

# Tarling: modern music from Cirebon<sup>1</sup>

by Michael R. Wright

The modern Cirebonese ensemble, *tarling*, derives its name from the *suling miring*, a transverse flute having six finger holes plus another opening covered with a fixed, sound-adulterating membrane (similar to the Chinese *ti tse* after which it is probably modeled), and *gitar*, the Western guitar. The smallest sized tarling ensemble consists of two amplified acoustic guitars, a battery of four or more *kendhang* (drums), performed by one player (usually with his hands), a *pesindhèn* (female singer), a *suling miring*, and a gong. Ensembles may also include a *kebluk* (similar to, but pitched lower than, the Central Javanese *kethuk*), a *kempul*, a *kecrek* (metal plates similar to the Central Javanese *keprak*), and a tambourine as well as several additional singer-actors. Tarling performances are essentially dramatic in nature. Staged stories unfold through both spoken and sung dialogue between the *pesindhèn* and either the lead guitar player or another singer-actor.

Cirebonese folklore says that the tarling ensemble developed during the Indonesian revolution (1945-49) when the nationalist troops, who were hiding in the forests, attempted to recreate gamelan sounds using guitars. While the authenticity of this legend remains unverified, it is certain that the ensemble does not predate the revolution. Therefore, considering its brief history, the impact that the tarling ensemble has had on Cirebonese culture is startling. Today, within the metropolitan Cirebon area, tarling performance are as common as *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet theatre) productions. The "modernity" of this musical theatrical genre, with its melodramatic love stories and idolized celebrity performers, has captured the imagination and spirit of the newly emerging Indonesian middle class of Cirebon.

While obviously departing from the stylized *wayang kulit* tradition, tarling productions still retain certain traditional and spiritual elements of the former genre. First, tarling performances usually last throughout the entire evening beginning around 9:00 PM and lasting until 5:30 AM. Additionally, it is common for some form of spirit offering to be made, often a bunch of bananas or a small bundle of rice

stalks. While the dramatic action of a tarling production may not always be in the form of a continuous story, the action does progress in a series of related episodes. These episodes may portray the ordeals of a hero or heroine undergoing tests of spiritual strength. Magical elements, such as consulting a *dhukun* or sorcerer, and ultimate—though temporary—resolutions achieved by the protagonists are common dramatic elements of both *wayang* and tarling. Furthermore, like *wayang*, an evening of tarling would not be complete without some comic action and ribald quips.

Undoubtedly, part of the appeal of tarling is that it is more personal and less abstract than the *wayang* tradition. Furthermore, many young urban Javanese, who (perhaps mistakenly) seem to pride themselves on their modernity prefer listening to the guitar rather than gamelan.

Both the dramatic and musical aspects of tarling draw upon both traditional and contemporary sources. Episodes from the Panji cycle of stories, although seldom performed anymore by tarling ensembles, constitute the most important traditional dramatic source. More prevalent modern theatrical sources for the tarling dramas include the East Javanese *ludruk*, *sandiwara* (a contemporary Indonesian-language dramatic form), and television plays as well as a considerable amount of original material. The *patokan* (Sundanese modal system) based *lagu gamelan* (gamelan compositions) constitute the traditional musical sources of tarling. Tarling performances of such music are referred to as *tarling klasik* (classic tarling). Tarling music also draws from modern musical genres such as newly-composed *patokan* based *lagu* (that is music not yet part of the gamelan repertoire); *orkes Melayu* (a popular song type that supposedly came to Indonesia from the Malaysian peninsula); and *kroncong* (an acculturated musical tradition of song accompanied by violin, ukulele, guitar and other Western instruments). However, tarling musicians have not yet adapted rock music.

Performances of tarling are normally held outdoors on raised platforms with a covered roof, usually open in the front and back—similar to the kind of stage used for a *wayang kulit* performance. The front and back stage areas are at least partially divided by a flimsy partition, often times covered with advertisements, through which sound might easily pass. The *kendhang*, *suling miring*, and gong players are usually backstage while the *pesindhèn*, the guitar players and the various actor-singers are situated in front of the

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audience without props or scenery. Holding only a microphone in one hand, the actors exaggerate their facial expressions and sometimes dance by themselves in the Cirebonese style during their dialogue.

