

FIELD NOTES

Madura Journal: encounters with strange ensembles

(or “bak beng, dak deng, dong-dong, dik-duk, ngik-ngok and galundang”)

by Jack Body

Small islands have always appealed to me — geographical isolation suggests that a culture might somehow be “contained,” not so open to outside influences. A romantic notion, no doubt, but one which haunts me — I still gaze at the map of Indonesia and am entranced by that isolated dot called Enggano!

I first visited Madura in 1977 when I was teaching at the *Akademi Musik Indonesia*, a music school in Yogyakarta. It was vacation time and Yono and I wanted to explore new territory. Our principal destination was the island of Lombok but we decided to pay a brief visit to Madura on the way. I knew nothing of Madura or its culture, and the only Madurese I'd met were itinerant sellers of *sate Madura*, with their equipment for cooking bamboo skewers of meat balanced on the characteristically upraised ends of a bowed yoke. (The astonishing thing is that one has to search the length and breadth of Madura to find such *tukang sate Madura!*)

My first encounter with a Madurese musician was a street musician we met in the Jember, East Java. We invited him to our hotel room so we could record him. He sang, accompanying himself on a *kenprung*, a frame drum. His voice was high and sharply nasal, apparently without variation of color or nuance, what some might regard as inexpressive. Several of the hotel staff joined us for the session, one of whom understood Madurese and was able to give a general translation. During the performance, however, she slipped out, quite unnoticed; it was later explained that she had been so moved by the singing that she had wept, and felt it polite to leave. It was, of course, the words which moved her, a personal account of the hardships of the singer's life, of the harsh circumstances that forced him to leave his wife and child, to travel seeking money through his minstrelsy.

A short ferry ride took us across from the port of Surabaya to Madura. From where one lands the first town of note is Bangkalan, and it was here that we spent the few days we had available before returning to Java. At the office of *P dan K* (Education and Culture) we met Pak Usman Jati, a man deeply committed to Madurese music and culture, a *seniman* [artist] in the full sense of the word. He introduced us to the *kenong telo* ensemble (named after a set of three

