Honolulu on my way to Los Angeles, when the waitress asked me, “How do you want your eggs?” Now what kind of question is that? Cooked, of course! What she wanted to know was whether I wanted them scrambled, over easy, or with the two yolks staring at me. Before this moment I hadn’t realized that it was insufficient to learn the language without learning about its culture. This uncomfortable moment wasn’t the last cross-cultural discomfort I was to endure. More of a similar kind were to follow.

America

I entered UCLA in the fall of 1958. Indonesia was a very young country, so that, understandably not too many educated people at UCLA knew where Indonesia was. Some thought I was from Indochina, a.k.a. Vietnam, some asked if Indonesia was part of Bali, and several times the immigration officers mistook me for an illegal alien from Mexico. Many Mexicans themselves were sure that I was a Mexican—in fact, one of them disliked me so much because he thought that I was a Mexican who had turned my back on my heritage by pretending not to speak Spanish, and “by putting on a phony accent.” To make things worse, my close friends called me by my nickname, “Sus.” When they called to me from a distance they would yell, “Hey Sus!”, which in Southern California suggested the Spanish name “Jesus.” I mused, “I am a Moslem. How could they think my name was Jesus?!”

But in retrospect, the culture shock I experienced in 1958 was mild compared to the shock that Americans experienced in the following decades. Anyone who was more socially aware than I was would have known that America was about to undergo a cultural revolution. Even an outsider like myself could see the beginning of change in the social and moral outlook of UCLA students when they elected Rafer Johnson, a Negro (as they referred to African-Americans at that time), to be the president of their student body. By 1958 the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)²⁵ had lost its fearsome power. The study of folk music of America and of any other parts of the world was no longer associated with a clandestine leftist movement. The moral code in Hollywood, too, began to break down; until the late 1950s Hollywood’s code of ethics prescribed that in a bedroom love scene one of the actor’s feet must be on the floor, but by 1960 one began to see love scenes in which all four of the couple’s feet were on the bed.

Socially it was a very interesting period. But my immediate concern had to be on how to make use of the one year that I had to get my training in ethnomusicology and to share my knowledge of gamelan with the UCLA gamelan study group. The time came one Wednesday evening for me to meet the members of the first gamelan study group in the USA.

It was so heartwarming to see 15 or so Americans, Dr. Hood’s friends and students, all of whom were interested in learning to play gamelan. I felt extremely honored that there were so many people interested in the music of my culture. I asked them to play the pieces that they knew. Using the notation copied from the Yogya palace manuscript they played “Gangsaran minggah Roning Tawang” and “Udan Mas.” But the performance was not like the Javanese gamelan performances I was used to. Out of respect I had never been critical of the content of such highly esteemed sources as palace manuscripts, nor disagreed with Jaap Kunst,²⁶ the “Granddaddy” of Javanese music studies. But the blatant discrepancies between what was written and the way Javanese musicians performed the pieces persuaded me to look at Javanese written sources more critically.

Improvisation in Gamelan

At that time Javanese gamelan notation was less than one hundred years old. It had not had time to develop into a system that was accurate, consistent and truly representative of performance practice. Once I heard a government official admonishing his subordinate. So strong was the desire to be “modern” and to employ musical notation, I overheard him say, “Don’t play that kind of complicated pattern! It is too difficult to notate!” Obviously the bureaucrat was no musician. Because they are not tied down by notation, Javanese musicians are at liberty to make spontaneous musical changes, to elaborate, and improvise before or even during the course of the performance. I must go into more depth here about that illusive word “improvisation,” which is often equated with freedom in the sense of “doing anything you want.”

As part of my introduction to Western music at UCLA I participated in the Music Department’s chamber singers group, which was directed by Ms. Sally Terri. One day, to have a little fun with the type of music that we were singing, she directed each of us to improvise one by one in a continuous fashion. Without prior agreement the first three students improvised in the style of Renaissance music, filled with “tra-la-la-las.” But when she pointed her finger to one of the “cool” members of the group, he blurted out an elaborate jazz scat. The whole class broke out laughing, and the improvisation session abruptly halted. Afterwards I tried to figure out exactly why that had been so funny. I came to the conclusion that it was funny because it was incongruous; it was like a lady in an elegant wedding dress topped with a baseball cap. It dawned on me that improvisation, as composition, was not really “free.” The musical phrases should adhere to a predetermined style, by using only idioms acceptable in that style. This was the problem with the gamelan “improvisation” as played by early members of the UCLA study group. It was not in the style of Javanese music, as it didn’t use Javanese music idioms. That was why their “improvisation” sounded wrong to me.

