



Jaipongan cassette cover photo for the Tati Saleh Group (Genjlong Jaipong, SP Records, ca. 1984).



Cassette cover photo for the Central Javanese gamelan group Riris Raras Irama (Jungkang, Kusuma Recording KGD 010, ca. 1977). Cassette covers courtesy of Philip Yampolsky.

MUSICAL POLITICS IN CENTRAL JAVA  
(OR HOW NOT TO LISTEN TO A JAVANESE GAMELAN)\*

John Pemberton

Part of the peculiar attraction that music holds for Javanese is exposed in a standard gag performed by local comedy groups. Alone on stage, a domestic servant flourishing a long feather-duster is casually at work.<sup>1</sup> Without warning, an offstage stereo blasts him with disco music. It evidently sounds good, irresistibly good, since the feather-duster, and then the arm and body attached to it, immediately begin to twitch in time to the music. The disco-ed domestic turns out to be a fantastic dancer, gracefully defying gravity and household authority at the same time. The catch, however, comes somewhere in mid-air between the living room sofa and Donna Summer's third verse, when the recorded music suddenly cuts off and leaves the inspired servant posed as a perfect fool. "It's that spoiled kid and his damn stereo," the embarrassed servant explains to the audience, "tricked me this time, but it won't happen again." Indeed, it might not have had disco resumed. But the stereo sound that replaces the disco is *dangdut*, Indonesia's immensely popular musical answer to Indian pop. And the young female singer is Elvie Sukaesih, whose hips--acting entirely on their own--allegedly touched off mass riots during the 1982 election campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Completely forgetting his feather-duster, the servant now exhibits his extraordinary talents as a solo *dangdut* dancer, only to be exposed again, duped once more by that brat at the stereo controls offstage. Before the disconcerted *dangduter* has time for the slightest wince of protest, however, there emerges the final attraction in this escalating series of popular musical powers: the sounds of the West Javanese up-tempo gamelan dance craze called *jaipongan*.<sup>3</sup> Now

---

\*An earlier draft of this article was presented as a paper for the conference "Popular Music in the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia" held at the Society for the Humanities, Cornell University, April 25-26, 1986. I would like to thank Ben Anderson, Nancy Florida, and Jim Siegel for their comments and suggestions.

1. The "Charlie Chaplin"-like Basuki of the Sri Mulat comedy group (Surabaya branch) plays the ideal comic-domestic. The gag described here is from a performance by Basuki at Sri Mulat Solo on June 12, 1983.

2. Faced with the 1982 election campaign disturbances as well as Golkar campaigner Elvie Sukaesih's *dangdut*-ed body, no less a defender of law and order than Admiral Sudomo (head of the Indonesian national security forces) confessed: "Frankly, I too like it when Elvie sings, sways her hips, and so on. I'm a normal human being" (*Tempo*, April 3, 1982, p. 12). For an introduction to *dangdut*, see William H. Frederick, "Rhoma Irama and the Dangdut Style: Aspects of Contemporary Indonesian Popular Culture," *Indonesia* 34 (October 1982): 103-30.

3. For a description of the rise of *jaipongan*, see Peter Manuel and Randall

every piece of the servant's revived anatomy is attached to a drum beat; each accented flick of his retrieved feather-duster is fastened to a gong. The audience already savors the moment when the music will, no doubt, abruptly stop and hang the musical fellow in full view of the imposing authority that has just marched on stage. The master of the house, an amused big-daddy *bapak*, stands ready to seize the entranced dancer by the neck and shake out an explanation for this shameless performance. But the few words sputtered by the petrified servant are lost in the audience's howls of delight.

