

Jennifer A. Fraser. *Gongs and Pop Songs: Sounding Minangkabau in Indonesia*. Ohio University Press, 2015. 240 pp.

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Studies of music and ethnicity in Indonesia's outer islands are haunted by what Benedict Anderson called (in another context) the "spectre of comparisons."¹ Because the gamelan traditions of Java and Bali belong to politically powerful ethnic groups and have received the lion's share of attention from scholars, it can be a daunting task to claim spaces for other musical traditions. Jennifer Fraser rises ably to this challenge in her monograph *Gongs and Pop Songs: Sounding Minangkabau in Indonesia*, which explores *talempong*, a lesser-known Southeast Asian gong tradition performed in a variety of contexts by the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra. The result is a model of multi-sited, multi-method music ethnography that reveals shifting configurations of ethnicity, morality, gender, class, and modernity in contemporary Indonesia. Fraser follows *talempong*'s trajectory from folk tradition to university ensemble to commercial entertainment. Along the way, *talempong*'s widely variable pitches become standardized to a Western diatonic, then chromatic, scale; functional harmony is introduced; amplified, electronic instruments are added to the mix; and even djembes (African drums) and tambourines join the ensemble. It also becomes clear that Minangkabau music culture has been influenced decisively not only by Western models, but by the prestigious gamelan traditions mentioned above, as well as Minang- and Indonesian-language pop and *dangdut* (hybrid national music genre).

It is impossible to understand Indonesian ethnicities without an appreciation for how they are anchored in *kampung* (village) experience, and it is here that Fraser begins her exploration. After a detailed introductory chapter introducing *talempong*, the Minangkabau, and the cognitive view of ethnicity that guides her study, Fraser launches into a richly textured description of *talempong* performance focusing on two Minangkabau villages, Paninjauan and Unggan. The discussion centers on two traditions in particular: *talempong duduak*, tuned kettle gongs played while seated, accompanied by drums and idiophones; and *talempong pacik*, a processional form in which the gongs are joined by a reed instrument and percussion. Each village has its own distinctive sound, which represents the community both to the inhabitants and to outsiders:

[T]he local *talempong* practice becomes an investment in the community and a tacit statement about what it means, sounds, and feels like to be from that place. The presence of local styles also deepens the feeling of social connectedness between participants from the community because not only is the music familiar to them but it also is unique to that community. *Talempong* does not sound like that anywhere else. (80)

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¹ Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

Since the *kampung* (called *nagari* in Minangkabau) as idealized social unit by definition functions according to a cultural rather than market logic, it is unsurprising that musical performance there follows the parameters of gift exchange, even when monetary payment is involved. This stands in stark contrast to when “institutionalization, professionalization, and monetization” befall *talempong* performance. These processes are described in the book’s ensuing chapters, when Minangkabau “cosmopolitans,” under the influence of state support or economic incentive, appropriate the ensemble and refashion it into standardized signifiers of ethnic belonging.

Chapter 3 concerns the 1965 establishment of an institution dedicated to the “preservation” and “development” of traditional Minangkabau arts in the town of Padang Panjang, located near Bukittinggi. This institution was to have many names, starting with KOKAR (Konservatori Karawitan Indonesia). After numerous upgrades it is now known as ISI (Institut Seni Indonesia, Indonesian Institute of the Arts). Unfortunately, the developmentalist and xenocentric mentalities of the institution’s faculty cause the marginalization of village musicians, whom they deride as being backward and unlettered. At the same time, Fraser’s research indicates that both student and faculty interest is directed toward a style of music called *talempong kreasi baru* (or *talempong kreasi* for short), literally “new creation talempong,” as opposed to traditional musical forms like *talempong duaduk* or *pacik* (111–12). This new style of music is invented at the conservatory, and is an outgrowth of the decontextualizing of musical sounds and instruments on the one hand, and the standardization of tuning to a diatonic scale on the other. The next chapter investigates the ancestor of *talempong kreasi*, namely *orkes talempong*, a somewhat ungainly expansion of the traditional Minangkabau instrumental ensemble intended to rival a Javanese gamelan or Western symphony orchestra. (As it was primarily metallophones, it visually resembled the former; as its arrangements were based on functional harmony, it sonically resembled the latter.)

