

# **Theory's Object: Representing Balinese Music-Making**

Paper to Panel on

*Bali: Representations of Culture*

**International Bali Studies Conference**

**Bali in Global Asia**

**Between Modernization and Heritage Formation**

**16-18 July 2012**

**Denpasar Bali**

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## Theory's Object: Representing Balinese Music-Making

Bali held scant musicological interest for Westerners in the nineteenth century. Gamelan makes the odd appearance in the literature's margins but lurks there as a jumble of sound - a rather awkward cacophony. Friederich's 1849 account of a royal cremation ceremony (and the accompanying widow sacrifice) notes:

'during the whole time, from the burning of the prince till the leap of the victims, the air resounded with the clangour and noise of the numerous bands of music.' (1959 [1849-50]: 97)

Balinese gamelan is here synonymous with disorder. To paraphrase Jacques Attali's distinction between noise and music: 'noise is a weapon and music is its domestication' - at this point, to the European ear, Balinese gamelan is largely the stuff of ritual barbarism - it is pre-domestic, as such (Attali 1985: 25). Indeed, it is apparently so unmanageable that for the most part, other than brief commentary by the odd Dutch administrator, early musicological accounts of Bali are scarce.

Yet, by the late colonial era this same 'clangour and noise' of Balinese gamelan had emerged as a global phenomenon and was widely perceived as a music par excellence. If - to borrow another provocative definition from Attali - music is 'noise given form according to a code that is theoretically knowable', from hereon gamelan's new listeners apparently got to grips with its ciphers (Attali 1985: 25). Indeed, from the 1930s onwards Balinese music-making in its many forms became the subject of enraptured discussion from New York to Tokyo, Mexico City to London. It offers 'elaborate [musical] architecture'; it is 'serene and unified' (McPhee 1944: 40, 11). And it is celebrated and argued over by amateur enthusiast and ethnomusicology pundit alike. Indeed, from here, gamelan is not only 'High Art' but also the object of musicological theory: it comes backed by text books and charts, treatises on modes and modulations - authored by Westerners and Balinese alike.

This paper will explore some of the history and implications of representing gamelan music: what inspired this apparent change in sensibility? What was to be gained from it? And how do these representations impact on the conceptualisation of Balinese music-making today? In exploring these questions, I shall look first at some examples early colonial formulations of gamelan music and examine how seemingly innocuous if colourful descriptions of Balinese musical practice were nonetheless intimately connected to the colonial project. From here, I then consider the potency and the pitfalls of one very specific process of representing music: its theorisation. Using a similar process of analysis to unpick more recent accounts of Balinese gamelan theory or teori, I propose the need to contextualise any such attempt to codify the act of music-making.

### Colonial objects

Core to various excited colonial formulations of Bali's musical practice was the act of representing Balinese music as a series of vivid, often contrary objects: gamelan music-making as fossil, as high Art, as bronze analogue of Bach counterpoint, as material proof of inherent social order.

I propose that such representations of gamelan music were created and deployed (and in various cases, continue to be deployed) to substantiate a number of grand claims as to Bali's status and heritage. In turn these grand claims appear closely linked to various other socio-political agendas. Indeed, as set out by Art historian Nelson Goodman, inherent to the construction of any representation is the purposive act of 'representation as'; integral to any representative practice, an agent represents something as something else, to a subject, on an occasion and for a purpose (1968: 27-31). In this vein, critical examination of a representation necessarily involves consideration of what the designated object of

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representation (for instance, the practice of Balinese music-making) has been represented *as* (i.e. a shining fossil) - and, critically, by whom, for whom, when, where and why.