My composition professor at UCLA, Colin McPhee,²⁷ was fascinated by Balinese music. He had lived in Bali for many years, and had composed several Balinese-sounding works. For one of his assignments he gave me a made-up musical scale on which to base my melody. He further instructed me to use only piano and cymbals. Other than that, I was free to do anything I wanted. My composition was forgettable, but I remember the lesson well, namely, that composition, like improvisation, requires idiomatic consistency. The freedom that we should have was largely a freedom to set our own limitations. I find this to be true in whatever music one is dealing with.

Mantle Hood’s post-doctoral research in Java focused on the nature of improvisation in Javanese gamelan. Although at that time I didn’t understand what he meant, he was interested in the freedom, individualism and creative process of improvisation in gamelan. He was, I

guess, fascinated by the variation from one performance to the next vis-à-vis the fixedness of Western art music. For his research in the early 1950s, he went to the then seven-year-old conservatory of traditional music (*Konservatori Karawitan*).²⁸ At that time the teaching staff were infatuated with the discipline of Western performance practice. They were fascinated by the way the violin section of Western orchestra could play intricate melodies in total unison of bow movement; they were envious of the notational literacy that was demanded of Western musicians and they admired the rigor of the Western musical system. Ki Tjokrowasito, one of the conservatory teachers and the director of the Radio Republic Indonesia Yogyakarta gamelan “orchestra,” led a gamelan performance in which he experimented with the use of three rebab players, all playing the same melody and with unified bowing. On another occasion he used two *gènder barung*, both of which were playing exactly the same part. It seemed as if Mantle Hood was searching for something that the conservatory was attempting to abandon (fortunately unsuccessfully, I might note).

At the *Konservatori*, students were taught melodic or rhythmic patterns called *céngkok*.²⁹ Studying *céngkok* was an efficient way of learning parts for the elaborating instruments³⁰ in a gamelan ensemble. But *céngkok* became problematic when they were simplified and fixed, and when students were expected to play them as written, or risk failing the course. In practice, no Javanese musician worth his salt would have been caught dead playing most of the *céngkok* as prescribed by some of the *Konservatori* teachers at that time, without being allowed to vary them. Of course Mantle Hood rightly rejected these patterns as improvisation. Fixed improvisation would be a contradiction in terms. In order to better study Javanese improvisation he recorded top musicians, singly, to document how they actually played.

My job at UCLA, in addition to teaching gamelan, was to transcribe these recordings. I was convinced then that the Javanese notation system was not nearly as sophisticated as its performance practice. Some of the performances, such as Ki Pontjopangrawit’s rebab playing, were far too complex to transcribe. There was too much detail, which the notation system could not represent. When we fed the data into Charles Seeger’s³¹ melograph, a machine that could transcribe single melodic events in great detail, we encountered a different problem. Because the machine was extremely sensitive it gave out too much detail in the transcription. It showed all sorts of microtones that hampered our attempt to find melodic patterns. We saw too many trees; we missed the forest.

I concluded later that the Javanese “improvisation” was not like what the *Konservatori* prescribed, nor was it as free as Mantle Hood might have thought. Authentic improvisation is on-the-spot variations on *céngkok* that Javanese musicians deem appropriate for various instruments, in consideration of the tempo and the character of the piece. Certain individuals may standardize their own versions of the various patterns.

For example, in the course of a performance he might play the same way he had previously, or he might invent a new one. In general, musicians don't make specific plans on how they are going to realize or execute the *céngkok* in a given composition in a given performance. Perhaps it is analogous to a pianist in a popular music idiom who does not predetermine how he is going to realize a chord progression as he plays it.