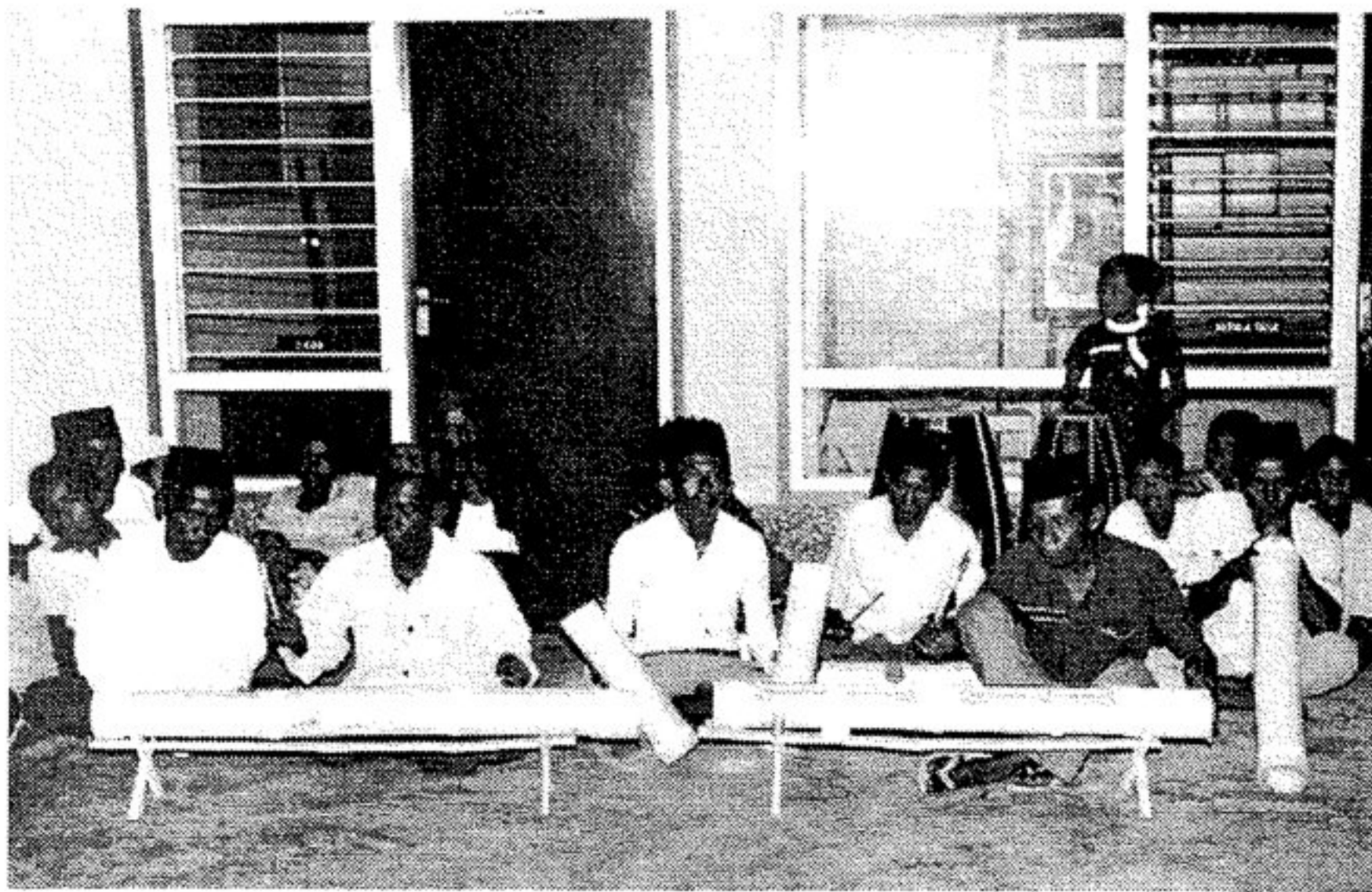
small rack-mounted gongs); *tuk-tuk*, the wooden slit gongs associated with *kerapan sapi* [bull-racing]; and the *ginggung*, a bamboo jaw's harp from Sepulu. He talked about the counting chants used by fish farm workers and of *kibikin*, the improvised laments for the dead, which he remembered from the time of the Japanese occupation. We returned to Java with these few samples of Madurese music, and a resolve to explore further at some later date.

This opportunity offered itself in 1983, when I took study leave from my teaching position in New Zealand. Over a four month period we moved from Banyumas in Central Java (examining Jemblung) through East Java to Madura. This time it was possible to explore the island over its full length and to get a picture of some of the regional characteristics of its culture — the central and particularly eastern sections being quite different from the west which is more strongly influenced by West Java.

