

TRADITIONS

Singing 'round the table: vocalized wayang and gamelan in Jemblung/Purwacarita

by Yono Sukarno



Suparman (center) and friends perform in Sumpiuh, Banyumas (March 13, 1991) in a performance commissioned by Harrison Parker.

I grew up near Jatiagung, a small village in South Lampung on the southern tip of Sumatra. The residents live in about two hundred dwellings, many of which are inhabited by more than one large family. It is a typical Javanese transmigrant settlement, with most families originating from Gombong, Kebumen, Kroya or other parts of the Banyumas district in Central Java. As in Banyumas, the people of Jatiagung are famed for roof-tile manufacturing. They also preserve, at least among the older generation, their Banyumas dialect. In the past this small community nurtured some older forms of music-theatre arts: Stambulan, Menorek, Ketoprak and Wayang Golek¹.

Yono Sukarno was born into a Javanese transmigrant community in Lampung, South Sumatra. From childhood, traditional music and dance have been an absorbing hobby. Since 1978 he has lived in New Zealand, and he has an M.A. in linguistics from Victoria University.

Although these genres have become a thing of the past, some talented practitioners still live in the area.

It was in Jatiagung that I encountered Jemblung for the first time, in my early teens. Nothing like it had ever been seen there before, or, I suspect, since! Although it was almost thirty years ago, a vivid memory of that performance remains with me.

As I remember, the news spread like wild-fire that a Dhalang Jemblung ("direct from Gombong"!) was coming to the home of Pak Lurah (the village head) to entertain the guests for his daughter's wedding. Dhalang Jemblung became the subject of much discussion: "Did you say Gemblung, or Jemblung?" Gemblung means crazy, mad, insane—in Yogya or Solo they would say *edan*. And jemblung means pot-bellied, bloated, having hunger-edema. Why would Pak Lurah invite such a dhalang? We were burning with curiosity.

The date for the performance was about two weeks

after the news first broke. Between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. the small village of Jatiagung became the center of the world. It took me a good hour to push my way through and get to see what was happening on the stage, as various members of the audience dragged themselves off, clutching their sides after seeing what they described as "something unbelievable." From a distance I could hear the amplified music of what sounded like gamelan, complete with the voice of a fine *pesindhen* [female singer], with the voice-over of a *dhalang* singing *ada-ada* and *suluk* [songs sung by the *dhalang* during a *wayang*].

But what I saw was unexpected: four men and a woman sitting around a table so full of food (*tumpeng* rice-offering and the like) that it could hold nothing more. Above the table hung a microphone for amplification. Apart from a small *kudi* [a so-called "pregnant" cleaver often used to chop *klembak* and *kemenyan*, spices that are essential for the home-made Banyumas cigarettes] held by the leader of the group, there were no other instruments to be seen: no gamelan, no puppets, no screen. All the performers (except the *pesindhen*) were moving in rhythm with their voices, because it was from their mouths that the sounds of gamelan came! Although my first reaction was to laugh at this curious sight, the performers' skill and artistry quickly became apparent. The audience that had been laughing was now spellbound.

The story chosen for Pak Lurah's daughter's wedding night was, appropriately, "Kamandaka," the heroic Menak love story from Gombong. It was a well-known folktale in that village, often seen on the stage of the *ketoprak* [Javanese folk theater].

The happy memory of that night stayed with me. Fifteen years later in 1976, when I was living in Yogyakarta, I talked about this strange performance to Jack Body, who had a strong interest in musical curiosities. We decided to seek out *jemblung* on its home territory and learn more about it.

Origins of Purwacarita/Jemblung

Although the popular term for this art form is *jemblung*, the performers themselves preferred to call it *purwacarita* (*purwa*, meaning ancient, original; *carita*, meaning narration), a term which gave a more respectable gloss than the rather more deprecatory *jemblung*. *Jemblung* ["pot-bellied"], we were told, applied to the tradition of having the performers' table laden with food. This food was not eaten during the performance; at the end it was divided among the players for them to take home. In effect it was part of their performance fee.