There is no Javanese word that exactly translates as "improvisation." There is *kembangan* or *sekaran*, which mean "flowery elaboration." There is the term *isèn-isèn*, which means "appropriate filler." *Ngambang*, literally "floating," refers to filling in without knowing where the music is going, while *sambang rapet* means "reacting to," i.e. keeping a tight ensemble, covering up, or recovering from mistakes. *Ngawur* is filling in with incongruous or unrelated material; in other words, "to blunder." A musician's "improvisation" preferably is of the *sekaran*, *kembangan* or *isèn-isèn* type; he should know *ngambang* or *sambang rapet* if necessary, but never play *ngawur*!

Most serious students of Javanese music today use prescribed *céngkok* as the basis of their *kembangan* or *isèn-isèn*. They memorize and internalize these *céngkok* so that they can recall these musical patterns, alter them, or elaborate them in the course of a performance. Unlike in some other musical traditions, Javanese musicians playing elaborating instruments may be required to play, regardless of whether they are inspired or not. This repertoire of memorized patterns comes in handy during uninspired moments or when the musician is half asleep, as when playing in an all-night *wayang kulit* show.

To facilitate learning, many drum *céngkok* are given the names of the dance motives for which they are played. Thus we have *céngkok lampah tiga*, *pilesan*, *ngaplak*, *magak*, *kicat*, etc. In *gendèran* the names of the patterns often refer to the parts of a well known lyric for which the *céngkok* would be used; for example: *kascaryan*, *tumurun*; or vocal interjection such as *dua lolo*, *ayu kuning*, *éla-éla*. They may be onomatopoeic, such as *thunak-thuning*; or they may be an off-the-wall term, such as *puthut gelut* ("wrestling disciple"). It seems that the *céngkok* of *kendhangan*³² and *gendèran*³³ have received a greater degree prescription and codification than the *céngkok* of other instruments such as *gambang*,³⁴ *celempung*,³⁵ and *rebab*.³⁶

There were other innovations in the early 1950s. One that was considered quite challenging was a gamelan composition by R.C. Hardjosubroto (no relation to Hardja Susilo!). In July 1952, he introduced, for the first time, triple meter into a Javanese gamelan piece, an "operetta" entitled "*Langen Sekar: Gendhing – Gendhing Lampah tiga*" (*Langen Sekar: Pieces in triple meter*). The work was performed in January 1954. Ki Hardjosubroto was not a practicing performer, and so, while he composed the songs and the lyrics, the instrumental realization, the "orchestration," was entirely left to the creativity of the accompanying musicians. Like most of his compositions, this "operetta" was intended for children. To date, this piece still presents a serious challenge to professional musicians; only a few of them are capable of providing a decent instrumental realization of Ki Hardjosubroto's "gamelan waltz."



Susilo assisting Mantle Hood (standing) with a Balinese gamelan rehearsal.

Ki Hardjosoebroto was a devout Catholic. To express pride in his Javanese heritage and his religious devotion, he composed a Catholic Mass: Sanctus, Agnus Dei, Gloria, etc., using the pélog³⁷ tuning system of Central Javanese gamelan. Javanese has its own style of vocal polyphony, such as when the *pesindhèn* (female soloist), *gérong* (male chorus) and the *dhalang* (puppeteer-narrator of traditional theater) are singing simultaneously. But in his compositions Ki Hardjosubroto went outside this tradition, using a style, closer, I think, to European Renaissance polyphony.

Uyon-Uyon or Klenèngan

In Java the presentation of gamelan music for listening pleasure is called *uyon-uyon* or *klenèngan*. Taking four to five hours, the event is sponsored by an individual, a family, an organization, or an institution. The sponsor is responsible for supplying the gamelan, hiring of musicians, providing refreshments and everything else connected with the presentation. Guests are invited free of charge. Usually the event is an adjunct to an auspicious occasion, a circumcision, for example, or a wedding, or other celebratory event. There are no program notes, since the pieces and the order in which they will be played are not normally predetermined.³⁸

Javanese musicians, unlike Western musicians, do not bring their own instruments to the site of the performance; they expect the sponsor of the event to provide them. Since

there is no standard tuning between sets of gamelan,³⁹ musicians bringing their own instruments would certainly guarantee chaos, not to mention the great hardship for gong players, most of whom could never afford their own vehicles with which to transport such large instruments.

