



## MYSTICAL PRACTICE AND MUSICIANSHIP IN CENTRAL JAVA

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### ABSTRACT

*Mysticism plays a significant role within the tradition of Javanese gamelan. This work focuses specifically on central Java, and the questions it posits and attempts to answer are: How does mysticism manifest itself in Javanese gamelan traditions? How has this changed? And, how does mysticism survive within the context of music and performance today? Ethnomusicological and ethnographic methodologies were utilized in the composition of this paper, relying on academic research done by past scholars as well as primary sources. Dialogues, interviews, and participation in various performing gamelan groups both in the United States and Indonesia have further informed the scope of this work. Most recently, those groups have been Kyai Gandrung based at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and Sumunar based in St. Paul, Minnesota while at a performance exchange trip in Surakarta, Java.*

## Introduction

Mysticism is an inherent part of Javanese culture, including within the tradition of gamelan music. Gamelan can refer to the instruments that comprise an ensemble as well as the music and tradition itself. It encompasses metallophones and gongs, the ideal material being bronze, with the addition of wooden percussion, stringed instruments, and vocals. It can be played in a wide variety of contexts, ranging from rituals to public weddings and celebrations. A synthesis of textual research on the history and tradition of gamelan music by scholars such as Judith Becker, Marc Benamou, Sumarsam, and Neil Sorrell as well as works on Javanese mystic practice by Koentjaraningrat, Mark Woodward, Clifford Geertz, Niels Mulder, and Susan Pratt Walton will help to demonstrate how Javanese mystical practice is intimately tied to the sphere of gamelan performance and musicianship.[1] A gamelan performance is fundamentally lacking if it is bereft of *rasa*, a concept tied closely to mystical practice and defined pithily as sentiment or aesthetic affect. Javanese gamelan performance, called *karawitan*, provides a cultural context through which mysticism can be expressed and experienced.

## Java's Geographic and Historical Milieu

The historical diversity of Java provides fertile ground for the development of its rich musical and mystical traditions. Java, one of the five main islands of the Indonesian

archipelago, is composed of many different regions, each with its unique history and provincial dialect. Indonesia is home to a multitude of religious, cultural, and ethnic traditions. Javanese comprise the largest ethnic group in the country. Moreover, Javanese culture permeates the broader cultural sphere of Indonesia as nation-state.

To be Javanese is to be Indonesian but the reverse is clearly not the case...Javanese culture occupies a position of "first among equals," or hegemony depending on one's perspective, in the larger Indonesian society because the Javanese are the largest ethnic community and have been politically dominant since the beginning. [2]

Currently, Bahasa Indonesia is recognized as the national language, although there are countless regional languages that preceded the establishment of a common language. This is due to the political unification of many disparate cultures under Dutch colonialism, beginning with the *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (the V.O.C.), or, the Dutch East India Company. The standardization and implementation of Malay, from which the Indonesian language developed, was "the means through which colonial hegemony was established and strengthened." [3] Compared to the complex hierarchical linguistic systems specific to the Javanese language, Indonesian is considered to be relatively "egalitarian" because of its lack of speech registers traditionally employed to distinguish relative social status.

Along with the establishment of a unifying national language, there is a sense of religious pluralism within the context of a majority Islamic population. This includes the

survival of older indigenous practices found in each region before the early, external influences of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, and later by the Dutch and Japanese. The cultural and religious diversity of central Java, let alone Indonesia as a whole, is unsurprising upon examining a timeline excerpt of its history. The dynamic historical, religious, and cultural interchanges are demonstrated today by the remnants of an architecturally resplendent past. The Sailendra kingdom is credited for building the monumental Mahayana Buddhist *candi* (monument) Borobudur (a world heritage site) along with smaller *candis* Mendut and Pawon in the late 8th to early 9th centuries.[4] The subsequent Sailendra and Sanjaya royal families' Hindu revival occurred at *candi* Prambanan, known colloquially as *Loro Jonggrang* in the 9th century.[5] One of the many ways this rich diversity and syncretic character expresses itself is through traditional cultural practices, such as the many varieties of theater and dance. The central Javanese court cities of Yogyakarta and Surakarta (alternatively known as Solo) are known as hubs of Javanese culture and art where various forms of theater still thrive today.

