

An introduction to the musical traditions of Cirebon

by Richard North

It is becoming increasingly clear that Javanese culture is not a monolithic entity, but exists in many forms and regional styles. One particularly interesting center of this rich and multifaceted culture is Cirebon,¹ an ancient sultanate on the north coast near the border of Central and West Java. Cirebon today is a port town of about 350,000 people and is known mainly for its royal courts, unique style of batik cloth, and sacred shrines. It is located in the Indonesian province of West Java, populated predominantly by ethnic Sundanese.

Cirebon gamelan: Sundanese or Javanese?

Is Cirebon culturally a part of Sunda? The popular assumption seems to be that Cirebon and Sunda are somehow synonymous. In actuality, this assumption is false. Although Cirebon is found in the province of West Java, political boundaries do not necessarily reflect cultural or ethnic regions. Cirebon is not culturally a part of Sunda. The people of Cirebon are ethnically Javanese, and refer to themselves as *wong Jawa* (Javanese people). The first words sung by the *sindhèn* (solo female vocalist) in a Cirebon gamelan performance typically are:

*Wilujeng, wilujeng képanjang maning, seni swara kejawèn asli.*²

"Greetings, welcome as we meet again, to this performance of genuine Javanese music."

Clearly, then, the people of Cirebon view their art and culture as Javanese, not Sundanese. The Sundanese, on the other hand, view Cirebon-style gamelan as something quite foreign to their culture, saying that they really don't understand "gamelan Jawa."

Interestingly enough, Central Javanese regard Cirebon culture as equally foreign to them. For initiated listeners, the musical traditions of Cirebon and Central Java are obviously different. The Central Javanese listener has a hard time accepting such an utterly foreign style of music as part of their Javanese heritage and tends to lump together the two "foreign" musical traditions of Sunda and Cirebon that share the same political province but have otherwise very little else in common. What, then, is the basis of Cirebon's Javanese identity?

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Historical background

The history of the Javanese is a history of successive waves of culture brought to Java's shores from across the sea and the ingenious blending of these foreign cultural influences with indigenous elements. Each era borrows, adapts and builds upon the culture of the previous cultural "wave." In the ninth century Buddhism and Javanese culture combined to build the world's largest Buddhist temple, Borobudur, in Central Java. In the tenth through the fifteenth centuries a Hindu-Javanese blend with distinct Buddhist elements produced the court cultures of Majapahit in East Java and Pajajaran in West Java. And in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the *pasisir* (north coast) kingdoms produced a synthesis of Muslim and Hindu-Javanese culture, that included Cirebon as a major capital. In following centuries the Muslim dynasties of Central Java adapted certain aspects of north coast culture and blended them with new elements, producing the rich court culture of Yogyakarta and Surakarta (Pigeaud 1976:8-9 and Wright 1978:13-14).

Cirebon was originally settled by immigrants from the East Javanese kingdom of Kediri in the thirteenth century (Elliot 1984:76 and Abdurachman 1987:24), and, although the language of the southern border of the Cirebon region contains some Sundanese borrowings, a "recognizable Javanese" remains the lingua franca of Cirebon and the surrounding area to this day (Hatley 1984:6, 24; Abdurachman 1982:13). The immigrants brought the Javanese arts of gamelan, *wayang*, and *topèng* (masked dance) with them to their new homes (Elliot: 1984:76) and became the ancestors of the current residents of Cirebon, which might explain why certain aspects of the culture of Cirebon today more closely resemble those of old East Java than contemporary Central Java (Wright 1978:14).

The house of Cirebon was founded in c. 1378 by "a Muslim with strong Hindu ties," and became one of the dominant royal courts on the north coast (Elliot 1984:72,94). This makes Cirebon the oldest extant kingdom in Java.³ However, Cirebon came into its own as a cultural and political force under the leadership of Sunan Gunung Jati (reign 1479-1568) a Javanese ruler and mystic who was one of the *wali sanga*, or "nine saints," of Javanese Islam (Abdurachman 1982:19,33,64). This was an exciting and dynamic time—the "golden age" of the *pasisir* states (Siddique 1977:21)—reflected in the energetic and exuberant arts of Cirebon.

Due to the vicissitudes of history, the material fortunes of the sultans are greatly diminished today, but what remains is an outstanding legacy of Hindu and Muslim art forms from fifteenth century Java. Cirebon architecture, exemplified in its *kraton* (royal courts) and ancient mosques, preserves a style which closely resembles that of Hindu East Java. The arts of woodcarving and painting on glass feature dramatic blends of Hindu and Muslim motifs and portray Hindu deities, such as Shiva and Ganésa, whose bodies are completely filled with calligraphy from the *Koran*. The batik of Cirebon, famous for its *megamendung* (rain cloud) patterns, also depicts graphic cloth representations of mythological creatures, royal heirlooms, and wayang puppet figures permeated with mystical symbolism (Elliot 1984). Cirebon metal working, although now a lost art, created *keris* (ceremonial daggers) and gongs of rare beauty.