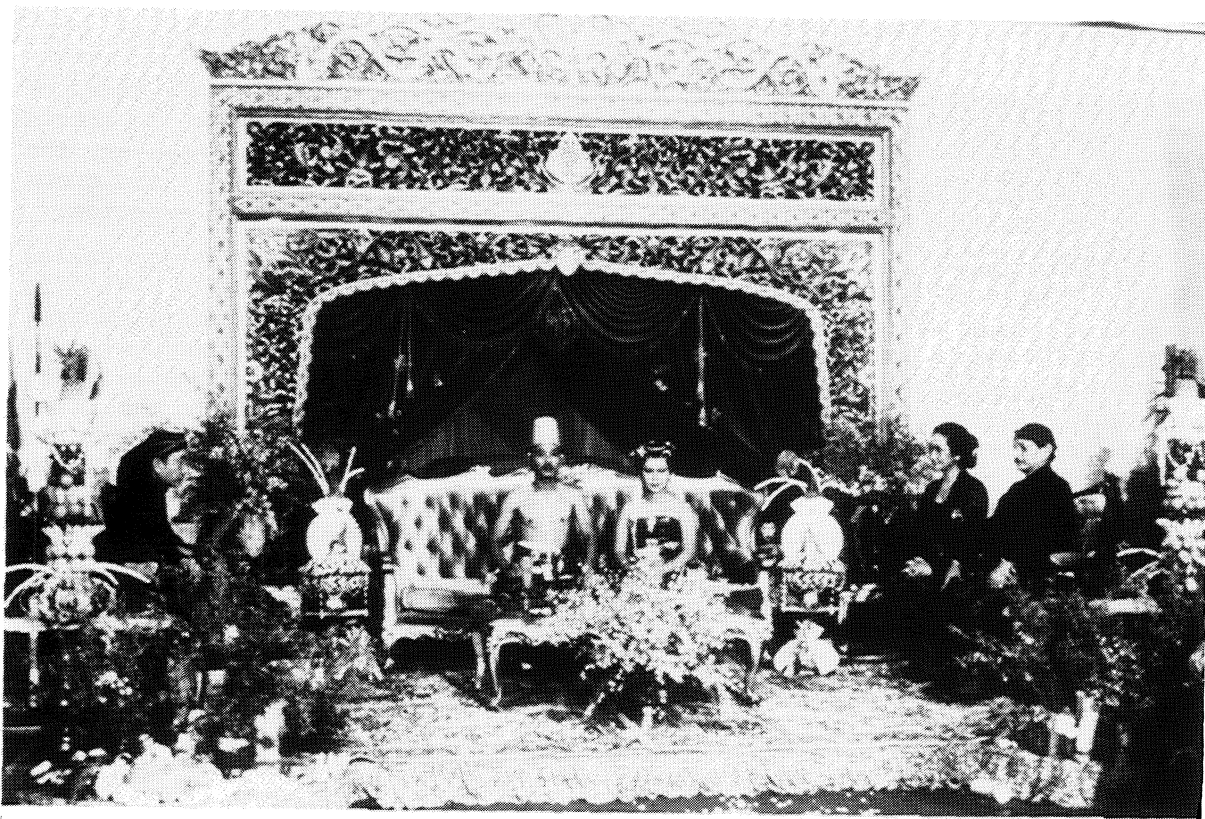
The musical powers assumed by this comedy routine, powers whose force of attraction still charms Javanese audiences and animates Javanese comic-servants, derive from a sense that certain sounds--in this case "musical" sounds--are, by nature, extraordinarily compelling. An entirely different sort of Javanese encounter with music occurs regularly in an everyday scene that ideally presents few surprises, does not animate listeners, and, as we shall see, represents a very different kind of power. The scene is that of formal domestic rituals, particularly the large ceremonial wedding receptions so common in modern Java. At these receptions each guest is promptly ushered to his or her own honored place: a stiff, straight-back chair notoriously uncomfortable by Javanese standards. The guests know all too well that once they have been seated within the ranks of chairs, they will remain seated for no less than two and one-half hours while they act as entertained but polite witness-observers to an event executed with near perfect predictability. There is, in fact, very little for the guests really to watch at wedding ceremonies, since the few rites performed are brief. For the most part, the bride and groom sit as if in state, immobile, at one end of the reception hall, and stare out over the rows of seated guests. The guests, in turn, observe this scene of order by displaying their own cultivated air of detachment. They usually do not compliment or comment on, for instance, the reception food passed down the row in their direction, the customary elegant attire of the host family, or the formal speeches on the family's behalf. They act, in a phrase, as honored guests.<sup>4</sup>

This show of detachment is not particularly difficult for the guests. During ritual seasons, they are likely to be served precisely the same food, attire, and speeches several times a week. On weekends, some guests attend afternoon and evening ritual double-headers. The whole business is so familiar that it assumes a kind of invisibility. Only when something in the wedding ritual

---

Baier, "Jaipongan: Indigenous Popular Music of West Java," *Asian Music* 18, 1 (1986): 91-110.

<sup>4</sup>Drawing on fieldwork conducted in the early 1950s, Clifford Geertz noted that: "Traditionally the bride (*mantèn*) dressed as a princess, the groom (also called *mantèn*) as a prince, and each marriage re-enacted a royal marriage." Geertz went on to observe that, "the traditional dressing pattern is now found, for the most part, only among *priyafis* . . . and it appears rather doubtful that this pattern at its most elaborate ever extended to the villages to any large degree." Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 57. Under the Suhartos' New Order government, the so-called "traditional" wedding patterns have emerged not only in cities and towns, but in outlying villages as well. This emergence reflects the New Order's appeal to cultural order as a basis and rationale for a stable political order and underscores the Suharto regime's authority in domestic life. "Traditional" domestic rituals now appear as ceremonial models of order--of giving and receiving commands--with local Javanese bureaucrats noting, "If only the government functioned as smoothly as these ceremonies!"



A 1983 Javanese bride and groom sit in state during their "traditional" wedding in Solo's Kusuma Sahid Prince Hotel.



Reception hall guests (women's section, front row) sit in attendance at a 1976 Solonese wedding.

scene looks wrong--the bride's lips, say, are painted on crooked--only then, do guests take note and comment with enthusiasm. Sometimes a string of little blunders elicits a commentary that lasts the evening. More often, however, the momentary pleasure that comes with a mishap, fades away quickly. If the groom ups and faints, as grooms are known to do, this too turns out to be expected.