Circa the 7th-10th centuries CE, rivaling Saivaite (Hindu) and Buddhist dynasties and culture flourished in central Java. During this time, the major kingdoms of central and east Java became heavily influenced by Indian traditions: “the kingdom of the Shivaite [Saivaite] dynasty which supersedes the Sailendra in Java was known as Mataram...three kingdoms rise successively as centers of

power in East Java: Kediri (1045-1222); Singasari (1222-1292); and Majapahit (1294-c. 1520)...Shivaism [sic] and Buddhism coexist and sometimes merge in syncretic cults strongly tinged by Tantric mysticism.”[6] The Indian influence on theatre, dance, art and culture in general can still be witnessed today, particularly in certain elements of Javanese dance. For instance, “the use of Hindu mythology, albeit thoroughly assimilated into Javanese culture through the wayang and other art forms, is one of the main examples of Indian influence...”[7] The most common South Asian story cycles that have been localized in Java are the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.

### **On Localization and “Indianization”/“Sinicization”**

When examining any tradition in Southeast Asia, it is necessary to discuss how the multitude of cultures in and around the region informed its development. These historical settings create the cultural contexts and matrices that allow for the cultivation of traditions like Javanese gamelan music and forms of mysticism. The term “localization” is readily used today in Southeast Asian regional studies to clarify the outdated overuse of concepts pertaining to “Indianization” and “Sinicization”. For the geographical and cultural scope and relevance of this study, we need mostly to concern ourselves with the issue of Indianization and localization. Indianization and localization are two different historical processes in Southeast Asia. The former term is related to the

influence of Indic culture on Southeast Asia, and the latter is how Southeast Asian cultures indigenized influences from other regions of the world. The emphasis of localization is on indigenous people borrowing something from outside and making it their own. They were, and continue to be, active agents in the making of their history and cultural development.

Influenced by Georges Coedès, O.W. Wolters is credited with coining the term localization in his extensive analyses of Southeast Asian history during the latter part of the 20th century.[8] Wolters challenges some of Coedès' methodologies as well, by declaring that "the study of Southeast Asia must surely be for only one reason: to improve our knowledge of the region for its own sake." [9] Although this realization may seem self-evident to some, the movement from European-centric or even Asian-centric viewpoints in order to create single universal histories has been an effective step toward understanding the Southeast Asian region in its own right.

Conversely, it is important to remember that the term "Southeast Asia" was not coined until World War II to delineate the region. The term is derived from its geographic position east of India and south of China. The single universal history approach is nonetheless valuable for analyzing cultural contexts from which artistic traditions stem.

The single universal history was implemented by John Smail, who similarly argues for a new historiographical

approach and reinterpretation of Southeast Asian studies using a heightened emphasis on autonomous histories. As the terms suggest, localization arguments and autonomous histories challenged the long-standing systems that considered Southeast Asia as primarily Indianized or Sinicized—that is, the artistic, religious, political, and economic systems were borrowed from either India or China and supplanted onto the mainland and maritime regions of Southeast Asia. Localization and autonomous histories flip the script by arguing that rather than merely copying these exogenous conventions, indigenous Southeast Asian societies extracted from them what they wanted.

Perspective reconsiderations like these demonstrate the necessity of moving away from the preoccupation with the influence of colonial rule (including colonial, neo-colonial, and anti-colonial histories). They remind us of the importance in creating an independent perspective of Southeast Asia's complex cultural setting.[10] In fact, Smail himself deconstructs the term "perspective" and subdivides it into two categories: an actual standpoint (e.g., to "stand over someone's shoulder") and a moral viewpoint more concerned with evaluating importance and placing agency. The two must be separated when striving to understand the development of Southeast Asian history and historiography. I argue that understandings of *rasa* in Java draw from a matrix of many different influences from near and far, linking performance with the mystical cultivation of spiritual experience.