Because the tarling ensemble is relatively new and its practitioners are constantly experimenting with new techniques and modes of expression, it is difficult to make definitive statements about the tradition. However, since most of the performed repertoire consists of new patokan based lagu, a dramatic episode based on a composition of that genre was chosen as a representative example of the tarling style of the mid 1970s and is presented below: *Gandrung Kapilayu*, loosely translated as a "Love Story," was created and recorded by the *Melody Kota Udang* ensemble in 1976.<sup>2</sup>

Of the five dramatis persona in *Gandrung Kapilayu* only the two leading characters have both sung and spoken parts—the three supporting roles are limited to spoken dialogue. Unlike the gamelan tradition, in tarling the male performers sing, often times in falsetto voice, as frequently as the pesindhèn. Traditional Cirebonese poetic phrases, which constitute a major portion of the gamelan dramatic repertoire, have been incorporated within the text and are indicated in italics. Within the context of a tarling performance these phrases are linked together in a continuous story.

### Gandrung Kapilayu

#### Characters:

*Dadang*. A young girl about eighteen years old.

*Nanto*. *Dadang's* boyfriend.

*Dadang's* father.

*Dadang's* father's neighbor (male).

*Nanto's* friend (male).

**Nanto:** Look at the moon. I don't think that anyone else in the world could be as happy as we are tonight.

**Dadang:** Sshh! Don't talk so loud. For a long time you have talked about us but you still don't have the courage to take me from my father.

**Nanto:** Don't worry, no one else can hear us. I think we could go on meeting like this forever. It gives me the strength to go on living.

**Dadang:** Ah, you lie! (She then sings the following lines within the period of one *gongan*.) Aduh, my sweetheart! I see much that is good but only bad things seem to be around me. For a long time now you have talked about our future together but it is just talk. I feel so sad. The truth flashes before my eyes. I am sad because you are not waiting for me.

**Nanto:** (sings for one *gongan*) Aduh *Dadang*. I too have felt sad, *empty like plain water which becomes black coffee and then must wait for sugar at midnight when we meet*. I would be like a zombie if I could not marry you. I could even live in the hole of an ant if I could live there with you.

**Dadang:** (speaks) You must hurry and talk to my father.

**Nanto:** (sings) I know that you love me but I am ashamed because I am a poor man. But only I could love you as much as I do.

**Dadang:** (speaks) It is the same with me.

**Nanto:** (sings) Yes, I know that you love me but it is so sad because you are from a rich family but I am a poor man la . . . la . . . lu . . . lu . . . , etc.

**Dadang:** (sings) *There is a good world. Dead wood can grow living wood, hope can make them both flourish.*

**Nanto:** (speaks) That's easy for you to say.

**Dadang:** I can say that because it's true. I pray that we can be together. There are many nice boys but I only love you. If we are in love, take me to the hole of an ant, take me to the lair of a dragon! I could endure it with you.

**Nanto:** (speaks) Yes, I know but *Dadang* still has a father who's wishes come before mine. I am afraid that your father will not give his permission for us to marry. (sings) *Our spirits are like twins, back to back* (mirror images). *If we cannot be together then my heart will not be happy.*

**Dadang:** (sings) *If a man owns a carriage, has four wives and lives very high but still has a longing in his heart, then he cannot be happy.* It does not matter if I am rich or poor, if I still have a longing for you and we cannot be together then I would be better off dead. Perhaps my father can understand feelings like this. (*Dadang's* father comes out and sends *Nanto* away and scolds *Dadang*. The neighbor tries to assuage the father's anger but the father dismisses him. *Dadang* cries and says:) If you treat me like this then you do not remember what it is like to be young. Maybe you were in love like this once yourself. (The father, unmoved by her speech, continues to chastise his daughter. *Dadang* sings.) I would be better off dead than alive. My soul is spread out across the sky but my father is indifferent to my suffering. He thinks that I am still a child but I am already a woman. Father does not understand. Aduh! I don't know where I must go but my love is so strong I will always remember *Nanto* in my heart and I will always think about him. (*Nanto's* friend brings *Dadang* a letter from *Nanto*. In the letter *Nanto* explains that he must go far away. *Dadang* sings.) *Nanto*, my heart wants to hug a mountain but my hands are not large enough. Aduh! I must follow you. Every wife must be with her husband but my father is indifferent. *Bitters from the mountains, salt from the sea, meet together in the cooking pot* (this proverb refers to mixed marriages). Longing makes me forget about everything. My spirit is broken, I only think about you, *Nanto*. I'll become like a zombie if I can't stay together with you. There are many stars in the sky but they cannot grow together to make a moon. I may have many boys but none of them will be good like my beloved *Nanto*.