Purwacarita/jemblung stories, in my experience, do not draw on the Hindu mythologies of the Ramayana and Mahabarata that are the basic source material for much of the dance and theatre of Java, particularly *wayang kulit*. Rather they use the Javanese Panji/Menak cycles, episodes



Pak Aspari reading.

from the Ambyah verses (derived from Al Qur'an), or from traditions concerning the spread of Islam in Java in the early thirteenth century by the *Wali* [Islamic patriarchs]. All these are also sources for *ketoprak* stories. The "narrator with improvised dialogue" style used in *purwacarita* and *jemblung* is also very similar to *ketoprak*.

The use of *macapat* [Javanese poetic meters] in *Jemblung*, according to our information, is fundamental, and in fact the key to its origin. In Kebulusan village near Kebumen, we recorded an elderly *dhalang* called Pak Aspari, who performed a kind of one-man *jemblung* which he called *menthiet*. A term similar to *jemblung*, *menthiet* means "stuffed full," implying an image of someone so laden down with food that he has to lean backwards while walking! We also recorded him in a two-man *menthiet* where he was joined by his friend Pak Purwana. In these performances, the singing, which was periodically introduced in the midst of the story-telling, was mainly *macapat*, with occasional vocalisations, some of them gamelan-like by way of *ngegong* [sounds of support or agreement].

Menthiet appeared to be a simpler and perhaps earlier form of *jemblung*, suggesting that the vocalised gamelan of *jemblung* was a later addition to a basic form of story-telling mixed with *macapat*. It seemed that the stories used in *jemblung* were of a folk or religious nature (such as are favoured by *ketoprak*), and that one of the prime functions of this art form was *dakwah* [evangelism]. An

excerpt of the third page of Pak Aspari's book of *Ambyah* is shown below; the menthiet performance consisted of reading from this book (see photo at left). The text is in the poetic meter and associated melody *pakem asmarandana* ["fire of love"]; this excerpt is the final four lines of a single page. The Arabic script, read from left to right, is shown below with a transliteration and translation.

مَعْنَا لَأَعْلَمُ وَيُرَى نَبِيُّ يُوْسُفَ أَوَّيَّةَ رُوَسَّ تَمَوَّنَ لَعْمُ
 عَمُوِي سَارِي فَفَكَوْنِيْعُ كَعِ رَمَاهُ الْجُوْمَا لَسَمَّ جُمَعُهُ يُوْسُفُ
 كَيْتَعْلُ مَوْرَبُ سَاءَ فَعَلِيْلِيْرِي سَوَجَهْفُ لَهْ رَمَا كُوْلُ غَمِيْفِي
 دُوْكَ وَهُوَ كُوْلُ يِيْدَارَاهُ نِيْعَالُ وَوَلَنَ شَرَّ غِيْبِي كَلُوْنُ لِنَتِيْعَ سَاوَسُ

*Mangkana ingkang winarni / nabi yusup wayah rolas
 taun-ing umuré, saré pangkoning kang rama / anuju malem
 jumuwah yusup katingal murub / sa'panglilira angucap: lah
 rama kula ngimpi duka mau kula nilara / ningal wulan
 srengéngé / kelawan lintang sewelas.*

Then the same Joseph, when he was twelve years old, asleep on his father's lap, on a Thursday night, this Joseph, looking radiant, awoke and said, "Oh father, I had a dream, and I do not understand its meaning: I saw the moon, the sun and eleven stars."

Another related genre we encountered in Pekalongan was a style of choral macapat. Here the phrases of the macapat melody were overlapped and varied by the members of the group in a fashion similar to jemblung Gombong, and at the end the group broke into a light-hearted vocalised gendhing also similar to jemblung Gombong. This latter section was however not entirely vocal, being accompanied by a cigar box "*kendhang*" [drum] and a *gong-bumbung* [a bamboo tube blown to imitate the sound of the gong] with other optional additions being a violin or a *siter* [plucked zither]. The performers all sat on the floor, but with the onset of the pieces one or two of the singers leaped up and danced.

A form of jemblung we later discovered in Kediri belonged to a similar tradition although it used a larger group of people and, for the musical interludes, a sizeable ensemble of Islamic instruments such as *jedor*, *rebana*, *kentrung* and *bedug*. In yet other travels we discovered a style of *memaca* [reading] in Sampang, Madura, which used exclusively religious *babad* [history] texts sung in *macapat* by four male vocalists, and had vocalised gendhing interludes strikingly similar in many ways to jemblung Gombong, though without the spoken narrative.