## **Karawitan: Traditional Gamelan Music of Central Java**

Gamelan music, known in Javanese as *karawitan*, is one of the essential components in performing the rituals and dances in Java. Gamelan as an ensemble of traditional Javanese music may accompany various *wayang* theater performances as well as religious rituals. The term *karawitan* means traditional gamelan music. It is important in part because it “allows the Javanese to distinguish their own musical culture from Western music, called *musik*...for a piece of music to qualify as *karawitan*, it must use one or both of the characteristic tuning systems *sléndro* and *pélog*...”[11] *Karawitan* is furthermore differentiated from fusion genres that incorporate gamelan instruments, such as *campursari* or *dangdut*.

A gamelan ensemble is comprised mostly of bronze percussion instruments, including gongs and other metal idiophones—musical instruments consisting of tuned metal bars. There are several wooden and stringed instruments, as well as a predominantly male vocal “chorus” (*gérong*) and a female vocal soloist (*pesindhèn*). *Karawitan* is structurally cyclic and employs several timekeeping instruments, the most important of which is the large gong. The two tuning systems are the heptatonic (seven pitch scale) *pélog* and the pentatonic (five pitch scale) *sléndro*. The *sléndro* system has more uniform intervals between its pitches, whereas the pitch intervals of *pélog* instruments are relatively unequal. Neither of these relate to the diatonic scale of Western music.

Current knowledge of the early history and development of *karawitan* is limited. There are very few writings on the origins of the musical tradition because the use of notation did not commence until the nineteenth century.[12] According to mythology, the gamelan was created by the god Sang Hyang Guru who ruled from the legendary Mahendra mountains, a mountain range from the *Mahabharata* story cycle that relates to Mount Lawu in Java. Sang Hyang Guru crafted the large gong, one of the most important timekeeping instruments in the ensemble, as a method to summon the other gods.[13] Ethnomusicologist Judith Becker explains the incomparable role of the large gong: “The sound of the gong is not an acoustic phenomenon of vibrating air, but a voice...In Java, gongs are the favored way. Because of this special function, gongs are highly respected and feared.”[14] From this stemmed the other main instruments of the gamelan, such as the smaller gongs called *siyem*, *kempul*, and *kenong*.

There have been several more recent developments that can be more easily determined, such as “certain instruments (*siter*, *ciblon*, *gendèr panerus*) [which] have not been in the gamelan for long, and *pesindhèn* too are a relatively recent addition...there used to be fewer but larger instruments, and pitch has risen over the years.”[15] Accounts by foreign visitors allude to the existence of ensembles resembling present-day gamelan around the sixteenth century, and the extensive *Serat Wedha Pradangga* states that the first gamelan of much simpler and smaller composition can be dated as far back as the 200s BCE. It should be noted,

however, that the *Serat Wedha Pradangga* is a Javanese chronicle with uncertain provenance and historicity. What is known is that particular gamelan instruments that are centuries old still exist, therefore elevating them to the prestige of *pusaka*, treasured heirlooms and markers of status.[16]

The two hubs of Javanese court culture mentioned above, Surakarta and Yogyakarta, retain differences in their respective styles of musical practice and performance, which is referred to as *garap* (musical treatment or interpretation) in Javanese. In the broadest sense, Yogya (Yogyakarta) is known for its loud playing style while Solo (Surakarta) is known for its soft style. Moreover, the main melodic (*balungan*) *sléndro* instruments of Solo typically contain an extra pitch—the low 6. While these stylistic distinctions exist, there is “no glass wall located somewhere between Solo and Yogya, defining where one style stops and the other begins.” [17] That is to say, particular characteristics from one city can be found in the other, and musicians from one tradition are also known to borrow from the other.

The significance of gamelan music is evident in the context of *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) shows: “Gamelan music is essential to the performance...It establishes or alters mood. It provides respite between major actions.”[18] In addition to theater, performances in the royal courts (*kraton*) of Yogya and Solo, weddings, rituals, and tourist entertainment, it can also be played in very casual all-night settings like *wayang kulit* or shorter *klenengan*, where

audience members are often seen entering and leaving at their own leisure. It is common for *wayang* shows to take up an entire evening and may last approximately nine hours.