The link between Sundanese and Cirebonese gamelan

If the people of Cirebon are Javanese and not Sundanese, two questions immediately come to mind: First, why does their gamelan music sound so similar to Sundanese gamelan and, secondly, why is it so different from the music of Central Java?

The key to understanding the similarities between the gamelan of Cirebon and Sunda is once again the history of the kingdoms of Java. The arts of gamelan (of the *sléndro* and *pélog* type), wayang and topèng were imported from the northern plains of Cirebon to the southern mountains of Sunda, during the period when the royal courts of Cirebon held sway over Sunda (Pigeaud 1967:144, 225 and Foley 1979:24). As elsewhere in Java, gamelan sets were given to local aristocrats in Sunda and became symbols of their power and connection to the Javanese royal courts to the north.

The Sundanese, however, had a rich variety of indigenous forms of music long before the introduction of gamelan from their Javanese neighbors to the north. Two Sundanese gong ensembles, *rèntèng* and *degung*, are mentioned in Sundanese oral histories as far back as the

Hindu Era. The musical ensembles of *angklung* (Baier, 1986:8-16.), *kecapi suling*, *kendhang pencak*, *calung* and *kethuk tilu*, as well as the solo music of *kecapi badui*, *calung buhun*, *rengkong*, *tarawangsa*, *taleot*, and *bangsing*, attest to the rich heritage of indigenous musical forms in Sunda prior to the arrival of gamelan from the north coast of Java (Heins 1968; Soepandi 1976:4-33).

Old Dutch photographs from the early part of this century show gamelan sets in Sunda virtually identical to those found in Cirebon today (Kunst 1973:453-455). However, the decline in power of the Cirebon court, accelerated by Indonesian independence in 1945, led to the autonomous development of a completely new style of gamelan, shaped by the aesthetics and values of the Sundanese people. This resulted in the gamelan Sunda of today.

Distinguishing between Cirebonese and Sundanese gamelan

The gamelan styles of Sunda and Cirebon possess a number of traits in common. Both styles have a pair of interlocking *saron*, a single *kempul*, prominent drumming, and share certain structural similarities. However, a number of important differences make it easy to distinguish the two styles:

Instrumentation. A Cirebon gamelan may have more than twenty instruments, whereas eight musicians form a complete Sundanese gamelan. Absent from the Sundanese ensemble are eight instruments found in the Cirebonese gamelan: *gendèr*, *suling*, *kemanak* (hand-held slit bell), *klenang* (similar to the Central Javanese *kempyang*), *bèri* (floor cymbals), *gong sabet* (Central Java: *gong suwukan*), *bedhug*, and *kebluk* (a kind of low octave *kethuk*). The Cirebonese *titil* (CJ: *peking*), *kenong*, *jengglong* (one octave below kenong), *kethuk*, and *kemyang* (CJ: *bonang panerus*) are also extremely rare in Sunda. (See Figure 1.)

By contrast, a Sundanese gamelan typically consists of a *gong*, *kempul*, two *saron*, a *panerus* (CJ: *demung*), *bonang*, *gambang*, *kendhang*, and *rebab*. The *rebab*, so prominent in the Sundanese ensemble, is absent from the Cirebon gamelan.

TYPE	ERA	TUNING	FUNCTION
<i>Rèntèng</i>	Hindu	5-tone pélog	village and court celebrations
<i>Denggung</i>	Hindu	5-tone pélog	court ceremonies
<i>Sekatèn</i>	Hindu	7-tone pélog	court ceremonies
<i>Gamelan Prawa</i>	Muslim	5-tone sléndro	accompanying wayang purwa (shadow puppet theatre) and topèng (masked dances)
<i>Gamelan Pélog</i>	Muslim	7-tone pélog	accompanying wayang cepak (rod puppet theatre), bedhaya (classical dances), tayuban (social dances), and as lalagon (listening music)

Figure 1. Table of Cirebon Gong Ensembles

Tuning. A Sundanese *gamelan saléndro* (CJ: sléndro) is usually two full tones lower in pitch than its Cirebonese counterpart, the *gamelan prawa*. Seven-tone pélog gamelan sets, so popular in Cirebon, are now virtually non-existent in Sunda (except for old gamelan in museums or brought in from Cirebon). The Sundanese regard the indigenous five-tone *degung* as their equivalent of the Javanese gamelan pélog.