Uyon-uyon is a concept quite different from the Western idea of a concert. At the American universities where I have had the pleasure of being a visiting instructor, gamelan organizations present concerts rather than uyon-uyon.⁴⁰ There is something exciting about a concert: the house lights go down, stage lights come up, a moment of waiting, of tension, the adrenaline is pumping, the conductor enters, the audience bursts into applause. Presented in this way, a routine gamelan performance becomes a very special event. It is like a hamburger served on a silver platter. It tastes the same, but it looks more elegant!

There are other niceties Western musicians experience in a concert that are absent in a Javanese uyon-uyon, namely that the audience shows its appreciation by applauding at the end of every piece and at the end of the concert. When I returned to Java and played with a professional wayang wong company, the audience began to trickle out as soon as they knew that the end was coming. By the conclusion of the show, at the last stroke of the gong, there was literally not one person left in the house to show their appreciation. Even the gong player began to stand up before the music was finished, and hit the last stroke as he stepped out of

A newspaper article about the gamelan group at the University of Hawai'i, Manoa. Susilo is playing rebab.



Members of the University of Hawai'i Gamelan Ensemble, under the direction of Professor Hardja Susilo, are featured in a Culture Learning Institute video production producing Javanese music and related arts. This half-hour color presentation, written by research interns Ruth Vasey and Byron Moon, is currently in the final editing phase. When completed, the tape will be shown to high school and adult audiences. Not intended only for music and Indonesian studies specialists, this presentation attempts to explain the logic and beauty behind a unique artistic tradition, and possibly engender greater understanding for the culture and people who created the art. For

the workspace. Having got used to hearing applause over the last quarter century, not having an audible audience response at the end of the show was quite a letdown! I had not realized how westernized I had become.

The introduction of gamelan in America has led to a new kind of gamelan concert, which is different from *uyon-uyon* in several ways. My first experience of a westernized gamelan concert was at UCLA under the direction of Professor Mantle Hood. That night the gamelan was arranged in tiers showing the shapes of the instruments more distinctly. The curtain was open when the audience arrived, and the house lights dim. Golden lighting gently illuminated the shiny bronze keys and gongs mounted on elegant frames, making them look like King Solomon's mines. The audience gasped as they entered the house. The student musicians, ready in the wings, had donned formal Yogyanese palace official dress—batik wrap—around, a blue high collar, a long sleeve *pranakan*⁴¹ top, a *samir* neck-cloth with golden fringes at the ends, and the Yogyanese *blankon*, a ready-made batik headband. The ladies wore batik skirts, a long batik cloth was wrapped around their chest, with a *samir* neck-cloth. I made sure that each costume fitted well. They looked elegant. The lights of the house were gradually faded out, synchronized with the brightening of the stage lights. How we entered the stage was carefully choreographed, so that when signaled, we were all in place in less than a minute. The audience applauded wildly. We began. It didn't matter what we played or how we played it; we had already won over the audience.

I was very impressed. What was strange to me, however, was that during and after the concert not one pot of tea was available to the performers. In Java, when we played gamelan, even during the rehearsal, there was always tea, and sometimes a snack. At traditional *uyon-uyon* the musicians were always provided with dinner or supper. But here I was in the richest country in the world; we played gamelan, but there was not even one cup of tea! It seemed so uncivilized to me. Perhaps my expectation was due to the fact that gamelan performances in Java were usually associated with celebrations. Of course in that context there was always plenty of food and beverage for all.

Today student gamelan concerts in America, and perhaps elsewhere, often follow the same practice as at UCLA, where musicians usually shift to another instrument after each piece. The rationale for this is to give everyone the opportunity to play various instruments—after all, don't Javanese musicians traditionally play more than one instrument? Yes they do. However, unless there is an emergency, they don't perform on different instruments during the same night. This westernized practice seemed rather harmless, so I let it be, until a couple of years ago, when it became impractical in a lengthy dance drama and an all-night *wayang kulit*—obviously one cannot stop the drama to give the opportunity for the musicians to swap places. Now, as much as possible, I try to keep the same person on the same instrument at least until an intermission.