Theater in Java can be delivered in various forms, ranging from a style utilizing human dancers, known as *wayang wong*, a performance involving rounded, three-dimensional puppets called *wayang golèk*, and the better known leather shadow puppetry performance called *wayang kulit*. Most of these forms today develop their narratives from the major Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The more vernacular *kethoprak* version of Javanese theater using live actors, gamelan, singing, and occasionally dance draws its repertoire from Javanese history.

There are other indigenous stories that are seldom performed today. An exception to this can be found with the comparatively rare *wayang topeng* (masked dance), which utilizes the legend of Panji that is native to Java, specifically in the town and historical kingdom of Kediri in east Java—previously called Daha—whence the hero Panji hails. Both masked and unmasked dance performance varieties are derived from *wayang kulit*. Both forms are thought to be reproductions of shadow puppetry using actors, dance, and sometimes dialogue. Although the date of origin is still indeterminate, evidence from Javanese literature points to circa 1000 CE as a time when *wayang kulit* was a recognized art form.[19] When observing both shadow puppet and masked dance performances, the formal parallels in facial, gestural, and choreographic elements become apparent.

## Kebatinan: Mystical Practice in Java

The term “mysticism” can be defined in various ways within the Javanese context. It can refer to the process of accumulating spiritual knowledge that is otherwise unattainable via logical analysis or the intellect. It can suggest the belief that truth, god, and/or fundamental reality can be realized through intuitive and insightful practice, such as asceticism and meditation—*tapa* and *semedi*, respectively. *Iklas* (from Arabic’s *al-ikhlas* meaning “the purity”), detachment from the surrounding world, can also culminate in desired forms of self-control to achieve spiritual power.[20] *Tapa* is practiced most commonly by way of fasting or depriving oneself from sleep. There are some very extreme cases of asceticism which still occur today. For instance, *tapa pendhem* involves meditating and fasting while buried underground for long periods of time—usually between seven or forty days. Remarkably, there have been several known survivors of this practice in Java and, understandably, *tapa pendhem* has also been the cause of many deaths.[21] Less extreme versions include *puasa putih* (“white fasting”), which restricts the ascetic to consuming only water and steamed white rice.

The Javanese term that most closely compares with the English word “mysticism” is *kebatinan*: “science of the inner self.” This term comes from the root *batin*, which means “the inner realm of human experience’, and *lair* [also spelled *lahir*] ‘the outer realm of human behavior.’”[22] *Lahir* may simply refer to the outer or the external.[23] *Batin* is easily defined as

“inward (feeling)”, and *kebatinan* as “pertaining to the inner self.”[24] As Geertz cautions, *lahir* and *batin* (both terms derived from Arabic’s *zahir* and *batin*) do not correspond to western notions of “body and soul.” They are understood to be separate and progressive realms of the self, the multifaceted vessel and terrain (irrespectively) through which the individual travels from the outward to the inward.

*Lahir* has to do with an individual’s sensory perception and the material world, whereas *batin* is the inner core and heart wherein lies pure feeling and intuition (*rasa sejati* or *rasa murni*).[25] Niels Mulder confirms: “people strive to subject their outer being to their inner potential; they hope to free their inner selves in a quest for reunification with their origin, and to experience the oneness of being.”[26] The idea of the origin is fundamental and is part of the concept of *sangkan-paran*, “origin-destination” and the unity of existence, *kasunyatan*. These ideologies propose that all beings and phenomena not only have intrinsic meaning, but are also interconnected. P. J. Zoetmulder labels it as pantheism, which in turn is “just a certain form of monism [the doctrine, as the etymology suggests, that there exists only one supreme being] in which, when establishing the oneness of all that exists, one proceeds from God and reduces everything to Him.”[27] Though easy to comprehend, this definition borders on essentialism and attempts to explain Javanese ideology in purely western terminologies. Perhaps Niels Mulder, three years after Zoetmulder’s work, tries to resolve this problem by description through example: events

“do not happen haphazardly, or because of chance, but because of necessity.”[28] This law of necessity within the ubiquitous *kasunyatan* is referred to as *ukum pinesthi*, and it governs the manner in which everything is related.