The music that regularly appears at formal domestic rituals is the so-called *halus* or "refined" tradition of gamelan playing. Given its almost requisite presence at such rituals, *halus* gamelan music provides contemporary Central Javanese with their most common encounter with gamelan sound.<sup>5</sup> Although a reception hall gamelan occasionally plays specifically ceremonial music (for example, music which accompanies the bridal couple's entrances and exits), the great bulk of its music is *halus* and simply passes time. Like the food, attire, and speeches, the gamelan represents a predictable scene of order--a scene that, barring mishaps, requires no comment on the part of the guests. Slightly hidden from the guests' view, the gamelan produces music that is clearly audible and yet capable of being *not* listened to. In this respect, gamelan music at receptions is entirely different from the gamelan of *jaipongan*, whose power--as exhibited by the comic-servant--rests on its attraction as a music which *cannot* be "not listened to," that is, on its extreme irresistibility. If wedding guests suddenly jumped to their feet and danced the night away, this would be a terrific mistake. The reception hall gamelan assures that this does not happen. It furnishes the guests with the detachment necessary to enjoy, as it were, a Javanese wedding.<sup>6</sup>

\* \* \*

The Central Javanese musical landscape has not always been so dominated by *halus* gamelan music. Javanese and foreign accounts of the nineteenth and early twentieth century describe a diversity of musical forces.<sup>7</sup> Entranced dancers of *jaran képang*, for example, rode rattan horses into unusual realms where feats of invulnerability became possible. Enormous masked characters of *réyog* troupes danced through spectacular magical battles. *Tayuban* music played on the almost addictive attraction between a professional female dancer and the male customers who danced with her. And *wayang* shadow-puppeteers performed ritually, as if the puppets moved on their own and spoke for themselves. All

---

5. The possible exception here is gamelan music used for *wayang*; the implications of this will be discussed below.

6. Reception hall gamelan music is not precisely "background" music; that is, sound which passively or semi-consciously induces action (as, for example, muzak in shopping malls is said to encourage buying). The reverse seems the case: a reception hall gamelan is actively (or at least ceremonially) "not listened to" and thus encourages a form of generalized inactivity. This holds true both for live and recorded gamelan music played at formal domestic ceremonies; in fact, recorded gamelan music (along with the introduction of chairs) appears to have facilitated the creation of a "reception hall" atmosphere at even the most modest domestic ritual events in rural areas where the halls themselves are missing.

7. For an early twentieth century, inspired sampling of this diversity, see Th. Pigeaud, *Javaanse Volksvertoningen* (Batavia: Volkslectuur, 1938). For a somewhat similarly inspired, early nineteenth century Javanese account of Java's cultural landscape, see *Serat Tjentini*, 8 vols., ed. R. Ng. Soeradioera, R. Poerwa Soewignja, and R. Wirawangsa (Batavia: Ruygrok & Co., 1912-1915).

of these spectacles were activated by sounds from gamelan instruments, sounds that, by nature, refused to be "not listened to." It is, in retrospect, quite remarkable that each of these spectacles was, in one way or another, ritually associated with Javanese weddings. But that was at a time when wedding rituals stimulated a fertile dissemination of magical powers, a time before the widespread appearance of reception hall models of order.

The various fates of *jaran kèpang*, *rèyog*, *tayuban*, and *wayang* are instructive. Although by no means absent from the contemporary Central Javanese musical landscape, these four musical forces (and other similar displays of unruly behavior, action that is not fully *tertib*) have been increasingly closeted, marginalized, or bracketed as "traditional" or "folk" performances, particularly under the New Order. In the 1950s, the attractions of *rèyog* and *jaran kèpang* had coalesced with the more explicitly "political" attractions of political parties, most notably after 1955 with the PKI and PNI. This apparently natural coalescence of attractions made vigorous *rèyog* and *jaran kèpang* groups immediately suspect under the New Order government.<sup>8</sup> *Tayuban*, on the other hand, has enjoyed a long, illicit relationship with authority. Surakarta court chronicles from the late eighteenth century on, record the aristocracy's passion for *tayuban* no matter where it occurred, behind palace walls or at a lesser courtier's house out in the country.<sup>9</sup> During the late colonial period, *tayuban* apparently had become so identified with the Javanese ruling elite's lifestyle of excess, that by the 1950s, nationalist-minded wedding hosts in Solo turned to other forms of entertainment.<sup>10</sup> Village *tayuban*, however, continued to

---

8. And even in the later years of the New Order it was rumored that several Central Javanese leaders or *dhukun* ("shaman," possibly "sorcerers") for *jaran kèpang* groups were the targeted victims of the government's unofficial 1983 "Petrus" death squads.

9. For an early nineteenth century Javanese satirical description of an endless *tayuban* and the disorder that reigned when a *priyayi tayuban* party arrived at the home of an upwardly mobile merchant, see: R.M.H. Jayadiningrat I, *Serat Mas Ngantèn* (composed Surakarta, 1818) in *Serat Wulang* (inscribed Surakarta, 1899). MS. Museum Radyapustaka Cat.No. 104; Cornell University Surakarta Manuscript Project [henceforth SMP] Cat.No. Rp 106B, pt. I, pp. 1-48.