There is tacit agreement among gamelan teachers

that students should learn particular instruments before moving on to learn another, to play a certain class of compositions before trying to tackle another. The rules are not fixed, but are voluntary. For example, students should learn to play *saron* before learning to play *bonang*, to play *kenong* before learning to play *rebab*, and to play *Pangkur*, before learning such pieces as *Bondhan Kinanthi*. Abroad, however, a teacher is often expected to present a concert after only teaching the students for a semester. Sometimes the pressure comes from the teachers themselves who are anxious to show the result of their work. Javanese institutions do not expect students to perform after only learning instruments for a semester. The presumed ability of the gamelan students in the West to give a concert after such a short acquaintance with the tradition often leads to the belief that there is not much to learn in Javanese music. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I remember the time at UCLA when we were preparing to give a concert of Balinese music and we only knew two pieces. Some of the students did not even remember the names of the pieces. They just knew that one was *Baris*,⁴² and the other one wasn't! Of course we were not ready to give a public performance. The concert was postponed for one year.

I can understand the need of a different *modus operandi* for teaching gamelan and preparing concerts in America vis-à-vis performances in Java. In the context of gamelan study at the university, if students began their gamelan lessons when they were sophomores, they should have their first concert just before their graduation, if we followed the normal university schedule. I plead guilty of transgression myself—in my attempt to attract students I would whip up a concert after students had only been playing the music for three weeks. I once taught a student *bonang* (an instrument that should be taught in the second year) in the first semester, because he had a long pair of hands to reach all the gongs. I taught another student to play *rebab*, because she played violin. Although technically violin is a great deal more challenging, musically it does not prepare a student to play a leading role in a gamelan ensemble, anymore than the ability to play drum-set would prepare a student to play Javanese drum and direct a gamelan “orchestra.” But even in Indonesia these old unwritten rules are broken these days, because music is becoming more and more commoditized. One can learn practically any piece on any instrument if one is willing to pay the teacher to teach it.

Conclusion

At this point I have taught gamelan in America for more than 45 years. Throughout this time I have been enriched by my experiences and I hope my students have also benefited from learning the music of another culture. My two-year ethnomusicology training, which began in 1958, has been extended forty plus years. My knowledge of gamelan gave me a good job at the University of Hawaii,

a job that has allowed me to develop my musical curiosity, to study and teach World Music, and to have the most rewarding cross-cultural experiences. But even more than that, my acquaintance with the West had helped me find my kindred spirits worldwide, a pleasure impossible to imagine in my childhood fantasies.

Let me conclude with this. As an outsider, I could not have entered American culture without someone from the inside letting me in. I think it is only proper to close with an expression of eternal gratitude to Professor Mantle Hood, to Professor Barbara Smith,⁴³ and Professor Ricardo Trimillos,⁴⁴ who have allowed me to come in to their culture, and have enriched my life in more ways than they could ever imagine. ▀

Notes

1. Pak Hardja Susilo was invited to present the opening address for the BEAT Gamelan Festival in recognition of his important role as a teacher and performer of in gamelan and dance in the West. He was the first professional practitioner of Indonesian performing arts to take up residence in the United States. Susilo was born in 1934 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Mantle Hood invited him to California in 1958 to study and teach at UCLA; he graduated with an M.A. in Ethnomusicology in 1967. Susilo was appointed to the music staff of the University of Hawaii in 1970, and taught there until his retirement in 2000. He received an *Hadiah Seni* in 1993, an award from the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture for “extraordinary achievement” in the field of *karawitan* (traditional music and its related arts). [—ed.]

2. American Ki Mantle Hood (1918–2005) established a program in Ethnomusicology at UCLA in 1961 in which students were encouraged to develop “bi-musicality,” or competence in the performance of more than one musical tradition.

3. An independent Indonesia was proclaimed by Sukarno on 17 August 1945. The Dutch relinquished sovereignty to the new Indonesian Republic in December 1949.

4. The city-state of Yogyakarta is a leading center of Javanese culture. The court was established there in 1755 by Prince Mankgubumi, who adopted the title of Hamengku Buwono.

5. A raised platform supporting a roof, open on all sides, used for cultural performances, and ceremonies, such as receiving important guests.

6. Shadow puppets, carved from buffalo hide and intricately painted. The term *wayang kulit* applies both to the puppets and to the performance genre.

7. Readings from the *Koran*, the Holy Book of Islam. Although to non-Moslem ears these recitations sound superbly “musical”, Moslems regard them neither as music nor as singing. Rather, the vocalization of the sacred texts is considered an act of devotion, both for the reciter and the listener.