It is testament to the somewhat vivid imagination of Balinese gamelan's early Western commentators that such a range of objects exist in the literature, but for the purposes of this discussion, I here consider two early formulations of Balinese music-making which I shall examine with this 'representation as' approach:

Firstly, the representation of Balinese gamelan music as cultural relic - or opportune fossil. 1920s studies of Balinese music overcame the idea of noise to declare Bali a tonal depository of a noble, ancient Java. This theory draws on the now largely discredited Majapahit myth, where the court is alleged to have fled wholesale from Java to Bali following the "sudden" incursion of Islam in the fifteenth century. Dutch musicologist Jaap Kunst duly asserted that Bali was the place where these ancient musical forms remained housed, where the 'old musical forms and old names have a so much greater chance of continuous existence' (1927: 72). In turn, Bali's Gambuh tradition came to be celebrated in the literature (and often continues to be) as the clearest example of this living ancient Javanese tradition alive and well on Bali, despite very little evidence to support this eerily neat transmission. Widely termed 'the source and prototype' for all manner of more modern Balinese dance and musical forms, Gambuh is often understood as a site where 'the manners and ideals of the sophisticated courtiers of the Majapahit era are preserved, as well as the musical repertoire' (Bandem and de Boer 1995: 27).

But amid these musical relics we can also identify the relics of Dutch colonial policy. We find here the skeleton of the Dutch administration's reconfiguration of Java's "true" cultural heritage as a shimmering Hindu cargo - a reconfiguration that took place in response to the Java War and the onset of political uprising, as conducted under the banner of Islam. Defining Java's past as Hindu was vital for the Dutch, and Bali's Majapahit relics - musical or otherwise - provided a crucial piece of circumstantial evidence (Florida 1995). Indeed, this reconfiguration of cultural history proved equally convenient in subjugating the Balinese through the administration's various traditionalising policies, such as an education system that focused on traditional Balinese dance, sculpture, music and language rather than science and mathematics (Robinson 1995: 49).

One interesting find in musicological studies of the time is an interesting complicity in this 'ancient narrative' among a number of high-caste Balinese musical informants. Lontars suddenly surface that restrict gamelan at its most refined to Bali's high caste community. Indeed, the alleged ancient Hindu roots to Balinese gamelan repertoire held popular explanatory power for this group. By finding new ways to preserve (or construct) exclusive esoteric 'knowledge', including that which supposedly concerned music, this group found one means to preserve an otherwise dwindling power supply.

A second example. We are likely all familiar with Bali's perhaps most popular and most loaded epigraph - "that every Balinese is an Artist" - and likewise familiar with the epigraph's genesis amid a dark cooperation between colonial cultural policy, the drifting nostalgia of Bali's Euro-American visitors, and the many Balinese trying to navigate their way more productively through the imposition of radical social and political change. Musicological accounts of Balinese gamelan of the era cheerfully conform. But an interesting corollary of this obsession with Bali's imagined 'intrinsic aestheticism' was a fad linking Balinese music to the precepts of Western musical modernism and, by association, the gold standard of Baroque counterpoint. Here we have Balinese music represented as modernist apologia.

For popular amid the New World modernists of the 1930s was the notion of new

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musical materials and with this, a firm rejection of the bombastic Germanic orchestral tradition and the perceived emotional excesses of Romantic music. Indeed, whatever the enthusiasm for accessing 'new' materials, the movement's response to non-Western musical material was strongly shaped by this antagonism: composers were searching for new musics to validate the specific claims of their rejection, and to question the West's emphasis on tonality over rhythm and to rebuff the need for programmatic musical associations - that is music which tells a story or paints a picture (to mix my metaphors, aptly enough.)

With Canadian composer Colin McPhee at the helm, but by no means alone, Balinese music came to be framed as modernism's certification, and in very specific ways. There is no doubting that a Balinese gamelan ensemble holds few similarities to a 100-piece Wagnerian orchestra. Why would it? But now instead of a "living fossil" wedged firmly into Bali and Java's igneous crust, Bali music is bestowed with a new paradox - and one closely associated with this particular brand of modernism - these writers deem gamelan as the ultimate in modern timelessness (or timeless modernity). Gamelan music from gong kebyar to gong gede is depicted as: 'a phenomenon of sound rather than of language... filled with a rhythmic vitality at once primitive and joyous'; an 'ultra-modern Bach fugue' (McPhee 1935: 163, Covarrubias 1937: 207).