Fraser’s description of the formation of *orkes talempong* in the late 1960s and 70s (making good use of field materials from Margaret Kartomi’s trip to the institute in 1972²) strongly resembles Sutton’s account of the ill-fated *sinfoni kacapi* genre in Sulawesi.³ Fraser is critical of the institution’s attempts to “modernize” *talempong*; she states: “the preservation of indigenous arts at the institution also entailed their development” (100), which is to say, no preservation at all due to the misguided attempts to “improve” that which they hoped to protect. Later she bluntly asserts that “the preservationist objectives of the institutions have failed” (219).

The fifth chapter moves from state to market forces. The economic shapers of *talempong*-centric musical development in West Sumatra include the loss of public funds after regional autonomy is established (since West Sumatra is not a resource-rich province), the rise of a domestic tourist industry as Indonesia’s economy recovered from the *krismon* (monetary crisis) and began to prosper, and the pressing

² See Margaret J. Kartomi, “Minangkabau Musical Culture: The Contemporary Scene and Recent Attempts at Its Modernization,” in *What Is Modern Indonesian Culture?* ed. Gloria Davis (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 1979), 19–36.

³ R. Anderson Sutton, “Musical Genre and Hybridity in Indonesian Popular Music: *Sinfoni Kacapi* and *Campur Sari*,” *Asian Music* 44, 2 (2013): 81–94.

need to make a living felt by hundreds of graduates of Padang Panjang's arts institution who lacked viable career paths in the public sector. The stage was set for the development of a crowd-friendly genre of *talempong*-based music that diverged from the largely instrumental *kreasi* repertoire to instead encompass pop, *dangdut*, and vocal styles favored by Minangkabau audiences.

In many respects, the upstart *talempong goyang* genre that emerged in the 2000s resembles *campur sari* and *jaipong* in Central and West Java, respectively.⁴ The power of a propulsive rhythm and a seductive female vocalist to attract appreciative (male) audiences has, of course, been noted by a number of ethnomusicologists working in Indonesia, most notably Henry Spiller.⁵ While Fraser herself does not appear to like this genre very much (more on this below), she acknowledges that "*Talempong goyang* is the kind of style that people think balances the demands of the market and the representation of Minangkabau identity. In a world of tough choices, it is a better option than others" (212). Only time will tell if this particular market-driven hybrid possesses the vitality to endure in the Minang music scene.

Fraser's study joins excellent recent works by Byl and Kartomi on the still-narrow shelf of books dedicated to the ethnomusicology of Sumatra.⁶ *Gongs and Pop Songs* is also significant in that it elucidates how expressive culture shapes ethnic identity in multiple ways in *Reformasi*-era Indonesia.

The book did leave me wondering about the level of antipathy "cosmopolitans" have for traditional Minangkabau culture and how that factors in to cosmopolitan unwillingness to listen to *nagari* music. Village ways are usually not just "outdated"; the culture of the *kampung* has been an object of outright loathing among the upwardly mobile and status-conscious for Indonesia's entire history. While some in Jakarta have insisted to me that the pernicious classist slur *kampung* really has nothing to do with the actual *kampung*, others (and the word's etymology) suggest otherwise. Though it is possible that this kind of prejudice is not as salient in West Sumatra, the arrogance of the institutional faculty and their readiness to marginalize village-based music practitioners indicates differently.

Amidst the variety of options for performing ethnicity that her study lays out, Fraser does not shy away from revealing where her own loyalties lie. While the majority of the book examines the diatonic *talempong* ensembles that have emerged since the late 1960s, she is firmly on the side of the original village traditions. Many scholars of Indonesian culture may find that their sympathies lie elsewhere, due to their focus on people struggling to make a living in urbanized contexts. By contrast, Fraser's masterful music ethnography remind us that alternatives to capitalist relations still exist, albeit precariously, in the vast hinterlands of the Indonesian nation-state, and that, even now, the music you'll find there is not for sale.

⁴ See: Ibid.; and Henry Spiller, "Sundanese Dance as Practice or Spectacle: It's All Happening at the Zoo," in *Austronesian Soundscapes: Performing Arts in Oceania and Southeast Asia*, ed. Birgit Abels (Amsterdam, Manchester: IIAS/Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 45–70.

⁵ Henry Spiller, *Erotic Triangles: Sundanese Dance and Masculinity in West Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁶ See: Julia Byl, *Antiphonal Histories: Resonant Pasts in the Toba Batak Musical Present* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014); and Margaret J. Kartomi, *Musical Journeys in Sumatra* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