8. An acculturated musical genre, using an ensemble of western instruments—ideally a guitar, two ukuleles,

violoncello, flute, violin—to accompany a singer, singing in a style that to Western ears is unabashedly sentimental.

9. Gamelan performances for listening pleasure.

10. A form of Javanese theatre in which the performers are required to both sing and dance. The style of physical movement is based on that of wayang kulit puppets, hence the term which means “human puppets.”

11. American ethnographer (1901–1970) who visited Indonesia in the 1930s. Author of *Art in Indonesia*.

12. Javanese court dance defines two types of male characters: *alus*, meaning refined, and *gagah* meaning forceful and strong. Although they share the same basic repertoire of movements, they are distinguished by different performance dynamics.

13. Known today as Bahasa Indonesia, it is closest to the Malay spoken in Riau Province, Sumatra.

14. Later in life, I learned that *Taman Siswa*, a non-governmental school that provided excellent education to commoners, was only four kilometers away. It had been founded by the great nationalist educator, Ki Hadjar Dewantara, in 1922. The curriculum included traditional music and dance, but my parents could not have afforded to send me to that school. Instead, they sent me to a Sultanate school where the fee was only a dime a month, a nickel for the second child.

15. Royal palace.

16. A “quasi-village” unit in a town, demarcated by streets or natural boundaries.

17. Academy of Dance.

18. Academy of Performing Arts.

19. Puppet master of wayang kulit, or, sometimes, the narrator in other traditional theatre forms.

20. An American composer (1917–2003) who, with his partner Bill Colvig, designed and built an “American gamelan.” Harrison also composed many works for gamelan, including concertos for Western soloists with gamelan accompaniment.

21. Founder of the American Society for Eastern Arts, an important center for world music studies in California in the 1960s and 1970s.

22. Hood’s doctoral thesis, published in 1954.

23. From the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*.

24. Ibid.

25. In the early 1950s the House UnAmerican Activity Committee (HUAC) victimized and black-listed many public figures, including actors, musicians and playwrights, for their alleged left-wing views.

26. Dutch ethnomusicologist (1883–1965), author of *Music of Java* (2 Vols., 1949).

27. American composer (1900–1964), author of *Music in Bali*. 1966.

28. Music conservatory for traditional music for high school aged students.

29. Melodic patterns, played by the elaborating instruments of the gamelan, to elaborate upon and link together the notes of the slower moving basic melody, the *balungan*.

30. Including the *rebab* (spiked fiddle), the *gambang* (xylophone) and the *gènder* (metallophone).
31. American musicologist (1886–1979) who worked at UCLA 1957–61. A collection of his writings, *Studies in Musicology 1935–1975*, was published in 1984.
32. Double-headed drum that is laid horizontally on a wooden frame strung with leather straps.
33. Metallophone with metal slabs (bronze or iron) suspended horizontally over vertical tube resonators.
34. Xylophone with wooden keys resting on a box resonator.
35. Plucked zither.
36. Two-stringed spiked fiddle.
37. A seven tone system of intonation. A second system, of five tones, is called *slèndro*. A Javanese gamelan generally comprises two sets of instruments, one set tuned to *pélog*, and the other to *slèndro*.
38. Uyon-uyon for radio broadcast are, of necessity, planned, since they must fit within a given time slot.
39. One might have expected that the court gamelan tuning would be a logical standard. But in the old days, tradition discouraged, if not prohibited, the copying of the tuning of the royal court gamelan by commoners—doing so would have been regarded as elevating oneself to the same level as the royal court.
40. Under my direction, the University of Hawaii students presented the first public gamelan concert performed by non-Javanese at the princely house of Purwodiningratan, in Yogyakarta, in August of 1973. It was an exceptional event.
41. The Yogyanese royal court cotton jacket, in dark blue or other dark color, with long sleeves, and high collar.
42. A classical warrior dance of Bali, sometimes performed by a solo dancer, sometimes by massed dancers.
43. The founder of the Ethnomusicology program at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Many of her former students have become prominent scholars in the field.
44. Professor in Ethnomusicology at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, a specialist in Hawaiian music and dance, and the music of Moslem groups in the Southern Philippines.

Photographs contributed by Ken Susilo.