

BOOK REVIEW

by Kent Devereaux

Aesthetic Tradition and Cultural Transition in Java and Bali
Stephanie Morgan and Laurie Jo Sears, editors
Madison: University of Wisconsin, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Monograph 2, 1984. 312 pages.

While *Aesthetic Tradition ...* contains several papers that should be of interest to gamelan practitioners, this anthology covers a lot of other ground as well — from linguistics, as in Ellen Rafferty's "Linguistic Acculturation of the Chinese in Java," to many of the performing arts, as in F.X. Widaryanto's "Teaching Javanese Dance: Lessons from an American Journey." Precisely because of the wide range of subjects covered, all of the articles will not be of interest to everyone. Also, despite the title of the work — or perhaps in deference to it — only one article on Bali was included: Mary Zurbuchen's "Contexts and Choices: Spoken Indonesian in Bali," giving the collection a predominantly Javanese orientation.

The articles in *Aesthetic Tradition ...* are divided into three sections, subtitled "Performance in History," "Culture in Performance," and "Presented Identities." "Performance in History" covers the historical sources, tradition, and transmission of texts employed in traditional Javanese performing arts. This section begins with Sears' look at the historical journey of the Mahabharata and Ramayana from India to Java over a thousand years ago. Sears, presently involved in compiling a collection of wayang lakon [stories] in Central Java, is aptly qualified to trace the transmission of the Indian epics to Java. Her article, as she states, "suggests that Indian aesthetic theory may have influenced the tastes of the Javanese elite and may have been incorporated along with the epic stories that have formed the basis of Javanese, Balinese, and other Southeast Asian performing arts." She outlines differences in various Javanese versions of the epics and traces their incorporation into Javanese art forms.

Valerie Mau Vetter, in her article "In Search of Panji," explores the influence of the tales of the legendary Javanese hero Panji in Indonesian literature and performing arts. She presents a clear, concise introduction to the role of the Panji cycle in Javanese society for those readers unfamiliar with either William Rassers' dissertation or his book *Panji: The Culture Hero*. (1959) However, whereas Rassers employs the Panji cycle as a vehicle for understanding Malaysian society in the broadest sense, Vetter traces the historical sources and present day influence of the tales with a specific focus on both the performing and plastic arts in Java.

In Peggy Choy's paper "Texts Throughout Time: The Golek Dance of Java," which concludes the first group of essays, the historical lineage and contemporary use of text in a specific dance genre is analyzed to clarify meaning within that genre. Choy traces the historical roots of Golek from the "klana dance genre" and the "tledhek" tradition to its present form.

"Culture in Performance," the second group of articles, will be particularly useful to those interested in Javanese gamelan and performing arts. Roger Vetter's "Poetic, Musical, and Dramatic Structures in a Langen Mandra Wanara Performance," is especially good. Vetter analyzes this Javanese music theater form, relatively unknown in the United States compared to wayang kulit [shadow puppet theater], using a specific recorded performance (Java "Langen Mandra Wanara" Opera de Danurejo VII, Ocora Records 558 507/9 [available in the U.S.]). The analytical depth of the article, as well as his personal observations, make interesting reading.

"Wayang Wong Panggung: Its Social Context, Technique and Music" by Harja Susilo is also particularly good as a general introduction to the music and social context of this Javanese dance form. Sumarsam's "Gamelan Music and the Javanese Wayang Kulit" is a short paper (seven pages) that provides a general survey of wayang kulit.

Joan Suyenaga's article "Patterns in Process: Java Through Gamelan" could have more fully developed its interesting premise — that Javanese society and cultural behavior are patterned in the same way as the music itself is structured. A thorough analysis of the music, employed as a tool to understand particular patterning endemic to the civilization, might yield useful insights into that culture. A major portion of this paper, however, is devoted to a basic summary of gamelan and its instrumental functions, an explanation that might not be necessary for an already informed audience.

In the last group of essays, "Presented Identities," the article of most interest to members of the gamelan community will be R. Anderson Sutton's "Change and Ambiguity: Gamelan style and Regional Identity in Yogyakarta." Sutton explores the social and political factors behind the need to establish and maintain a truly "Yogyanese" style of gamelan music in the city of Yogyakarta, Central Java. His article makes interesting reading and clarifies several points in relationship to the difference between "Yogya" and "Solo" style gamelan. In another recent article, "Musical Pluralism in Java: Three Local Traditions" (1985), Sutton provided many concrete examples of the several musical styles he was discussing. A similar approach might have made the article in this anthology even more valuable to gamelan musicians.

On the whole, *Aesthetic Tradition and Cultural Transition in Java and Bali* provides the reader with an interesting, if uneven, set of articles covering a wide variety of topics in Javanese performing arts and culture. Sears says in her introduction that the value of this kind of anthology "lies in its multiplicity of viewpoints presented." This multiplicity, however, also presents certain problems. Some of the articles chosen for inclusion were previously published or prepared for specific conferences. In several cases, they are addressed to a specialized audience, and assume knowledge of specific terminologies. In other cases, general descriptions which might have been useful in another situation are less relevant in the overall context of this anthology.

The editors and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin are to be commended for their significant efforts in bringing this work to publication. This volume will be a useful and interesting resource to students of Indonesian culture, and we look forward to future collections.

References

- Rassers, W.H.
1959 *Panji the Culture Hero: A structural Study of Religion in Java*. The Hague: M. Nijhoff
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1985 "Musical Pluralism in Java: Three Local Traditions". *Ethnomusicology* (Winter) 29(1):56-85.

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