While the staging and spoken dialogue of *Gandrung Kapilayu* may represent modern dramatic elements, the overall theme of the episode—disappointment in love—is perhaps the most common traditional Cirebonese literary subject. The fact that *Nanto* has to go "far away" reflects a modern concept in Javanese society. On the other hand, the fact that

Dadang remains with her father represents the conservative element of the story.

Primarily for the benefit of those familiar with West Javanese and Sundanese performance practices, I will now examine the structural and modal features of *Gandrung Kapilyu*.

While the *kendhang*, the various *colotomic* instruments, the voice, and the *suling miring* essentially play in a traditional gamelan style within the *tarling* ensemble, the role of the guitar in the ensemble differs markedly. The lead guitar rather freely imitates a solo *saron/gambang* style. The second guitar may play either the *panerus* (a multi-octave low-pitched *saron*) or *kemyang* (CJ: *bonang panerus*) melodic patterns. Thus, the guitars represent the fixed-pitch melody instruments within the *tarling* ensemble.

One *gongan* of *Gandrung Kapilyu* with lead guitar, *suling miring* and voice parts is shown in Figure 1.<sup>3</sup> The guitars play only in the pentatonic *pélog*-like scale, C, D, E-flat, G, A-flat. For purposes of analysis, these might be considered to represent the *pélog* gamelan tones 7, 6, 5, 3, 2, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

In depicting a *patokan*-based lagu, only the *kenong* and *jenglong* (bass *kenong*) tones are represented in cipher notation. All of the other melodic parts can be improvised according to the structure. However, since the *tarling* ensemble does not have *kenong* or *jenglong* sound kettles, the various *patokan* tones normally played by these instruments are represented by sustained pitches in the guitar part sounding on the downbeats of each measure. Thus, the *patokan* structure of *Gandrung Kapilyu* is as shown in Figure 2.

In Figure 3 this "new" lagu, given in both cipher and modal notation, is shown to be a slightly irregular realization of the traditional Sundanese *patokan* formula *Panglima*, (I<sub>G</sub>-IV<sub>C</sub>-II<sub>G</sub>) on pitch level six wherein pitch 6 (D) is modal degree I. The irregular features of this *patokan* structure include: the consistent placement of strong modal degrees (the "strong" modal degrees are always I, II & IV; I is a fifth above IV which is a fifth above II) in weak *patokan* positions (1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, etc.) of a *gongan*; conversely, the positioning of weak modal tones (iii and v) in strong *patokan* positions (2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, etc.); the lack of *patokan* positions (represented by a blank in Figure 3) in the seventh and fifteenth positions of each *gongan*; the anticipation of the various *cawelan* (the *kenong* pitch midway between two *gong* strokes); and finally, *gong* pitches within the *patokan* structure itself.

D - A-flat - D - E-flat - G - A-flat - \_\_\_ - G<sub>C</sub>  
 C - A-flat - C - E-flat - C - A-flat - \_\_\_ - C<sub>G</sub>  
 C - A-flat - C - E-flat - G - A-flat - \_\_\_ - G<sub>C</sub>  
 D - A-flat - D - E-flat - D - A-flat - \_\_\_ - D<sub>G</sub>

G = Gong C = Cawelan

Figure 2. The *patokan* structure of "Gandrung Kapilyu."

However, most of these irregularities are found, to some degree, within the traditional gamelan repertoire.