Style. Sundanese gamelan is often a lot livelier than the music of Cirebon. Fast, loud drumming and relatively short pieces have become increasingly popular in Sunda. While Cirebon music can also be rather loud and fast at times (especially the style used to accompany the village topèng masked dances), the music usually begins with a slow section (*dodoan*) that is very soft, peaceful and dreamlike. This slow *dodoan* section is rarely found in Sundanese gamelan today.

Vocal accompaniment. The *sindhèn* of Sunda traditionally has a more prominent role in gamelan music than her counterpart in Cirebon. In fact, there were no *sindhèn* in Cirebonese wayang until the 1950's. Sundanese *sindhèn* read their vocal text from a special song book, while Cirebon *sindhèn* sing extemporaneously, often commenting on the action of the wayang or *tayuban* (traditional all night gamelan and social dance party). In both Cirebon and Sunda the *nayaga* (instrumentalists) contribute vocally to the music with interlocking rhythmic syllables (*senggak*). In Cirebon, however, a special kind of *senggak* occurs, with the *nayaga* singing a unison melody from the gong to the first kenong when the music is in slow (*dodoan*) tempo. This "choral" *senggak*, somewhat resembling the *gérong* singing of Central Java, is an important part of the atmosphere of gamelan Cirebon as distinct from gamelan Sunda.

Although the very existence of sléndro-pélog gamelan in Sunda is due to influence from the north coast, this is not to imply that there has not been influence in the opposite direction. In recent years the flashy and popular Sundanese *jaipongan* drumming style and the virtuoso vocal style of the Sundanese *sindhèn* have begun to influence Cirebonese gamelan style. Thus, the north coast Javanese culture which originally brought gamelan to Sunda is in turn influenced by the music of the Sundanese in the present day. Yet despite these recent trends, the two styles of gamelan have remained quite distinct.

Cirebon and Central Java

As to the question of the great differences in style between the Javanese gamelan traditions of Cirebon and Central Java, the answer is a little more complex. The Central Javanese kingdom of Mataram (c. 1576-1746), ancestor of today's courts in Yogyakarta (1755) and Surakarta (1746), defeated the north coast states in the mid-seventeenth century (Pigeaud 1976:9-23). But even after the defeat of the north coast kingdoms, the royal families of Central Java frequently intermarried with members of the Cirebon court.

The daughter of the king of Cirebon married the famous Sultan Agung of Mataram, and a special relationship was established between the two Javanese courts that continues to this day. The Sultan arranged for artistic and spiritual advisors to be brought in from the older courts of Cirebon (Siddique 1977:26; Abdurachman 1982:50). And, it is considered probable by both Western and Indonesian musicologists that the musics of Cirebon and Mataram at this time were quite similar, if not identical (Wright 1978:17; Abdurachman 1982: 92). Indeed, museums in West Java contain gamelan sets given as gifts from the Mataram court virtually identical to the Cirebon gamelan of today.

After the death of Sultan Agung, a conscious effort was made to create a new court culture entirely separate from that of the north coast states (Elliot 1984:64). An exclusive style of gamelan developed under the guidance of the Sultan's royal palace musicians, evolving into the refined and elegant Central Javanese music that we know today (Abdurachman 1982:92). Cirebonese gamelan also doubtless experienced significant changes.

Wright, in his dissertation on Cirebonese music, suggests that the resulting "vastly different" gamelan traditions of Cirebon and Central Java are due in part to the relative wealth of the Central Javanese sultans during the colonial period that resulted in a "perfect atmosphere for artistic development." During this time "the Central Javanese enjoyed a veritable renaissance" (Wright 1978:15-16). Cirebon was not so fortunate. While the Central Javanese courts enjoyed lucrative financial support extracted through lease arrangements with the Dutch, the assets of the sultans of Cirebon were seized soon after the Dutch took control of Cirebon c. 1682. The resulting impoverishment of the Cirebon palaces was no doubt a factor in the relative lack of development of the Cirebon gamelan style since the seventeenth century (Wright 1978:16). Whether due to relative poverty, political isolation, or to the conservative influence of the kraton, Cirebon gamelan has retained certain traditions "which have apparently been preserved with little change up to the present time" (Wright 1978:17).

The old palace in Cirebon has "peacefully continued its sleepy existence from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries" (de Graaf and Pigeaud 1984:85). Over time Cirebon has managed to preserve a distinct regional style of music and art, giving it a sense of cultural identity within the broader context of Javanese culture. The very fact that two styles of Javanese gamelan, such as Cirebon and Central Java, could be so dissimilar only serves to demonstrate the richness and variety of the Javanese gamelan tradition.