10. A postindependence (ca. 1950) *priyayi* appeal for the return of *tayuban* to Solonese wedding receptions, in light of the dance's purported "cultural authenticity" and artistic qualities, appears in *Lelangen Beksa Tayub* (composed Surakarta, ca. 1950) in *Aanteekeningen Betreffende den Javaanschen Dans (en Muziek)* (inscribed Surakarta, ca. 1950). MS. Rekso Pustoko Cat.No. none; SMP MN 649B.2. I am grateful to Nancy Florida for bringing this text to my attention.

The hope for the return of *tayuban* to Javanese elite circles still burns. In 1983 a retired Solonese army officer cum New Order customs official hosted a deluxe wedding in Solo's own Kusuma Sahid Prince Hotel. To give the affair a "genuine" (*asli*) feel, a *tayuban* was scheduled. The emissary sent off to a wedding in Blitar, East Java in search of the real thing, met, however, with more success than he could handle: "Oh, there were [female] dancers there, fifteen of them, and the men were all drunk, totally plastered. They were so generous with their *honor* [money handed over--often less than ceremoniously--by men to the women hired to dance] that the dancers' bras couldn't hold it all. Even the Bupati himself performed for quite a while, just like the old days. We couldn't do that at the Prince Hotel--what if ole Benny [Murdani]

flourish in the early years of Indonesian independence; indeed, these *tayuban* reportedly were so lively that stretchers were ready on the sidelines. The same villagers who enthusiastically recall these animated events of 1950s rural Java, often go on to note a sharp decline in *tayuban*--especially *tayuban* performed as part of village rites for tutelary spirits--immediately after 1965 when local, village-wide events became politically dangerous.

The recent history of *wayang* reveals a similar shift after 1965 when many *dhalang* were identified as being associated with the Indonesian Communist Party. Under the New Order, rarely do the puppets appear to talk on their own, exposing the personal exploits of local administrators and village heads. The almost otherworldly political immunity once enjoyed by the puppets, is largely lost now since *wayang* has come to be viewed as formal "entertainment" and *dhalang* hired as refined "performing artists."<sup>11</sup> Most often performed in conjunction with a domestic ceremony--usually a wedding ceremony--a reception *wayang* is viewed by guests, dutifully seated in the chairs provided them, with the same calculated detachment that a reception gamelan elicits. This detachment is dramatized regularly around midnight at the height of *wayang* action, long before the story actually concludes. At this point, the guest of greatest status--a village head, for example--stands up from his chair and exits; the other guests must follow suit. This gesture effectively turns its back on the power of attraction that a *wayang* presents and highlights the model order that ceremonial receptions now exemplify and local authorities are supposed to represent. Just after this grand exit, scores of kids and older women--the real *wayang* fans of contemporary Java--take over the chairs and sprawl out for a long night of dreamy viewing. Like the reception hall gamelan, a reception *wayang* performance reflects an increasingly common scene of ceremonial order in Central Java, a scene in which attractions routinely are left behind. In the

---

showed up? But you know, considering what goes on in that hotel at night, I think the *tayuban*'s okay; that sort of *energi* could be directed towards the dance. Actually, a good *tayuban* might even raise today's collapsed morals [*moral sing sa'iki rusak*]."

11. This shift, however, is part of a deeper history of transformation which converted *wayang*'s magical powers (and the threats to colonial order posed by *wayang*'s empowered local *dhalang*) into *priyayi* mystical aesthetics. "If we examine the lakon itself, isn't every lakon a battle between magic and mysticism and the ultimate victory of mysticism?" Mangkunagoro VII quotes from R.M.Ir. Sarsita's 1932 address in K.G.P.A.A. Mangkunagoro VII, *On the Wayang Kulit (Purwa) and its Symbolic and Mystical Elements*, trans. Claire Holt (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1957), p. 4.

In Java today, on occasions when "political" issues do emerge during a *wayang* performance, they almost always take the form of promotional sermons on behalf the New Order's development programs and dominant political organization, Golkar. A *dhalang* with a keen historical sense, the late R. Sutrisna, observed that this kind of sermonizing by *dhalang* may have had its beginnings in the late 1920s at Solo's Radyapustaka Museum school for *dhalang*, "Padasuka" (Pasinaon Dhalangan Surakarta, founded 1923). R.M.Ng. Dutadipraja, the instructor in "spiritual" lessons at Padasuka and a member of Solo's Theosophical Society, turned to formal philosophical pronouncements in *wayang* scenes requiring *bantah*, spirited debates between two magically endowed opponents. This substitution of sermons for verbal clashes transformed the confrontational logic of debate into a single-minded vehicle which gave the *dhalang* a new voice of authority. (Personal communication from Pak Sutrisna, 1983.)

end, many such *wayang* are ceremoniously "not watched" in much the same way that a reception hall gamelan is "not listened to."