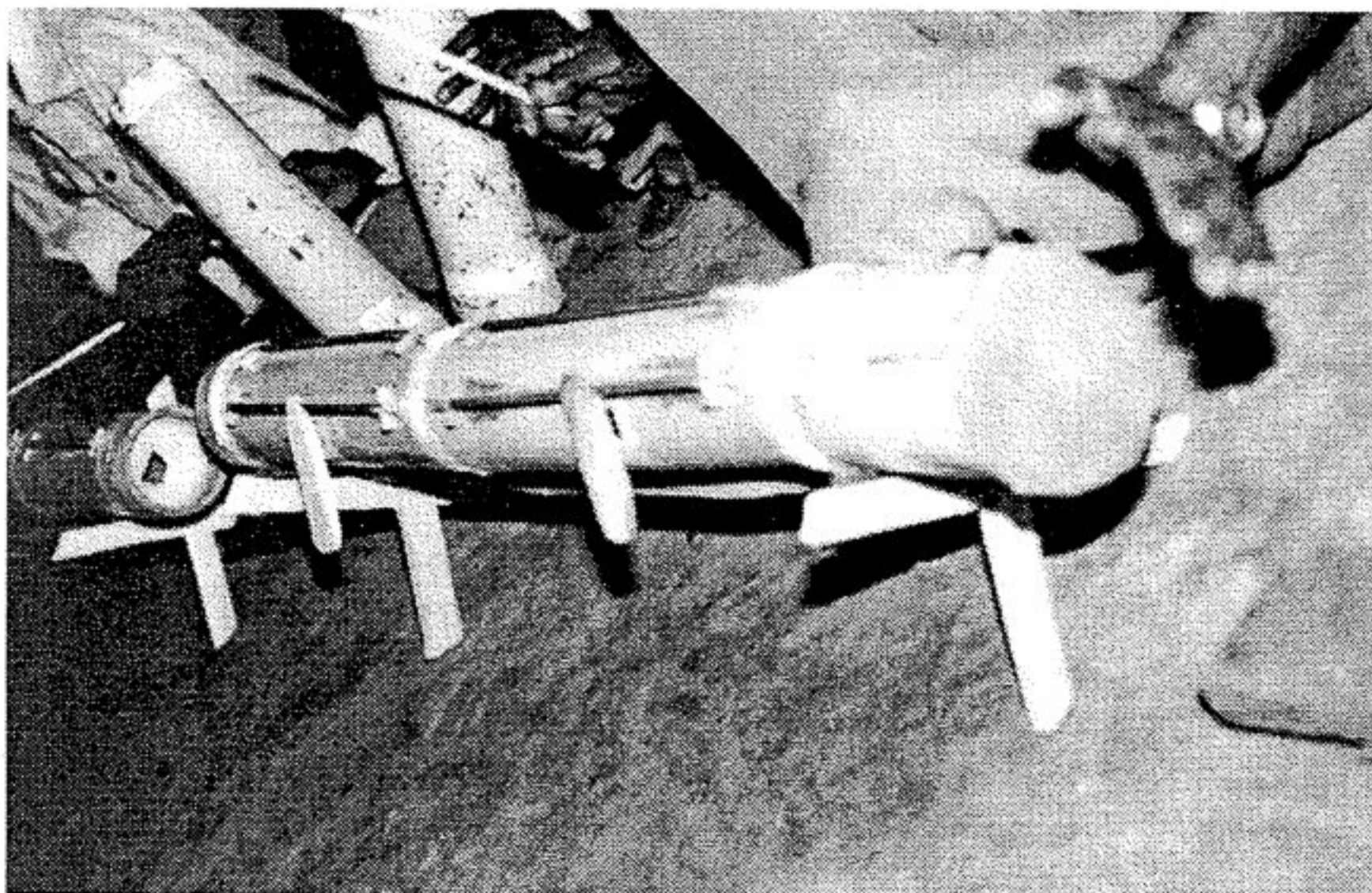
Although the considerable variety of musics we collected during that time was only a sampling, we were able to make some general observations. There is an apparent absence of any *wayang* puppetry, although a unique *topeng* [masked dance] tradition seemed to fulfill the need for a theatrical genre. We found Javanese *macapat* [sung poetry] in many transmuted forms — always sung in Javanese, even though the singer seldom spoke the language. Thus the text was often misrepresented and totally incomprehensible to a Javanese. Invariably a *penegas* [speaker] was used to translate or comment upon each line of the sung text. It seemed that *macapat* (often called *memaca*) had a kind of mystical association for the Madurese, as a tangible link with the culture of Java. In Sumenep at the eastern tip of Madura, the point furthest removed from Java, this nostalgic association was strongest. After all, this city had also once been the seat of a sultanate, and as such had developed a court culture comparable to that of Central Java. Here the language was tiered, as in Central Java and Bali, according to the social status of the person spoken to, and all music and culture aspired to an aesthetic of refinement. The Sumenep style of singing *macapat* was almost baroque in its extended florid elaboration, as if the musicians wanted to caress and adorn each syllable of the text. A *suling* [bamboo flute] shadowed the voice, surrounding it with its own web of melodic filigree.

Besides a number of unusual, sometimes unique

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1. The complete bak beng ensemble.