An individual’s spiritual quest involves accessing his or her inner being (*batin*) in order to reach a state of calmness and harmony (*rukun*) within, and consequently without the surrounding world. Mulder dubs it “the oneness of being,” which ends up revealing the belief that *sangkan-paran*, the origin-destination, and the inner and outer realms are not only pervasive but ultimately one. What is more, the reason mysticism carries a connotation of mystery and secrecy comes from its role as a deeply personal endeavor, notwithstanding the fact that accessing inner realms of being can occur during group meditation, and collective learning is encouraged and common in Java.[29]

Due to the diverse influences that Java has undergone and the resultant syncretic nature of its traditions, *kebatinan* has evolved into a variety of forms and sects. There are hundreds of established mystical groups in Java today.[30] These branches may, of course, also stem from differing personal interpretations and practices of spiritual leaders. Some of the better-known sects are Subud, Sumarah, Pangestu, and Sapta Darma.[31] More broadly, however, *kebatinan* put into practice can be subcategorized into groups that retain different cultural and religious influences, be they indigenous or exogenous.

There are three main subdivisions of *kebatinan*, or mystical practice, revealed by Javanese anthropological studies. The *priyayi* are the aristocratic descendants and king’s officials who became civil servants during the V.O.C.’s (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, or “Dutch East India Company”) colonial occupation. They “[stress] the Hinduist aspects and [relate] to the bureaucratic element” of Javanese society.[32] They can be identified with *kejawèn*, which was the lifestyle and is seen by some as retaining the cultural essence of being Javanese. *Kejawèn* involves the distinctive culture of the central Javanese principalities, namely the royal courts of Surakarta and Yogyakarta. Presently, it has adopted elements of Islam in combination with preceding traditions, namely tantric Saivism.[33] The *santri* emphasize the Islamic aspects incorporated into *kebatinan*. The term *tasawuf* can alternatively be used to denote Islamic mysticism or Sufism.[34] Finally, there are the *abangan*, who are either the non-practicing Muslims in Java or those who stress the animistic, generally expressed among academics today as “supernaturalistic,” elements of *kebatinan*. Geertz reminds us that these “are the three main subtraditions” that “are not constructed types, but terms and divisions that Javanese themselves apply.”[35] Even though Geertz was working ethnographically with an individual town called Modjokuto (or Pare) in the Kediri region, these distinctions are applicable to other areas where *kebatinan* practice continues.

Javanese anthropologist Koentjaraningrat provides a more thorough description of the nature and development of

religion, spirituality, and the social groups' relation to mysticism in central Java. He asserts that it is more productive to compare and contrast differences between puritan and syncretic Javanese Islam rather than discuss the differences in the religious life of rural peasants and urban civil servants (*priyayi*). As a comparative statement Koentjaraningrat does, however, point out that “we may assume that magic is more frequently practiced by Javanese rural peasants than by civil servants, and that spiritual movements [such as the abovementioned sects] are much more part of the lifestyle of the civil servant rather than of the peasants.”[36] His analysis is comparable to Geertz’s in some respects. Both scholars distinguish *Agami Jawi* (“Javanese religion”) and *Agami Islam Santri* (“Islam of the religious people”). Followers of the latter adhere more closely to the formal tenets of Islam; whereas, the former incorporates elements of mysticism and ideas from the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon and tradition that are “syncretistically integrated in an Islamic frame of reference.”[37] Furthermore, the Islam that arrived into central Java during the 16th century was one wealthy with mystical influences absorbed from Persia and India where Sufi traders traversed before reaching the bustling Malacca Straits.

Since he published *Javanese Culture* in 1985, Koentjaraningrat differentiates his own understanding from other Indonesianists, “especially the Americans” like Geertz, mostly by challenging the idea that Islamic influence spread in a haphazard manner throughout the island and even the

rest of the archipelago.[38] Rather, he argues that Islam took heavier root in the coastal trade regions of north and northeast Java and did not profoundly penetrate the interior heartland even during the 1500s. Though much of Geertz’ work on Javanese religion is seen as pioneering and his concrete definitions of the sub-traditions is very helpful to our study, his attempt at poetry in describing “another meandering tropical growth on an already overcrowded religious landscape,” as Koentjaraningrat highlights, shrouds the actual manner of things. Islam did not spread via an arbitrary or “meandering” route.[39] Historical accounts and scholarly disputes aside, this can be perceived plainly from the monumental Hindu and Buddhist temples (such as Prambanan and Borobudur, respectively) that have remained in central Java and the syncretic elements that remain in gamelan music and the various forms of *wayang* theater.