It seems that a development can be traced from the kind of macapat singing that we heard in Pekalongan—a

form of social music making designed, for example, to pass the long nights spent waiting for a newborn baby's belly button to form (*muyi*, *muyen* or *nguyen*)—to menthiet, with its moral teaching conveyed in an entertaining narrative with added humorous vocalisations, and finally to a form of pure entertainment: *purwacarita/jemblung*. Thus, although jemblung Gombong might superficially appear to be a kind of wayang kulit sans puppets, its origins are to be found in macapat and originally its primary function was Islamic evangelism. It is significant, for instance, that the texts used in all these genres—Menthiet, Jemblung Kediri, Macapat Pekalongan and Memaca Sampang—were *Ambyah*, Islamic texts in Javanese language complete with macapat pakem printed in Arabic script.

Story telling, word play and onomatopoeia

On the evening of our first visit to Gombong, as luck would have it, we were directed to a wedding reception with a jemblung performance by a group from Tambak, Sumpyuh. We arrived just as they were beginning. The story was the familiar "Kamandaka." We recorded part of the performance but were dismayed by the frequent feedback from the sound system. (In fact the recording is a very truthful document with all the atmospheric noise, from both the audience and the sound system, that is so much a part of such village performances). We decided to come back another time and commission the best group we could find for a special recording session.

In 1983 we returned to Gombong and with the help of local officials were able to record in more controlled conditions. From the fee we contributed our hosts provided a table-full of food as part of the offerings required by tradition, and food for the small audience of specially invited guests. (Although this performance was for a recording, the presence of a responsive audience was desirable.) Being seated round a table is part of the jemblung tradition, allowing the performers to both relax and watch each other, facilitating fast verbal and musical exchange.

The group was a composite of the best performers in the region, and they received regular support from local government. All three male performers were dhalang by profession, and the female performer was a pesindhen for wayang kulit. They also performed in ketoprak productions.

The performers announced that for this evening they would "dig out and stretch an old forgotten story, 'Raden Sa'id'," about one of the nine mythical-historical Wali of Java. After a short spoken introduction, the lead dhalang said, "Let's start, Mbong, and pay our dues". (They had nicknamed one of their members "Mbong").

As with the first group we had heard, the show began with the singing of a macapat poem with overlapped phrases sung by all three men. At the conclusion one of

them suggested they should add gamelan sounds to their singing.

And so the performance was launched, continuing for six hours, a colourful tour de force of story-telling to which all four performers contributed, peppering the narrative with hilarious interruptions and asides, and from time to time introducing various vocalised gamelan-like *gendhing* [musical pieces].

During the all-night performance a total of eighteen *gendhing* were sung, in the following order: *Sekar Gadung*, *Sampak minggah Pangkur*, *Dhandhang Gula Tlutur*, *Eling-Eling Banyumasan*, *Uler Kambang*, *Sinom Parijata*, *Sinom*, *Nyandra*, *Gending Gunung Sari*, *Ricik-Ricik Banyumasan*, *Durma*, *Pucung*, *Gudril*, *Gudril Mumet*, *Renggong Manis*, *Bawa Citra-Mengeng minggah Pangkur Lamban*, *Senggot*, and *Ayak-Ayak Pamungkas*.

The four performers played various roles as the fancy took them — sometimes the men played female parts even though there was a female present — with improvised dialogue similar to what one would hear in *ketoprak*, except much more tongue-in-cheek. Much of the story was narrated in the third person by the chief *dhalang*, and it was he who restored the storyline whenever it threatened to lose its way under the disruptive influence of the numerous asides, jokes and witty exchanges. The performance was skillfully balanced between effectively telling a story and “hamming it up.” The interjections were typical *Banyumasan*, consisting of syllables and words that are lexically nonsensical but colourful and amusingly descriptive. A written equivalent might be the onomatopoeia found in American comic strips.