\* \* \*

No doubt the loudest empowered sound of the past served Javanese royalty. Gamelan had long performed as an emblematic sign of the king's authority, but by the nineteenth century the royal noise transmitted from the palace was far more formidable. Its volume seems to have grown in inverse proportion to the king's power--power that was, of course, rapidly decreasing under Dutch colonial rule. Numerous gamelan from the king's storehouse, drum and fife corps, chanting Islamic officials, brass bands, mantra-ing palace diviners, waltz orchestras, and twenty-one cannon salutes all served as signals of royal occasions: the greater the occasion, the more of these were sounded, often simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> These ensembles were, in fact, but a part--a sort of Bureau of Music/Noise--of the enormous and refined ceremonial bureaucracy that the kingdom had become. Standardly ranked, titled, and salaried members of each department received orders and then passed them on. Official programs for state occasions read, for example: "At 8:15 a.m. set out the instruments and their players." By 8:30 the instruments were performing as a signal for beginning, say, the military drills to announce a ceremonial moment, accompany a formal procession, or most likely, welcome visiting Dutch dignitaries.

It was the gamelan, particularly the palace gamelan used for the *halus* style of soft playing, however, that somehow came to represent the royal bureaucracy itself. The gamelan orchestra was heard to echo an ideal chain of command. The violin-like rebab, it was imagined, was king: it gives the command. The drum, prime minister, then takes charge. The large gong, acting as chief justice, evenhandedly divides up business. Thereupon, the rest of the instruments get to work, like so many devoted court servants, filling it all in.<sup>13</sup> Palace gongsmiths gave the gamelan's courtly image a specifically gongmaker's twist. The large gong was imagined king, the smaller hanging gongs (*gong suwukan* and *kempul*) members of the royal family, the large kettle gongs (*kenong*) ministers, and so on, down the expanding quadratic line of the gamelan's bronze ensemble.<sup>14</sup> In any case, no matter which was dubbed "king," rebab or gong, the

---

12. Javanese manuscripts and printed programs from nineteenth and early twentieth century palace ceremonies abound with descriptions of this grand noise. A 1929 program (*Pranatan Lampah-Lampah saha pakurmatanipun manawi Pramésuari Dalem Gusti Kanjeng Ratu Mas ambabar miyos kakung* [Surakarta: Karaton Surakarta, 1929]) plans the ceremonial events, should Pakubuwana X's (second and last) queen, Ratu Mas, give birth to a boy, the much anticipated Crown Prince. In the days that preceded the birth, no less than seven palace gamelan sounded, as did teams of Islamic officials (*panghulu* and *modin*) and diviners (*Juru Suranata*). But, alas, a baby girl emerged and the scheduled *tambur*, *salompret*, and cannon salutes were minimized.

13. See J. Kunst, *Music in Java* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973), p. 223. The clichéd image of a gamelan kingdom of musical commands was still in circulation among some older gamelan musicians in Solo in the 1970s. A reduced, more streamlined version of it appears in R. L. Martopangrawit's *Pengetahuan Karawitan* (Surakarta: ASKI Surakarta, 1972), pp. 13-14. Martopangrawit distinguishes *pamurba* (those instruments which supervise) from *pamangku* (those instruments which support).

14. Personal communication (1976) from the late M. L. Karyopradonggo, last of

image of the gamelan as an idealized royal chain of command stuck.

By the 1930s, the image of the gamelan orchestra as a musical model kingdom, had been transposed into Indonesian nationalist thought. In his 1932 article "Duty and the Gamelan," the prominent nationalist leader Dr. Soetomo envisioned an "harmonious" (*harmonis*) gamelan society where each member has the duty to perform a particular task.<sup>15</sup> If the members are disciplined and work together, a magnificent social harmony is produced. The gamelan thus became a picture of performed musical obligations, the model echo of an ideal social order. It is this image of the *halus* gamelan, augmented by the New Order's devoted insistence that *halus* gamelan music represents a refined, "traditional" art form, that now reappears regularly at formal wedding receptions. This image joins others in representing an ideal scene of order and, at the same time, facilitates order by presenting sound that can be "not listened to."

Missing in this ideal image are the players, the Javanese behind the instruments. A much less "harmonious" picture emerges in the stories from musicians, especially older musicians from palace circles.<sup>16</sup> One such story tells of how the palace musicians "won their freedom." Early in this century, a legendary palace rebab player was accused of truancy from a state ceremony. Instead of accepting the customary three days jail sentence, he defiantly resigned his position as first rebab. The king, however, could not bear his favorite rebabist's absence and sent a messenger: "The king demands your presence!" "After I've finished my card game," retorted the rebel rebabist who later returned to the palace only on the condition that, thenceforth, gamelan musicians be exempted from sojourns in the royal jail.<sup>17</sup> Accomplished gamelan musicians were (and

---

the Karaton Surakarta's titled gongsmiths.

15. "Kewajiban dan Gamelan," in *Kenang-kenangan Dokter Soetomo*, ed. Paul W. Van der Veur (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1984), pp. 71-72. For a detailed analysis of the "gamelan society," see Savitri Prastiti Scherer, "Harmony and Dissonance: Early Nationalist Thought in Java" (MA thesis, Cornell University, 1975). See also Benedict O'Gorman Anderson, "A Time of Darkness and a Time of Light: Transposition in Early Indonesian Nationalist Thought," in *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid and David Marr (Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books, 1979), pp. 246-47.