Were you to open a 1930s journal article on the ideals of modernist musical composition you may perhaps find an eerily similar batch of vocabulary to describe a work by Edgard Varese (although perhaps with less on J.S. Bach for him). While these writers claim Balinese music is a study in form, rhythm and abstraction which speaks to us on a *timeless, universal* level - I would argue the exact reverse, that Balinese music-making was in fact being clothed in language absolutely precise to that moment in Western cultural history, and consciously or not, serving a very precise purpose. In doing so these representations are all but dislocated from the very activity they purport to describe.

This all may seem rather innocuous - but I suggest not. These accounts bleed easily into another vocabulary also popular among ethnographers, governors and informants on Bali - a vocabulary that seems to fuel cultural policy on Bali up to the present day: that of 'unity', 'harmony' and 'balance'. McPhee was eager to cite gamelan's 'perfect balance' of form by which it achieves its structural unity - and along with a host of other writers, noted how this was mirrored in the social organisation of Bali's music-making and indeed across Balinese life more generally (McPhee 1966: 111). The pernicious backdrop to 'steady state Bali' and the political agenda behind the various hymns to Balinese 'balance' have been explored elsewhere - but in summary, we find these metaphors deployed as a means of enabling strategic governmental control.

### Introducing theory and teori

Moving closer towards the present day, I shall explore a set of representative practices concerning gamelan as yet somewhat under-examined - that of music theory, or as termed by Balinese scholars 'teori gamelan Bali'. Formulating teori began in earnest from Independence onwards, assumed particular popularity during the Orde Baru and remains a core part of the ISI student and research programmes. 'Teori gamelan Bali' has covered a number of aspects of gamelan music, notably various codifications of Balinese gamelan's scales and modes, and its composition structures. Particular preoccupations include the naming of various 5-tones modes with the seven-tone scale, determining the name and origin of metric cycles under the rubric of *jajar pageh* in gamelan compositions, and from here locating a tripartite structure known as KPP (*kawitan, pengawak and pengecet*) structure, in works both new and klasik.

Yet, on my encounters with numerous Balinese processes of creating, refining and performing music, I found a notable absence of any of these concerns - or of their sanctioned

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vocabulary - in practice. Indeed, many practising Balinese musicians were also quick to agree with me about this absence. This disjuncture raises a number of questions. Why are these theoretical accounts of gamelan music so dislocated from what they purport to explain? What purpose do they serve instead? And how might this process connect to the kinds of representational activity at large on Bali in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century?

### **Knowledge and knowing**

I suggest the creation of any kind of 'theory' is a very particular kind of representational practice and one closely linked to a distinct Western history and conception of knowledge production. Drawing on the work of Johannes Fabian, we can interrogate the idea of 'knowledge' in the West as operating through the act of re-presenting, a fixing of process into order - which stands in opposition to the active process, of knowing (Fabian 2000 [1985]: 191). Fabian proposes dissolving such an opposition between knowledge as object (a representation) and the act of knowing (a practice) by considering representation itself to be a practice. It is therefore an active process of, in Goodman's words, representing something as something else - a praxis, an activity in itself.

What then of theory? Theory as a set of explanatory principles has come to stand for conditioning knowledge into its most ordered form: knowledge's perfect distillation. From the term's Greek roots, *theoria* ('spectacle') and *theoros* ('spectator'), the notion of theory also constructs distance - the gap between viewer and object viewed - or knower and object known. Theory is lodged between the spectator and spectacle, a means of creating and conceptualizing a distance between them. In doing so, theory becomes a particularly powerful mode of representing. Given to mean 'a scheme of ideas which explains practice' since the eighteenth century (Williams 1983: 316), theory can thus also be defined as hierarchic through its alleged ability to transcend and encompass all of practice. As with Fabian's distinction between knowledge and knowing, theory is a totalizing structure. Furthermore, by being privileged as an entity ontologically distinct from practice it denies itself active properties. It is an exercise in decontextualisation, thereby seeking to escape any association with human power relations.

Yet by registering theory as representation - as a means of constituting and framing a particular type of gap between a knower and a thing known - theorizing emerges as a practice with all the attending implications of power. Indeed, the fact that theory and theorizing is often intent on disguising itself from being a practice has been one of its most powerful and pernicious properties.

