COMMENTARY

The Term *Karawitan*

by Marc Perlman

Javanese music has become known in this country (and others) by the name of the instruments that play it. *Gamelan*—the name of an ensemble—has become in many cases synonymous with Javanese music.

This can be misleading, since there are other kinds of traditional Javanese music which do not use gamelan instruments, and there are composers in many countries producing distinctly non-Javanese music for gamelan ensembles. Meanwhile, the word used by the Javanese themselves for traditional gamelan music—*karawitan* or *krawitan*—is little known here.

This odd situation (our familiarity with the one term, and ignorance of the other) has been noted by Indonesian scholars. Sri Hastanto pointed it out in 1985, though he felt the phrase "gamelan music" was a sufficiently good English equivalent for karawitan [1985:1].

In fact, the development of new gamelan-like ensembles in the West makes "gamelan music" an ambiguous phrase. My intent in this note is to offer karawitan as a convenient term to convey what we now express by the phrase "traditional gamelan music."

The word seems to have originally had a broader meaning. In Old Javanese *ararawitan* means "to amuse oneself with beautiful things" (Zoetmulder's (1982) examples of usage mention music and wayang). In Modern Javanese, the root *rawit* means "fine", as in "finely chopped"; also: detailed, meticulous craftsmanship. Gericke-Roorda's dictionary of 1901 associates karawitan with words for fine substances (such as silk) and mental discernment or sagacity.

The modern sense of the word had already been foreshadowed, however, in the early-nineteenth-century *Serat Centhini*, where *olah rawit* ("to practice *rawit*") refers to gamelan-playing. In Tondhakusuma's *Serat Gulang Yarya* of 1870 (Canto IV: *Pocung*) both olah rawit and karawitan are used, and seem to encompass the arts of sung poetry (*tembang*), gamelan music (*gendhing*), dance, wayang, and gamelan-making and wayang-carving. Poerwadarminta's dictionary of 1939 defines karawitan as "refined arts." By 1964, when the Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia (ASKI) was founded in Surakarta, it already had the more restricted sense it now bears; thus ASKI's name is probably best translated as the "Traditional Music Academy of Indonesia."

Karawitan has also entered the national language (Indonesian) with the meaning "music for voice or gamelan using the slendro and pelog scales" [*Kamus Besar*]. Thus it is sometimes also used for Balinese music. Such is the (numerical) dominance of Indonesia by speakers of Javanese, however, and such are the ways of the nationally standardized education system, that we find this term used even of Minangkabau music in West Sumatra, where it seems inappropriate. Is the word karawitan broadening in meaning; is it becoming the "general word for any indigenous music in any part of Indonesia," as Sutton (1991:5, 253) suggests? Perhaps not: in 1990 a seminar at the University of North Sumatra made headlines when it questioned the presence of this reputedly Java-centric term in Indonesia's Copyright Act of 1987.

The meaning of "karawitan" may or may not change in its Indonesian context; for now, however, gamelan communities around the world would do well to add this Javanese term to their vocabularies. With it, performers, composers, and audiences can speak more precisely about the musics they create, perform and enjoy. ◗

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