16. Most foreign ethnographers' accounts of Central Javanese gamelan music and of conversations with gamelan musicians make no allusion to gossip, an absence which is striking in light of the importance and delight attached to this form of discourse by the musicians themselves. Indeed, given the fierceness of their gossiping, it is surprising that Central Javanese musicians are capable of playing "together" at all, unless of course, gamelan's intimate musical togetherness has very little to do with ideal social harmony.

It should be clear that the material presented in this article is Solo based and no doubt Solo biased. Many of the comments of course pertain to the "other" court center, Yogya, as well as regional centers (like Klaten) that for years have felt Solo's influence. Be that as it may, there probably still is something peculiarly Solonese in the *degree* of unacknowledged contrast between celebrated ideal images and pursued worldly realities.

17. This tale is from the late R. L. Martopangrawit. The rebel rebabist was Martopangrawit's hero, R. L. Pantjapangrawit whose spirit of defiance may have won him "freedom" in the palace, but brought him exile to Boven Digul by the Dutch.

mostly still are) a spunky lot, known for gambling, romancing, and drinking. (In this last category, court gamelan musicians' enjoyment of the *sloki*, the shot-glass, appears to have been second only to the members of the royal family.) Stories are studded with cigar-toting drummers, rival rebab players, gamelan jokesters, and musical revenge--all part of a lively dissonance rather than a model social harmony.<sup>18</sup>

This spirited resistance to model order is reflected and at times quite audible in much of the gamelan musician's music. With great enthusiasm, older Karaton Surakarta gamelan musicians recall performing during the palace's *Sekatèn* festivities of the past.<sup>19</sup> Part of the special pleasure that accompanied playing the *Sekatèn* gamelan derived from the particular set-up presented by this gamelan's musical structure. Although the introductory instrument (an enormous *bonang* or rack of kettle-gongs) begins, it does not actually choose or even know the name of the musical composition it must introduce. Its introduction is generic and simply sounds the prescribed melodic line of the mode in which the piece is set; immediately following this "introduction," any one of a number of compositions in the mode may appear. The actual choice of the specific composition lies in the hands of the first *demung* (a large keyed instrument) player; and therein lies the fun. Since the *bonang* player must lead the chosen piece, the *demung* player chooses carefully, either to expose the *bonang* "master" with an obscure composition, or to hand him a lightweight piece (knowing full well that sooner or later positions will switch). Built in to this scene is the enticing possibility of subverting the "master," musically.

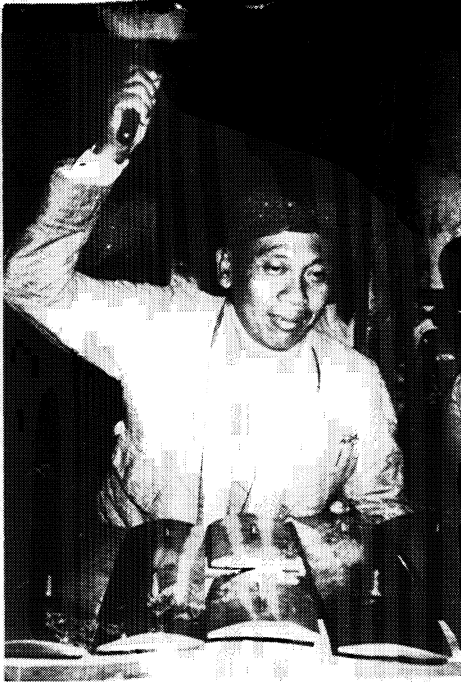
Cunning artistry in gamelan playing is by no means limited to *Sekatèn* performance. Although the *halus* gamelan orchestra may appear to be governed by a perfect regularity of uniform gong cycles and routine melodic formulae, its music is riddled with moments of specific irregularity and structural contradiction. There are, for example, points in certain gamelan compositions where everyday melodic patterns are replaced by an idiosyncratic melody or a direct musical quotation; this gives the composition its character. Then again, there are melodic impasses, blind spots built into the very structure of gamelan music: points which require the sudden transformation of a two and one-half octave melody into one and one-half octaves; sudden modal shifts within a single composition; broad melodic leaps which, for the detailed workings of the

---

18. In his *Serat Jayèngbaya*, a parodic fantasy of career options in early nineteenth century Solo, the young Ronggawarsita extolled the benefits of being a *niyaga* (gamelan musician). Not only could you expect all the food, drink, opium, and respect you desired, but you could escort into the night the *ronggèng* (the professional female dancer hired for a *tayuban*) right after the performance and "feel proud as a *kumendhur* [a military commander]." The catch in being a gamelan musician--and there is always a catch to the career fantasies of *Jayèngbaya*--comes when a big-shot *priyayi* requests an obscure piece for accompanying a *tayuban* dance, a piece that you, the rebabist and leader, don't happen to recall. The next thing you know, a disappointed *priyayi* smashes his gin bottle over your head while a crowd of heckling onlookers shout out, "madman musician." R. Ng. Ronggawarsita [=Kiyahi Sarataka], *Serat Jayèngbaya* (composed Surakarta, ca. 1830) in [*Klompokan*] (inscribed Surakarta, 1920). MS. Sasono Pustoko, Karaton Surakarta Cat.No. 135 Na; SMP KS 415.5, pt. 5, pp. 2-4.