2. The bak beng.



3. The dak deng (left) and kenong panerus (right).

choral traditions, we encountered several remarkable instrumental ensembles — remarkable in both the design of the instruments and the materials used — such as the all bamboo *bak beng* ensemble. This ensemble included a bamboo tube zither, an archaic instrument still found in use throughout South-East Asia.¹ In its basic form it consists of a tube of bamboo with “strings” cut longitudinally from its surface and still attached at the ends. Small bridges are inserted to increase tension on the bamboo strings and frequently a hole is cut in the tube so that it can better function as a resonator. The sound of these instruments is subtle and delicate. In Indonesia they are often thought of as children’s toys, easily made and readily disposable.

The bak beng ensemble we heard and recorded was in a sense not a living tradition but a reconstruction (photo 1). Pak Daud Bai of the Sampang Department of Culture remembered seeing and hearing such an ensemble in his childhood and had encouraged a group of musicians to recreate these instruments, which seemed to have fallen into disuse. The constitution of this little bamboo orchestra was modeled on the Madurese *kenong telo’* ensemble. The instruments used a variety of different designs to fulfil the various musical functions.

The names of some instruments were clearly onomatopoeic. The ensemble took its name from the instrument which comprised a tube two and a half sections in length. Over each of the two sections, two “strings” were cut, and over the open end of the half section a leather flap was fixed. The player beat the four strings with a stick in his right hand (*beng*) while he slapped the leather flap with his left hand (*bak*) in imitation of drumming (photo 2). The wooden flaps covering the frontmost two strings sit above resonance holes, producing deeper tones, presumably because of the added weight they give to the strings. Further drumming sounds were contributed by the *dak deng*, two bamboo tubes open at the upper end and stamped vertically on the ground (photo 3).

The *kenong telo’*, a tube in three sections with one string on each, reproduced the ostinato pattern of the like-named instrument in the *kenong telo’* ensemble, with the player using a stick in each hand. The ensemble was completed with two single string instruments, a *kempul panerus*, and a *kenong panerus* (also in photo 3); a *serbung*, made of two tubes, one inserted in the mouth of the other and blown trombone-like to imitate the sound of the gong (photo 4); and also a *sronen* [oboe], a *kendang* (drum) and a *cek-cek* [metallic time-beater].

Although it was considered necessary to add a *sronen* to carry the melodic function, to my ears its penetrating, extroverted sound sat rather unsympathetically amidst the delicate bamboo timbres. We recorded several *gending*, but my favorite has always been the “music-minus-one” movement in which the *sronen* was silent!

We found another all-wood ensemble in Rubaru, near Sumenep. It was, for Madura, a remarkably large orchestra involving eleven musicians. In the design and function of the instruments this was clearly a kind of wooden gamelan (photo 5). The ensemble took one of its names, *galundang*, from an instrument which seemed to be a curious wooden adaption of a bonang (photo 6). A bonang in a Javanese gamelan is comprised of two rows of small rack-mounted gongs positioned so that the two rows are diametrically opposed pitchwise, simplified thus:

6 5 3 2 1

1 2 3 5 6

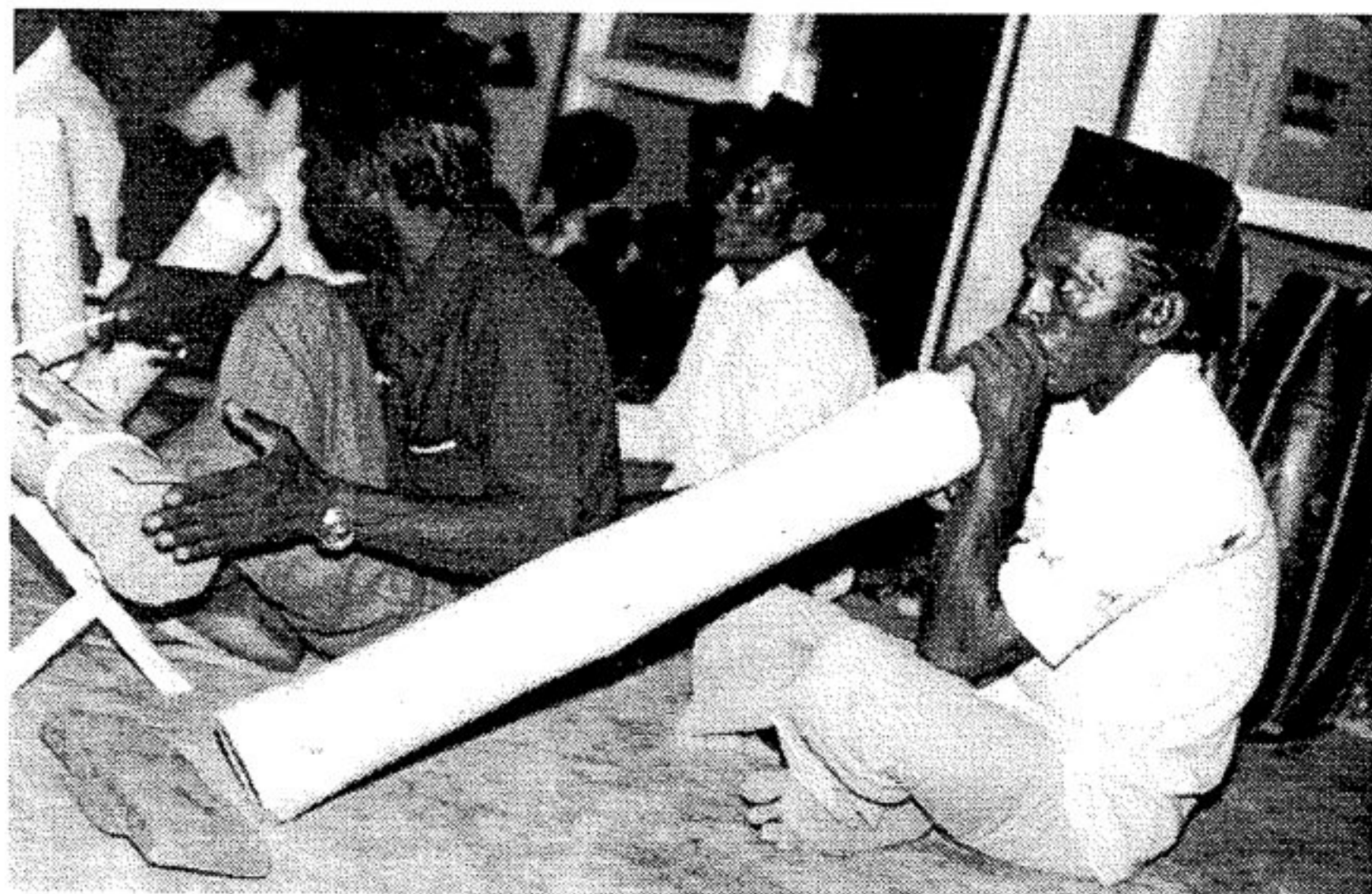
whereas on the *galundang* it became

6 5 1 3 2 2 3 1 5 6.

Some instruments by their archetypal design were already wooden (such as the *gambang* [xylophone] and bamboo *suling*) but others were translations from the bronze gamelan, such as the *peking* and *panerus*, wooden xylophones representing instruments of the saron family [bronze keys on box resonators]. But the most interesting group of instruments were those of the wooden slit gong type of which there was a range of sizes and shapes from the smaller *dong-dong* and *dik-duk* (having *ketuk/kenong*-like functions) through to a set of four huge barrel-like instruments (photo 7), two of which were beaten to duplicate drum patterns and two beaten in extended rolls to suggest the decaying resonance of the *kempul* and *gong*. The array of instruments was impressive, but by the very nature of their construction, the total sound was muted and subdued. But this was of course East Madura, where a refined, *halus* sound was much preferred.