Rèntèng

The gong ensembles of Cirebon can be divided into two groups: those from the Hindu period and those from the Muslim Era. The pre-Islamic orchestras feature a long, single-row *bonang* which resembles the Balinese *trompong*.

The ensembles are tuned to scales resembling Javanese pélog and include no "soft-style" instruments such as *gendèr*, *suling*, *rebab*, *gambang*, or voice.⁴ The Cirebonese differentiate between these ancient Hindu ensembles and gamelan proper. They contend (as Western musicologists such as Kunst and Heins also argue) that Javanese gamelan as it is known today—with its expanded instrumentation and tonal systems, a mixture of soft and loud-playing instruments, and "layered" polyphony—did not come into existence until the rise of the Islamic courts in Java during the sixteenth century (Kunst 1973:17,109,113; Heins 1977:31).

The first, and probably most ancient, of these Hindu Era gong ensembles is *rèntèng*. This boisterous and energetic music is played on long, single-row bonang with unpadded wooden sticks, and is accompanied by loud drums and crashing cymbals. It has been found throughout the villages of West Java since ancient times, both in the inland regions of Sunda, as well as in the Javanese-speaking coastal plains such as Cirebon and Banten. The music of *rèntèng* is loud, fast and syncopated, and is clearly the product of the village sphere. Even so, *rèntèng* is considered appropriate for certain palace festivities—an indication of the close relationship between court and village arts in Cirebon.

Denggung

The other two Hindu-era gong ensembles of Cirebon—known as *denggung* and *sekatèn*—are both sacred ritual orchestras and the exclusive province of the Cirebon kraton; they are reserved for ceremonial use by the sultans and their relations. *Denggung* was formerly the court music of the kingdom of Pajajaran, the last Hindu-Sundanese empire of West Java. Each of the three Cirebon kraton (Kasepuhan, Kanoman, and Kacerbonan) possesses a *denggung* set said to date back to the fifteenth century; the instruments were acquired when Pajajaran was conquered by the Cirebon forces led by Sunan Gunung Jati (c. 1527). Each is tuned to a five-tone pélog scale, and consists of a long, single-row bonang, one or two *saron*, a *kethuk*, and a set of small hanging gongs similar to *kempul*. The music is believed to have great supernatural power, and is played to ward off evil influences or, more often, to bring rain for the rice crop in times of drought.

Sekatèn

According to traditional accounts, the *sekatèn* of Cirebon was one of three such ensembles brought to the kraton of Banten, Cirebon, and Demak following the capture of the Hindu kingdom of Majapahit in East Java by the forces of the north coast states c. 1527.⁵ The *sekatèn* of Cirebon was divided between the kraton of Kasepuhan and Kanoman around 1662. The instruments are tuned to a seven-tone pélog scale, and consist of a long, single-row bonang, several *saron*, a *kethuk*, and a pair of huge gongs. As with the *rèntèng* and *denggung*, no soft-style instruments are present in the ensemble. *Sekatèn* is considered to be the most sacred and powerful music in all

of Cirebon, and is played to celebrate certain Islamic holidays such as Lebaran and Muludan.

Cirebon gamelan

The tradition of gamelan in Cirebon features a combination of loud-style and soft-style instruments that, according to local tradition, were blended to achieve an aesthetic in keeping with the cultural ideals of the newly emerged Muslim courts of Java's north coast in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In this way Javanese music was able to make the transition from Hindu ritual to art music suitable for the courts of the sultans. Retained were ancient instruments such as the *bèri*, the *kemanak*, and the ten-keyed *gendèr*, which closely resembles the instrument still used to accompany shadow plays in Hindu Bali today. The old style, single-row bonang was modified into the current double-row instrument, and soft, padded mallets were introduced. The instruments of the old loud-playing ensembles (gongs, *saron*, bonang, drums, and cymbals) were blended with the more delicate *gendèr*, *suling*, *rebab*, *gambang*, and voice to create an early form of the Javanese gamelan prominent today (Kunst 1973:113-114).

Cirebon gamelan, both in the courts and in the villages, is characterized by dynamic changes in tempo and vigorous drumming. The instruments are both smaller in size and fewer in number than their Central Javanese counterparts. Cirebon gamelan is noted for its great liveliness and exuberance and, although perhaps sounding less refined to the Central Javanese ear, can at times create an "ethereal other worldly" atmosphere (Wright 1978:272). Instrumentalists frequently contribute vocal parts to the music, both improvised melodic phrases and interlocking rhythmic calls known collectively as *senggak*. The gamelan bears numerous similarities to Balinese tradition, not entirely surprising since the music of Cirebon and Bali share a common source: Hindu East Java.