The charm of *jemblung Gombong*, one might say its soul, is in this onomatopoeic word-play, which is at the heart of the *Banyumas* dialect. To give an example: ask a *Jogjanese*, a *Surabayan* and a *Gombonger* how they would describe a room full of noisy people. The *Jogjanese* would say politely: “They talk rather loudly, don’t they?” The *Surabayan* would comment added emotion: “Beeh, what a loowoud bunch!” But the *Gombonger* would recreate the sound he heard: “Idhug, idhug, idhug—gedhubag-gedhubug pating braok temen sih!” This is really untranslatable but might be something like “My, my, my—what a chatter-natter-blather shouting match, eh!”

In Figure 1, the narrator tells how Queen *Jangiri* prepares to meet *Raden Sa’id*, her would-be hundred-and-fiftieth husband. Instead of being beheaded for trespassing in the palace of the Queen, *Raden Sa’id* has been pardoned on the condition that he marries her — which also means certain death, since all of her previous husbands have mysteriously died on their wedding-night!

The queen dresses herself and sets out. The interjections of the male performers illustrate her physical movements in sound. The performers have a repertoire of specific onomatopoeias for describing particular physical

actions. Here, they are listed with the Javanese words, followed by the sounds.

English / Javanese / onomatopoeia

to pick or grab (*candhak*) *ceg*
to wave, shake (*wiwir-wiwir*) *brebet*
to be tightened (*singseti*) *plenthit*
to twist, wring (*muntir*) *krewes*, *penthelo’*
to be lifted (*angkat*, *junjung*) *dhel*
to wear (*agem*) *slep*
to step (*jumangkah*) *jlinggrah*
to walk (*tindak*) *jlinggrang*

The Music

The vocalised *gendhing* are to many the most memorable aspect of *purwacarita/jemblung* performances. The use of onomatopoeic syllables to sing instrumental gamelan parts is quite natural for Javanese musicians, and is indeed part of their training, particularly for the *kendhang*.

With the exception of the *pesindhen’s* part, the *jemblung* performers do not render a vocalization of each instrument in a full gamelan ensemble. But the four performers do produce a surprisingly realistic impression of gamelan, an effect they achieve by skillfully combining elements from various instrumental parts, like giving the *kendhang* a melodic as well as rhythmic function. Instead of the normal rules of gamelan performance, *jemblung* musicians create their own set of rules or, more precisely, individual principles of function.

The four parts in the *jemblung* ensemble are referred to as *pesindhen*, *cengkok*, *kendhang* and *dhalang*.

The *pesindhen* is the female singer. Her part duplicates what would be sung in a regular gamelan. She also occasionally sings the male *gerong* line or *abon-abon* or *isen-isen* [filler phrases]. Her style is always straight-forward—never exaggerated like the male performers.

The *cengkok* singer creates his own *cengkok* [melodic patterns] to approximate what might be heard from a number of instruments playing together, invariably in *irama wiled* [a level of density relationships between gamelan instrument where the parts tend to be quite elaborate]. Though he is fairly free he always ensures that his line is *laras* [harmonious] with the *pesindhen’s*. He often also contributes *gong* and *kenong* sounds.

The *kendhang* singer invariably sings in the style of *kendhang ciblon* [a medium sized drum that plays complex patterns] with a melodic contour echoing the rise and fall of the *pesindhen’s* line. His pitch range is much wider and more varied than normal vocables for the *kendhang*, and has a distinct melodic quality. He sometimes reinforces the *cengkok* singer’s *kenong* or *gong* cadences.

The *dhalang* sings *suluk* phrases, *ada-ada* cues, *gerong*

choruses and *senggakan* [interjections], all in a "straight" or relatively normal manner. He also contributes to the kenong and kempul tones. Most importantly, as the narrator he directs the whole performance, including signaling when a new gendhing should be introduced.