Galundang had no individual repertoire of its own, we were told, but the actual ensemble had a very special function, related to the sport of homing pigeons. A flock of birds released in the morning would return to roost in the evening, having mingled with other flocks during the day. If they returned in greater numbers, accumulating birds from another flock, this was the occasion for playing *galundang*. We encountered another ensemble in Central Madura with a similar function, also comprised of mainly wooden instruments (though fewer in number). I wondered whether it was the quality of sound that made these ensembles appropriate to their function, that indeed the muted sound of wood might attract the birds, whereas metallic sounds might frighten them away. Perhaps one could even find an analogy between the cooing of pigeons and the timbre of resonating wood.

I began to wonder how much the use of bamboo and wood was a matter of virtue born of necessity. Metal instruments had to be imported from makers in Java at certain expense — a large gong, for



4. The *serbung*.



5. The complete *galundang* ensemble.



6. The *galundang*.

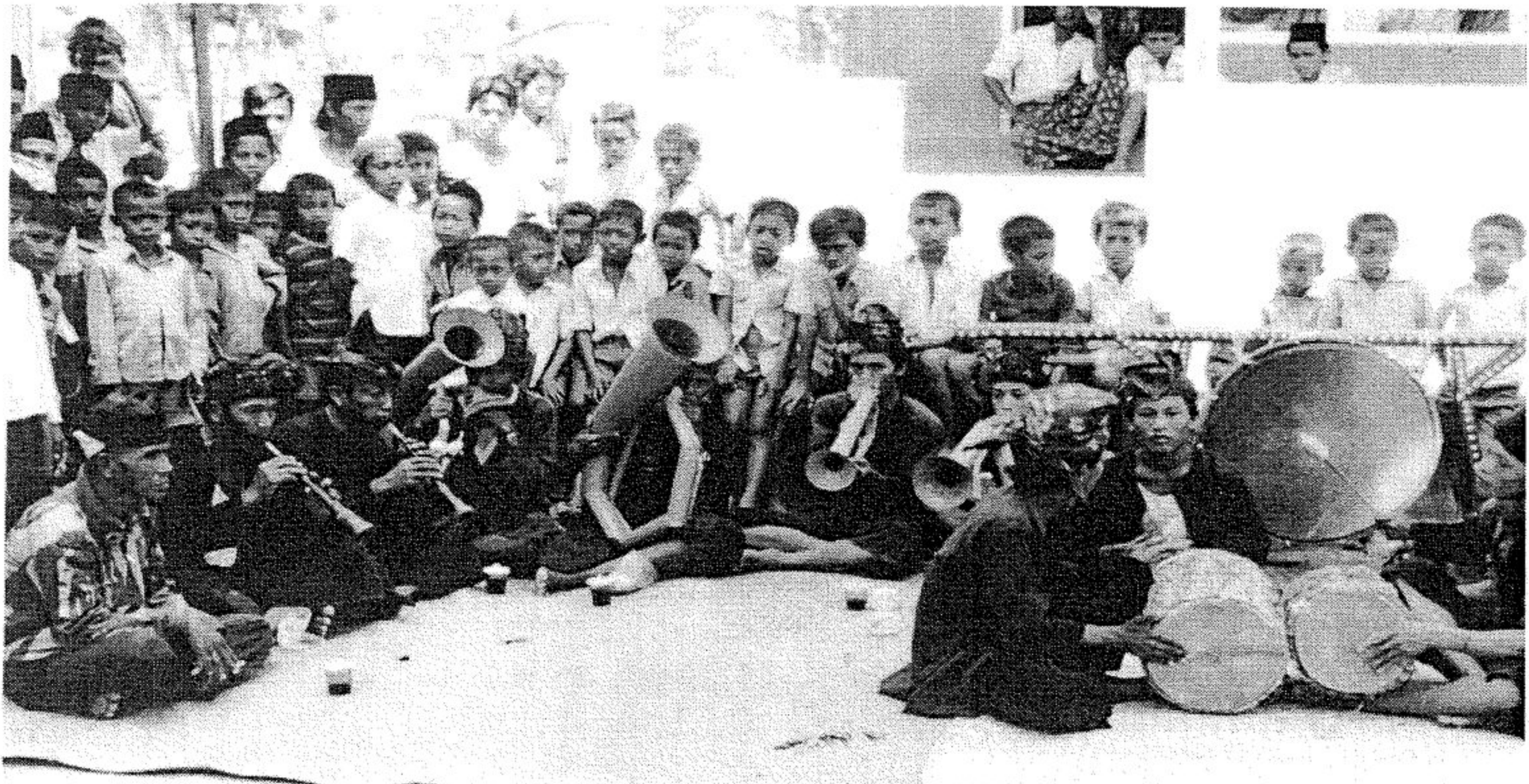


7. Two "kendang" (one player) in foreground with the "kempul/gong" behind.

instance, could require considerable outlay. More than once I found a *bedug* [a large suspended drum] fulfilling the gong function. It could be that the preference was on grounds of religious association (a *bedug* is found in every mosque) as well as sound quality. One such ensemble was *ngik ngok* in the village of Dempo Barat (photo 8). *Ngik ngok* is an onomatopoeia for the sound of Western music, in particular the sound of a violin being bowed, we were told! Although this was the common name for the ensemble, the players thought the term a little demeaning, and preferred it to be called *Musik Waru* meaning both "music from Waru," the name of the district, and "new music" (i.e. *musik baru*).