Generally, after sustaining the *patokan* tones for a minimum of two beats in each measure, the lead guitar plays cadential melodic figures in eighth and quarter note rhythms that culminate on the subsequent downbeats (*patokan* tones). The guitar frequently shifts octaves within a phrase—a practice that is well within the idiomatic style of that instrument. The guitar rhythms tend to be quadratic triplet figures rare in *saron* playing (but common in *gambang* playing). While the voice and, to a lesser extent, the *suling miring* may intermittently stop during a performance, the guitar player continues to repeat the *patokan* cycle, preferably with variations, until the dramatic episode has been played out.

The *suling miring* and vocal parts are essentially identical to their analogous roles in traditional gamelan. Typical embellishments such as grace notes, sustained and slow vibratos, upper mordants (measure 1), portamentos (such as in the voice part of measure 11), and phrases that terminate on quick ascending portamentos appear in each part. Additionally, a technique similar to *sprechstimme* is found in the vocal part in measure 3. The vocalist notated is a male performer, accounting for the tenor tessitura of that part.

Consistent with conventional gamelan practice the singers and *suling miring* parts either fall silent or sound in unison or octaves with the guitar on the downbeats of those measures that emphasize strong modal degrees (i.e., pitches C, D, G). Subsequently, these voices would either sound a vocal dissonance (i.e., sound or sustain a tone other than the guitar pitch) or remain tacet on the other, modally weak downbeats.

The singers generally follow these rules although there are a few exceptions in the vocal part in respect to traditional *pélog* gamelan vocal practice: for example, the singer may continue singing throughout the first quarter of the *gongan*. Occasionally the vocalist uses pitches F (4) and B-flat (1) as *sorogan* (exchange) tones for pitches G and C, respectively, but this practice is well within the *pélog* vocal tradition. The singer's use of the pitch E in measure 9, however, introduces

tone	C	D	E-flat	G	A-flat
pitch number	7	6	5	3	2
modal degree	II	I	v	IV	iii
cipher notation		modal notation			
6 <sub>G</sub>		pitch level 6			
6 2 6 5 3 2 ___ 3 <sub>C</sub>	I - iii - I - v - IV - iii - ___ - IV <sub>C</sub>				
7 2 7 5 7 2 ___ 7 <sub>G</sub>	II - iii - II - v - II - iii - ___ - II <sub>G</sub>				
7 2 7 5 3 2 ___ 3 <sub>C</sub>	II - iii - II - v - IV - iii - ___ - IV <sub>C</sub>				
6 2 6 5 6 2 ___ 6 <sub>G</sub>	I - iii - I - v - I - iii - ___ - I <sub>G</sub>				

Figure 3. Cipher and modal notation of the *patokan* structure of "Gandrung Kapilyu."

a "vocal tone" (i.e., a tone that is not within the predominant pélog *surupan*) thereby temporarily suggesting a quasi-sléndro vocal style that is more "chromatic" than conventional pélog vocal practice.

The suling miring part in Figure 1 is even more suggestive of the chromatic sléndro style. The vocal *surupan* D, C-flat, B-flat, G, E-flat, (i.e., a pentatonic scale that differs from the established instrumental *surupan* D, C, B-flat, A-flat, E-flat) in which pitches C-flat and B-flat are sorogan for the pitches C and A-flat, respectively, appears in the suling part in measures 1, 4, and 5. The B-natural in the measure 9 of the suling miring part appears to be a chromatic passing tone. Like the voice, the suling part employs F as a substitute for either G (as in measure 14) or E-flat (as in measures 8 and 9). However, the scale pattern G, F, E-flat, D, C (measures 7 and 13) does occur in the suling miring part. Note that this scale, (3, 4, 5, 6, 7) is in contradiction to the usual pélog *surupan* practice (wherein only two of the three pitches 3, 4, and 5 appear within the same phrase). Strong "vocal" dissonances appear in the suling miring part on the downbeats of measures 9 and 13. In both instances, these dissonances are the results of delayed resolutions of the suling miring phrases. Resolutions to the desired patokan tones (pitch C in both instances) occur later in measure 9 and 13. Such delayed resolutions are not a common feature of the Cirebonese gamelan tradition although they are commonly found in Central Javanese vocal and suling practices.