The first three phrases of *Dhandhang Gula Tlutur* with a slendro accompaniment (Figure 2) are an example of how the vocalised gendhing are executed. The vowels have specific differences in pitch, in accordance with the *pathet* [modal sub-class], and tuning (slendro or pelog). For this particular excerpt these vowels are fixed in slendro. The "n", "m" and "ng" sounds round off the sonority of each syllable.

pitch / vowel/ syllables used / pronounced as in

- 1 i (ting, ti-, til,ling, li-, ni-)/ "tea"
- 6 i (ding) / "thing"
- 5 u (tu-, du-, nu-, also mung)/ "too", but also "put"
- 3 o (dong, nong / no-, mong)/ "song"
- 2 a (dang, tak, na-)/ "calm"
- 1 e (det, net, let, e-, ke-, ge etc.)/ "about"

Instrumental pieces are also performed in jemblung. A simple *gangsaran loro* [musical form featuring pitch 2] can be sung by just two people, one singing the kendhang and the other the balungan, kempul, bonang and gong. A performance of gangsaran by the jemblung performers (Figure 3), however, sounds quite different from the usual instrumental performance!

Jemblung is one of the liveliest performance arts of Banyumas. Although Javanese musicians trained in the values of high Javanese art often regard Jemblung as a *kasar* (low class) imitation of wayang kulit puppetry (albeit without puppets or musical instruments), in actuality Jemblung has its own distinct origins in the sung recitation of ambyah and similar texts, presented in macapat verse. Jemblung's similarities to wayang kulit are therefore superficial rather than fundamental. The practitioners of Jemblung achieve high levels of skill and virtuosity, and they deserve greater recognition than is sometimes accorded them. ■

Notes

1. *Stambul*, derived from "Istambul", since most of the stories used are Islamic, with actors dressed in Islamic costume, and accompanied by an ensemble of Middle Eastern instruments. *Menorek* used only stories of the Panji cycle, with performers dressed and moving in the style of *wayang orang* [human theater where the actor's imitate the movements of puppets]. *Ketoprak* relates mythical/historical stories of Java's past kingdoms. A director (the dhalang), narrates from backstage, while

costumed actors improvise dialogue as necessary. Onstage movement is minimal except for fight sequences. *Wayang golek* are three dimensional wooden puppets, used in performances that tell mainly Menak Javanese folk tales. *Menorek*, *ketoprak* and *wayang golek* are all accompanied by gamelan.

Further Resources

- Lysloff, Rene. "Non-puppets and Non-gamelan: Wayang Parody in Banyumas." *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 34, No. 1, Winter 1990, pp.19-36.
- A CD of field recordings of Jemblung and related Banyumas narrative forms, made by Jack Body and Yono Sukarno, has been released by Pan Records, in Leiden, The Netherlands PAN2048CD, 1997. The recording also includes similar narrative art forms which utilise "vocalised instrumental music" from Pekalongan, Blitar and Sampang (Madura).

narrator	(adha-adha, said in a louder and more demonstrative way):		
	Teka mangkono ta wau.		(Just then...)
male1	:	hmm,	(Hmm!)
male2	:	iyoh!	(Yeh!)

n	: dawuh dhalem Janggiri.		(Queen Janggiri...)
m1	:	hmm,	(Hmm!)
m2	:	iyoh!	(Yeh!)

n	: mila sampun sumanggem Kiyana Patih Laweyan,		(as she told her prime-minister...)
m1	:	heh,	(Heh!)
m2	:	iyoh!	(Yeh!)

n	: kersa bade mbiwaraken dateng madyaning alun-alun mila sigra cancut tali wanda,		(that she wishes to announce her command, and act decisively...)
m1	:	nah!	(Right on!)
m2	:	begita-begitu,	(That's it!)

n	: cancut taraning dandang tali kenceng wanda wujud,		(empahatically and with steadfastness)
m1	:	lha iyoh!	(Yeh!)
m2	:	iyoh!	(Yeh!)

n	: cumentingira den singseli,		(She tightens her girdle...)
m1	:	nah, plento!	(Aah...yeeetch!)
m2	:	plentitil,	(Yitch!)

n	: den wiwir-wiwir punang pun sami,		(- the cloth tears -)
m1	:	preketek, brebet	(Scretch...Rrrrip!)
m2	:	bebet	(Rrrrip!)

n	: sigra amuntir kumbalane,		(winding it tighter....)
m1	:	krewes, pentelo' - heh!	(Crrrunch...yetch....aghh!)
m2	:	krewes, pentelo'	(Crrrunch...yetch...)