The format of the ensemble was clearly modelled on the ubiquitous *kenong telo'* ensemble, which usually consists of *sronen*, two gongs (*kempul* and *gong*), *kendang*, *kecrek* [a rattle] and the three gongs of the *kenong telo'* itself. But in this case, not only was the *kempul/gong* replaced by a *bedug*, but there were two *kendang* with a player each, and two *sronen*. We were told that it was common in East Madura to have multiple *sronen*, as they tended to be smaller than elsewhere on the island, and produced a gentler, less penetrating sound.

Replacing the *kenong telo'* was an extraordinary set of four so-called *terompet* [double reed aerophone]. These were hybrid instruments invented by a Dempo Barat villager in 1912 (photo 9). Obviously inspired by Western brass band instruments, they had been made by welding together



8. The complete *ngik ngok* ensemble.

sections of metal tubing. Into the ends of these oddly angular constructions the inventor had placed not Western-style mouthpieces but sronen double reeds (photo 10)! As can be imagined, the instruments sounded very odd, in keeping with their singular design. Incapable of playing notes of focused pitch, they were perfect for the rhythmic ostinato normally played by the *kenong telo'*, with occasional sounds to reinforce the *bedug* in its role of gong substitute.

From the perspective of instrument construction, these *terompet* were indeed unique and remarkable creations. And the structure of the *sronen* revealed a surprising detail. Instruments of this type frequently have curved wooden extensions to embrace and support the cheeks, which are continually being inflated to sustain circular breathing. Here (photo 11) these additions to the mouthpieces take on a purely decorative function — as mustaches!

Musically, however, the inter-relationship between the two *sronen* proved to be of much greater interest. Superficial impressions were that the two players shared the same melodic material. Careful listening showed that the second player had more of a supporting role, sometimes shadowing the bare outline of the melodic *sronen*, but more often supplying a kind of ostinato counterpoint. (A transcription of the *ngik ngok* ensemble playing *Lanjalan* is to be found in "Musical transcription: from sound to symbol and back again!" in this issue.)