Arriving at the theorisation of music-making, we find a particularly potent practice at hand. Music's ever-elusive status as an object of signification lends it a somewhat unnerving flexibility. You can, in a manner of speaking, do whatever you like with it.

### **The empty signifier**

So what might be happening with the construction of *teori gamelan Bali* here? If we follow that the idea of theorising is a representative act, then following Goodman we need to explore the circumstances of its production more closely. I suggest these more current accounts of 'teori gamelan Bali' follow a surprisingly similar pattern to the processes of 'representation as' discussed earlier. Located within the complex bureaucratisation of Bali's performing arts scene, I propose that *teori gamelan Bali* continues to participate in the substantiation of an essentialised Balinese culture - bolstering its status as a fossil, as an aesthetic trophy - promoting Balinese gamelan's status on the global stage and ensuring the status of the theory's author. If we return to *jajar pageh* and the KPP musical structure, we find a host of commentaries from Balinese theorists (then further promulgated by non-

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Balinese researchers) concerning these terms' ancient, spiritual pedigree, their links to Hindu cosmology and the apparent gravitas that these structural tenets afford a composition - new or old. At the same time, the idea of closed musical forms, and its enunciation in formal theoretical texts positions Balinese gamelan as academically viable along the rather cold Western definition of knowledge noted above - pinned down and knowable; an act of scholarly taxidermy.

Thinking back to the notion that theory allegedly holds an explanatory power over practice, I suggest something slightly different is at work here. Indeed, if we agree that Western notion of 'theory' is somewhat undetermined even in its original field of application, when applied to Balinese practices the plot thickens further still. Indeed, I suggest that the kind of music theory that has been produced within Bali's various institutions is so far removed from the practices it claims to explain, it is perhaps better described, after Barthes and Laclau, as an empty signifier. Teori stands less as an actual account of musical practice and more as a nominal stamp of academic approval and status, and as another pillar in the construct of Bali. It confers an imaginary order on music-making and in doing so its exponents may freely position Balinese music-making in accordance with the various socio-political needs of theoretician, institution, local government and nation state - teori has thus been effectively set to work by its authors to overlay gamelan as a site of 'tradition', of global standing, of managed innovation. That is not to say that teori has not had due impact on various musicians' creative processes (a topic for another paper) - but I suggest that this kind of process is best understood as 'simulation' after Baudrillard - an inversion of 'the causal and logical order of the real and its reproduction' (1987: 13, cited in Heryanto 1999: 152)

### Returning to Balinese practices

So if teori is an empty signifier - what, if teori were actually filled, would be the object of study? I suggest that Balinese practices of music-making present prove specifically resistant to any such singular, fixed form of signification. From my encounters with Balinese music-making, I propose that Balinese practices of musical knowing operate expressly through musical action: musical action that by its nature outwits any such fixed theory. In contrast to these representations of reified musical knowledge, when we consider a live rehearsal setting where repertoire is created, taught, memorized and refined, it is through the experience of playing—through practices of repetition, mimicry and continuation—that musicians primarily create and master material. A Balinese musician of ability is commonly described as 'duweg'. The term may be glossed as 'clever', but it also implies a strong sense of being skillful and nimble and connotes the idea of being able to do something well. By all accounts, duweg does not inscribe any distinction between a person's physical ability and mental facility in order to achieve something: they are part and parcel of the same process. As such, the kind of totalising account offered by theory - not least teori gamelan - can only ever fall short of the active musical understanding that Balinese musicians employ to learn, construct and refine music.

Having explored representational practices of those colonial era musical texts that sought to conjure up an imagined, essentialised Bali - we find more contemporary theory-making to be operating along similar lines, providing metaphorical meat for an imaginary, substantive 'Balinese culture'. By ignoring the real conditions under which music in Bali is created and developed, Balinese music's theoreticians may well serve this other agenda effectively - but I propose this teori does a disservice to the skilled and complex musical processes at play on Bali. For in order to engage with how and what Balinese musicians might know about gamelan, it is vital to address the principal site which Balinese musical knowing inhabits: musical practice itself.

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