The gamelan of Cirebon are tuned to two systems that, as in Bali and Sunda, are differentiated both in terms of instrumentation and function. The gamelan *prawa* is tuned to the five-tone *prawa* scale, equivalent to the *sléndro* tuning of Central Java. Nowadays, its main function is the accompaniment of *wayang purwa*. However, an archaic variant of gamelan *prawa* still exists in some of the villages surrounding Cirebon and is used to accompany ritual *topèng* performances.

The *gamelan pélog* is tuned to the seven-tone pélog scale. It does not include the *gendèr* in its instrumentation, and it has two bonang rather than one as in the gamelan *prawa*. The instruments are usually larger and tuned in a lower range than those of the gamelan *prawa*, producing a more ponderous and, to the Cirebonese, a more mystical sound. Gamelan pélog is therefore considered more appropriate for *lalagon* (court listening music) and *bedhaya* (classical dances) than the light and cheerful gamelan *prawa* used for *wayang purwa* and *topèng*. However, Cirebonese gamelan pélog is also used in the courts and villages to

accompany the rather rowdy, all-night *tayuban*. In addition, the *wayang cepak* (rod puppet theater) developed on the north coast in the sixteenth century, requires the gamelan pélog as accompaniment. Rather than the Indian epics of the older shadow puppet theatre, *wayang cepak* depicts the legends and romances of Middle Eastern and Javanese kingdoms.⁶

Other musical genres

Beyond the rich and varied heritage of the Hindu Era gong ensembles and the Muslim Era gamelan orchestras, several other types of music deserve mention. *Angklung bungko* is the Cirebon version of the bamboo rattle ensemble found throughout Indonesia and Southeast Asia. The bamboo instruments are played with gongs and drums to accompany *kuda képang* (horse-spirit possession dances).

Tarling, a new genre of music developed in Cirebon in the 1940's, is an acronym for the ensemble composed of *gitar* (guitar) and *suling* (flute), as well as various combinations of gongs and drums. *Tarling* originated as a substitute for gamelan during the Indonesian war for independence, but has since become quite popular in its own right especially as accompaniment for *sandiwara* (dance dramas). The guitars are tuned to an approximation of the pélog scale, and produce a surprisingly convincing imitation of traditional Cirebon-style gamelan music.

Finally, *macapat*, Javanese tales, legends, and didactic verse composed in complex poetic metres, are sung throughout the island of Java. A very old type of *macapat* singing exists in Cirebon, where it is sung *a capella* in both court and village ceremonies (Foley 1985:7; Wright 1978:44).

This short survey mentions only some of the varied musical traditions of Cirebon—one of many Javanese cultural centers that have received only scant attention from musicologists. Recently in Indonesia there has been a resurgence of interest in "regional" Javanese gamelan styles. Perhaps this revival will allow Western students greater access to the many manifestations of Javanese gamelan and lead ultimately to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted culture of Java. ▀

Notes

1. Cirebon has been known throughout history by a bewildering variety of names: Caruban, Carbon, and Cerbon (Javanese), Cirebon (Sundanese), Cherimon (Portuguese), Tjeribon and Cheribon (Dutch). The official Indonesian name is Cirebon, although the Javanese name "Cerbon" is the one used by the local inhabitants. The latter term is currently gaining popularity in cultural publications in Indonesia and abroad.

2. From the commercial cassette "Tayuban Masa Kini," *Gamelan Langen Suara*, Basari director, recorded October, 1977.

3. The better known courts of Yogyakarta (Yogya) and Surakarta (Solo) were formed in 1755, as a result of the division of the old Mataram kingdom by the Treaty of Giyanti.

4. In Central Java, the ancient Hindu ensembles of *kodok ngorèk*, *munggang*, and *cara balèn* fall into this category. Other gong ensembles based around single-row bonang-type instruments are found in the Philippines (*kulintang*), Sumatra (*gong sembilan*), and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

5. The *sekatèn* ensemble of Banten is now in the Museum Pusat (Central Museum) of Jakarta, having been confiscated by the Dutch when they destroyed the kraton of Banten and exiled the Sultan from Java in the nineteenth century. According to legend, the *sekatèn* of Demak was acquired by the kingdom of Mataram, and the instruments later divided among the royal houses of Yogya and Solo, where they remain today.

6. This rod puppet theatre later spread inland into Sunda and Central Java, where it developed into the form known as *wayang golèk* (Foley 1979:23).

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