The reader is cautioned against inferring harmonic connotations from the tarling music. The individual parts are conceived linearly and whatever perceived harmonies that may result are purely coincidental. It does not seem that tarling musicians are interested in exploiting either the harmonic possibilities of their instruments or the potential of the guitar to affect modulations (other than changes of vocal *surupan*) within a given composition.

While purists may decry the fact that the tarling ensemble is rapidly usurping the popularity and functions of traditional gamelan and wayang traditions in the Cirebon region, they should remember that the tarling ensemble is, in no small way, a modified extension of those traditions. Furthermore, tarling performers are generally very accomplished, creative musicians who in many instances are forging new forms from old while preserving the artistic integrity of the suling miring and vocal styles. Finally, whereas both the Central Javanese and Sundanese have modified their respective gamelan traditions in order to reflect modern values and tastes, in Cirebon, it is the tarling ensemble that appeals to contemporary standards while the gamelan tradition has continued to be representative of established values and practices.

In writing about the gradual decline of the wayang kulit tradition in his monograph *The Mythology and Tolerance of the Javanese*, Benedict Anderson observed:

"Autumn is in the air. . . [and] on the tree of Javanese culture the leaves are dropping one by one. The question now is whether the roots will nourish fresh leaves and

flowers for a new spring-time."

It seems that tarling is indeed a fresh flower of the new Indonesian springtime. ▀

#### Notes

1. This article is based upon dissertation research undertaken in the Cirebon region of West Java during the summer months of 1974 and 1976; therefore, some observations concerning this rapidly changing tradition may no longer apply.

2. A recording of the performance of *Gandrung Kapilayu* is included on the tape "A Composite of Tarling Excerpts" in the Wright Collection. Copies are available from the University of California at Los Angeles Ethnomusicology Archives, Archives Number 77.1-35.

3. Since the tarling ensemble does indeed perform in the Western equal-tempered tuning system, and the tuning of the guitars is essentially standard (although a semitone flat) traditional Western music notation was employed in Figure 1. The voice and guitar parts are notated in the treble clef, sounding one octave lower than written, while the suling miring part sounds one octave higher than written.

4. The reader is cautioned that, unlike Central Javanese cipher notation, the West Javanese and Sundanese build scales from high pitch 1 to low pitch 7.

modal  
degree

I<sub>G</sub>

I

iii

I

suling  
miring

voice

guitar

Musical notation for the first system, measures 1-4. The system includes staves for suling miring, voice, and guitar. The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 8/4. Measure 1 features a suling miring melody with a grace note and a voice part with a fermata. Measure 2 shows a voice part with a fermata and a guitar accompaniment. Measure 3 contains a voice part with a triplet and a guitar accompaniment. Measure 4 features a voice part with a triplet and a guitar accompaniment.

v

IV

iii

Musical notation for the second system, measures 5-8. The system includes staves for suling miring, voice, and guitar. Measure 5 features a suling miring melody and a voice part with a triplet. Measure 6 shows a suling miring melody and a voice part with a triplet. Measure 7 contains a suling miring melody and a voice part with a triplet. Measure 8 features a suling miring melody and a voice part with a triplet.

IV<sub>C</sub>

II

iii

II

Musical notation for the third system, measures 9-12. The system includes staves for suling miring, voice, and guitar. Measure 9 features a suling miring melody and a voice part with a fermata. Measure 10 shows a suling miring melody and a voice part with a fermata. Measure 11 contains a suling miring melody and a voice part with a fermata. Measure 12 features a suling miring melody and a voice part with a fermata.

v

II

iii

II<sub>G</sub>

Musical notation for the fourth system, measures 13-16. The system includes staves for suling miring, voice, and guitar. Measure 13 features a suling miring melody and a voice part with a fermata. Measure 14 shows a suling miring melody and a voice part with a fermata. Measure 15 contains a suling miring melody and a voice part with a fermata. Measure 16 features a suling miring melody and a voice part with a fermata.