19. *Sekatèn* is a palace-sponsored festival held in the courtyard of Solo's Mesjid Ageng (Great Mosque) and overflowing into a mass of carnivalesque attractions covering the broad, open field which faces the palace proper. Occurring during the month of Mulud, the festival commemorates the birth of Muhammad.

Sekatèn gamelan musicians in Solo.



Left: Bp. Hadipurwoko poses in 1976 for a portrait with the demung of the Karaton Surakarta Sekatèn gamelan Kiyahi Guntur Sari. He has just cracked the demung's middle key in two. For this amazing feat--the enormous bronze key broke, in fact, with a mysterious crunch precisely on the final gong tone of a composition played on the final evening of Sekatèn festivities--Hadipurwoko reportedly received a prize from the palace.



Right: R. L. Martopangrawit leads off on demung during a 1977 evening Sekatèn sounding of Kiyahi Guntur Sari.



Left: R. L. Haswopangrawit with Kiyahi Guntur Sari's bonang panembung in 1976.

gamelan's elaborating instruments, can create the sense that there is no way to get "there" from "here." These are moments where one either wings it with a show of confidence (which, when the results are less than successful, is called *ngawur*, "faking it")<sup>20</sup> or draws from a traditional bag of musical tricks, or both. It is the solving, or better yet, the playing out of these musical riddles that forms a musician's esoteric know-how: the crystallization from gamelan experience of all that does *not* fit the rules.<sup>21</sup> Among gamelan players, this coveted know-how (together with some nerve) distinguishes the experienced musician from the others, those puzzled players who, when faced with a melodic impasse, *ngawur* awkwardly and meet a sort of musical dead-end. These points--suggesting, as they do, a composition's special character--provide the moments that accomplished musicians seem to find the most satisfying. Behind the facade of functional order that a gamelan orchestra presents to nonmusicians, however, the spirited play within this know-how distinguishes all gamelan players, no matter how bad they are, from their ascribed roles as musical clerks in a model bureaucracy.<sup>22</sup>

\* \* \*

At formal wedding receptions, most guests are unmusical in these matters; they are oblivious to all this. Besides, Javanese gamelan players usually perform perfectly deadpan.<sup>23</sup> For the guests, the *halus* gamelan now represents

---

20. An elegant example of *ngawur* from a small Solonese gamelan session in 1976, featured an unwitting *pesindhèn* (female vocalist). Arriving just after the first piece had started, she immediately plunked down and sang her "part" with a convincingly detached air of experience while the rest of the musicians smiled and played on. A little later, the drummer delighted in mentioning to her that the piece was a garden variety *gendhing bonang*, a piece featuring the *bonang* and for which there was, alas, absolutely no vocal part. As I recall, the woman calmly replied something to the effect of, "You don't say."

21. The notion "know-how" refers, in part, to the old sense of *kawruh*: acquired knowledge; lore, the specifics of a trade (before *kawruh* developed a rationalized feel in Western scientific texts which appeared in Javanese at the beginning of this century). *Kawruh gendhing* thus refers to the specifics of musical compositions. The other side of this "know-how" is *ngelmu*, esoteric knowledge with magical overtones: the keys to an older world of power and rivalry.

22. I have emphasized gamelan specifics here partly in response to what seems to me ethnomusicologists' preoccupation with regular formulae, repeatable patterns, gong cycling, and so on. There are, of course, patterns and cycles in gamelan music; the unruffled *pesindhèn* of footnote twenty could not have sung to the *gendhing bonang* as wonderfully as she did if there were not. The problem with patterns, however, is that they tend to refer only to other patterns (turning ethnomusicology into a closet linguistics), or lead to colorless (sometimes cosmic) generalizations. In any case, patterns are not very talkable; among Central Javanese gamelan players, musical peculiarities and musicians' idiosyncrasies are.

23. The considerable gap between nonmusicians' and musicians' perceptions of music is certainly not peculiar to Central Java. What is remarkable in Java, however, is the nature of this gap. On the one hand, aestheticized generalizations elevate *halus* gamelan music to ideal realms of social, even spiritual, harmony. On the other, gamelan musicians go about playing and talking about

an explicitly "traditional" order of things by regularly presenting sounds that can be "not listened to." Unlike the *jaipong*-ed comic-servant, reception hall guests remain unmoved by gamelan sounds. The sounds thus are turned back on themselves and deflected back onto the gamelan. There, the ensemble's sounds circulate and are made to perform on their own as in concert music: sounds caught in a performance where they are disciplined and refer only to themselves. But in Java, a gamelan concert tradition where spectators sit and face the music, does not really exist. Perhaps sound's ability to animate is still too active, or perhaps the echoes of gamelan trance ensembles are still too close for concert comfort. The reception hall scene comes nearest to a concert tradition. Were guests to turn around in their chairs and stare at the gamelan placed off to one side, they might perceive an animated orchestra of players whose every gesture appears attached to a drum beat or fastened to a gong--a sort of "player gamelan" whose members move methodically in time to the music. But proper guests do not turn around and stare. Instead, they ceremoniously display their detachment by not watching, not listening, and not commenting on anything much, save mishaps.