n	: sigra nyandak punang duwung,		(she grabs her blouse...)
m1	:	ceg!	(Glick!)
m2	:	ceg!	(Glick!)

n	: den angkat, den agem wonten ampeyan,		(lifts it.....and puts it on...)
m1	:	dhe! slep!	(Whoop.....Yip!)
m2	:	dhe! slep!	(Whoop.....Yip!)

n	: paripurna anggenira dandos busana,		(and so her dressing is complete)
m1	:	iyoh!	(Yehhh!)
m2	:	iyoh!	(Yehhh!)

n	: asta gering nyandak poncoting nyamping,		(her thin hand takes the corner of her kain)
m1	:	ceg!	(Glick!)
m2	:	ceg!	(Glick!)

n	: kersa jumangkah,		(she steps out...)
m1	:	jliggrah	(Clomp!)
m2	:	jliggrah	(Clomp!)

n	: medal sangking penangkilan agung kawungkur tindakira,		(walks out of the room...)
m1	:	wu-a-duh,	(Wow-weee!)
m2	:	jliggrang,	(Ccclomp!)

Figure 1. Onomatopoeic sounds accompany Queen Janggiri's preparations for her meeting with Raden Sa'id.

n (*suluk*, half-sung): welulang rineka jalma,
 m1(music): a - temlong . .
 m2(music): a - temlong . .

n (sung): mula nyata Sunan Kali karsa ngangge
 m1(kendang): ndong ding,
 m2:

n : - -
 kendang: ndongding dung mbem nduk,
 m2 (trumpet): mbem, embembembem,

n : - -
 kendang: nduk,
 trumpet: mbembembembembem,

Now the performers begin a representation of martial music. (Untranslated words are either vocal *suluk* or syllables imitating musical instruments such as kenong, *bende* [small gong] or trumpet.)

n : teka mangkono Kiyana Patih sampun medhal wonten (The Queen arrives in the square,
 madyaning alun-alun sigra nyandak punang bende, and her prime-minister grabs a *bende*.....)
 m1: ceg. (Glick!)

n : sarta tabuhira den junjung tinabuh ngungkung swarane (a beater...lifts it...and beats thunderously)
 m1: ceg, dhei, (Glick.....whoop!)
 m2: ceg, dhei, (Glick.....whoop!)

n :
 m1: wadhuh, kenong koh ana untune ya? (Oh my!.....how come the kenong has teeth!)
 m2: mung hh hh, mung hh hh, beerr rr rr (mung hh hh, mung hh hh, beerr rr rr)

n :
 m1: heh heh heh, tlaten! nganti nyiprati (Hah, so fastidious!.....he's even spraying us!)
 m2: mung hh hh, mung, hh hh, beer rr rr (mung hh hh, mung, hh hh, beer rr rr)

n : ana sawenehe kang nyebul slompret (And now another trumpet calls)
 m1:
 m2: tarare hemororimororihemo (tarare hemororimororihemo)

n :
 m1: mo s'oyo (come on...
 m2: rorihe morot, morot, rorihe nyerot nyerot (rorihe morot, morot, rorihe nyerot nyerot)

n : Heh, kanca-kanca ing Kediri ("Friends of Kediri....")
 m1: nyerot-nyerot Mbong lah tuli ora umum.. (..hardly a proper trumpet sound!)
 m2:

n : kae Gusti Patih nabuh tengara bende ("That PM has just beaten the *bende*!")
 m1: hah? kula ah wadhuh ("Heh""Ho" Yah") ("Oh my God!")
 m2: kula kula kula ("Yah" "Yah") ("Yah")

n : ana apa kae ana apa? hah, ana perantean ucul ("What's happening?" "Its a gaol break!")
 m1: geger! geger! ("Riot! Riot")
 m2: geger! geger! ("Riot! Riot")

n : mbok menawa heh yen ta kaya mngkono ("Maybe! Then, we'd better...")
 m1: geger! ("Riot!")
 m2: onten sing mayur (Someone's caused trouble)

n : ayo padha nyedak, padha nyedak ("...move closer, closer.")
 m1: ayuk! ("O.K".)
 m2: ayuk! ("O.K".)

Figure 1, continued.