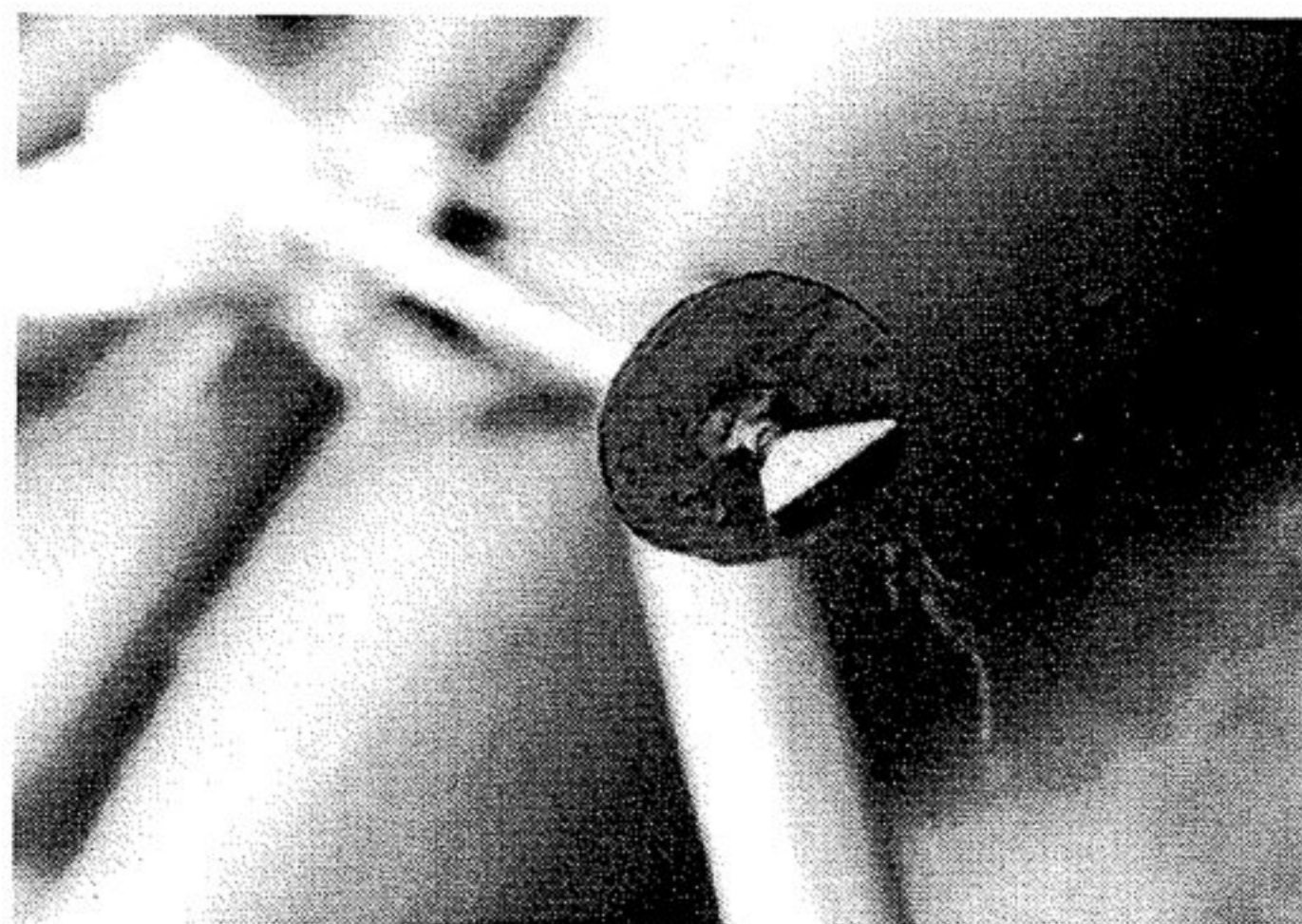
I had long hoped to make my recordings of Madurese music available, and was delighted when they were published by Ode Records (*Music of Madura* OdeCD1381 1991), not for motives of self-aggrandizement (I subsidized the production myself), but for the satisfaction of knowing that many more people will have the opportunity to experience the special charm of Madurese music. ▀

Notes

1. Although in Indonesia I have generally seen such instruments struck with a stick, among the Igorot and Kalinga in the Phillipines it is struck with the thumb. This is called the *kulistang* or *kulitong*, and I've seen it both as a tube and a raft (section of a tube) zither. This latter variant may be the ancestor of the large raft zithers of the Far East: the Chinese *zheng*, the Japanese *koto*, and the *kayagum* of Korea. An obvious descendant are the tube harp-zithers with multiple wire strings such as the Timorese *sasando*, the Madagascan *valiha*, and similar instruments in the Phillipines among the Kalinga and Mboli.



9. Three *terompet* players. Note the different positions of holding the instruments.



10. The reed of the *terompet*.



11. The two *sronen* players.