Javanese domestic rituals have not always exhibited such a studied air of detachment. Attempting some salvage ethnography on weddings, I asked an elderly villager:

JP: What were rituals like in the old days?

A: Chairs--there weren't any.

JP: Yes, but how about ritual offerings and their symbolism?

A: Chairs--that's the big difference.

After a rambling sentimental description of domestic rituals in the past--times when neighbors and kin relaxed on rattan mats gambling, gossiping, and storytelling the night away--the old man matter-of-factly decided in favor of chairs. "They are, after all, *praktis* [practical]: they place a time limit on rituals." A ritual event now ends with a closing speech directed at the rows of seated guests who then must leave. After two and one-half hours everyone is only too happy to stand up and file out.

Straight-back chairs, in fact, form an important part of Java's ceremonial history. From the late eighteenth century on, palace regulations slowly extended the privilege of sitting in chairs to an expanding show of loyal guests.<sup>24</sup> At postindependence reception hall ceremonies nowadays, all guests are honored with this privilege as well as the problems it carries. Beyond the physical awkwardness that reception hall chairs bring out, social discomfort is a common worry. The concern comes with being seated next to someone you have never met before--

---

their music with a less than "spiritual" appreciation for the everyday pleasures and intrigue that the music suggests. But even gamelan musicians are not above citing the lofty benefits of gamelan music when the moment seems appropriate.

24. See *Serat Adhel* (compiled and inscribed Surakarta, ca. 1900). MS. Museum Radyapustaka Cat.No. 75 b; SMP Rp 77), pp. 79-83, for chair (*kursi*) regulations probably dating from the time of Pakubuwana III (r. 1749-88). These regulations permitted the use of chairs to the courtier's rank of *kaliwon* and above. By 1929, Pakubuwana X (r. 1893-1939) was handing out seating rights as a regular part of the Karaton Surakarta's contribution to *kamajengan* or "progress" (*Pusaka Jawi*, 1-2 [Surakarta: Java-Instituut, 1929], p. 12).

An intriguing introduction to the role of chairs in contemporary Java, appears in Saya Shiraishi's "Silakan Masuk. Silakan Duduk: Reflections in a Sitting Room in Java," *Indonesia* 41 (April 1986): 98-101.

quite likely at these mass receptions. A middle-aged Solonese man with years of obligatory experience at performing as a guest for reception hall weddings explains the situation:

The problem is like this. You're seated right next to someone you don't know, someone you've never even met, and this guy turns out to be an expert on a subject you know absolutely nothing about and he starts up talking on that subject. All you can do is answer, "Uh huh, of course, yes that's right, uh huh." That's what's known as *ngegongí*.

*Ngegongí*, the terrifically Javanese term for this common human plight, means, at bottom, that you must perform on cue as a gong. All you can do is chime in, involuntarily.

This is where the *halus* reception hall gamelan comes in. Guests remain seated in their chairs and display a detachment from gamelan sounds; they demonstrate that these sounds are "not listened to." The sounds thus are disciplined and made to perform on their own. Their performance, in turn, represents to the guests a model of musical obligations--a music imagined to echo the now-traditional reception hall order of chairs and social obligations. But with the chairs, the honored guests are faced with the unnerving possibility of having to *ngegongí*. Given its image as a refined musical chain of command, the reception hall gamelan is ideally equipped to *ngegongí* on the guests' behalf. The gamelan relieves the guests' anxiety that accompanies the fear of being treated like a gong. It lets guests sit undisturbed, as if listening to someone else fulfilling the task of *ngegongí*, for the better part of two and one-half hours.

The famous Indonesian educator and contemporary of Dr. Soetomo, Ki Hadjar Dewantara concluded a 1936 article on gamelan with a thought on musicians' status.<sup>25</sup> To raise the social position of gamelan players to that of the guests for whom they play, gamelan instruments should be built taller and their players seated in chairs. This has not happened; had it, gamelan players would be one step closer to a respectable concert tradition, which is probably what Ki Hadjar had in mind. Instead, a reception hall gamelan remains partly hidden from the guests' view. Offstage, the *halus* gamelan plays music that welcomes guests to chairs, keeps them in the chairs for hours, and then signals them to leave. Gamelan sound thus still displays its own peculiar powers by exhibiting a trance-like control over people; but it does so by a reverse logic of immobility and in the institutional interest of a very different order of power.

---

25. Ki Hadjar Dewantara, *Karja Ki Hardjar Dewantara*, 2a (Yogyakarta: Madjelis Luhur Persatuan Taman Siswa, 1967), p. 213.