### **Yang Penting *Rasanya*: “What Matters is *Rasa*”**

A fundamental concept in the study of Javanese spirituality, music, philosophy, and practice is *rasa* (pronounced *rāsā* in Javanese). *Rasa*, a term derived from classical Sanskrit, has a multiplicity of meanings in Java. The lexicological connections that modern Javanese has preserved from Sanskrit for this term are “disposition,” “mercury,” “flavor,” “the faculty of taste,” “sentiment,” and “aesthetic affect.”[40] Becker compares the aesthetic correlations and

diverse meanings of *rasa* from Indian conventions to those that have been localized in Java:

The different meanings of the term *rasa* in Javanese mystical writings are similar to the different meanings found in texts on Indian aesthetic theory. Sometimes the term *rasa* is partially disambiguated in Javanese as the distinction is made between ordinary feeling, sensation or perception (*rasa*) and the extraordinary, internal and refined cognition (*rasa sejati* or *rasa murni*). In Indian aesthetic writings, *rasa* was used in all these different ways.[41]

In relation to *karawitan*, *rasa* can range to mean feeling or mood (of a piece or performance), inner meaning, and deep understanding.[42] It can exist within and be relayed through the performer, as well as experienced by the receptive audience member. *Karawitan* performers “do not express personal feelings, but, rather, perform their personal interpretations of the tradition.”[43] Pieces and performances (called *gendhing*) without *rasa* are at the very least incomplete if not measured as empty altogether.[44] In his most recent work, appropriately titled *Rasa*, Benamou relates the quality of a piece or performance, bodily sensation, ability or knowledge of the performer, and faculty of the performer ultimately to pure feeling (*rasa murni*); all these factors can be defined as *rasa* and all can lead, in a deeply internal sense, to *rasa murni*.

The complexity of affect and intuition in *karawitan* are evident in multiple levels of translation—from formal Javanese (*krāmā*) to familiar Javanese (*ngoko*) to Bahasa Indonesia, for example—as well as binary oppositions, five continua, and several clusters of the terms and concepts

Javanese employ to characterize a piece or performance. Some basic examples of how a *gendhing* would be described are *regu* (“imposing”), *sedhih* (“sad”), *prenès* (“coquettish”), *bérag* (“exuberant”), and *gecul* (“jocular”).[45] These are placed within the more general dichotomies of *alus/kasar* (refined/coarse), *luruh/trègel* (humble/brash), and *berat/ringan* (heavy/light).

Admittedly, Javanese aesthetics is a very broad and complex subject and can be impossible to fully comprehend without being immersed in Javanese culture. However, a brief discussion of basic categories and distinctions is within reach and is fundamental to understanding the mystical aspects of gamelan. One of the major distinctions exists between the aforementioned descriptors *alus* and *kasar*. *Alus* can be translated from Javanese to mean humble, polite, refined, gracious, and even noble. In an earlier article, Benamou conveys the significance of this concept:

The best all-around translation of *alus* is “refined,” in all senses of the word. Smallness is a major component of the concept (*gula alus* is finely granulated sugar), as is smoothness...according to one line of argument, *alusness*, in the form of self-control or decorum, is tied to spiritual power gained largely through asceticism. [46]

*Kasar*, on the other hand, relates more to crass, unrefined, and coarse behavior: “the opposite of *alus* is *kasar*, perhaps best rendered by the English crude.”[47] These two terms create a dichotomy of traits and natures of being, which are then used to distinguish the various *rasa gendhing* (the mood or feeling of a piece or performance), not to mention the

traits of *wayang* characters. Though seemingly straightforward at first, these two concepts are much more intricate in the way that they shape Javanese culture, and therefore Javanese art, as can be seen in the way Benamou, from his time with numerous teachers in central Java, deconstructs them into the plethora of related but not necessarily synonymous descriptors listed above.

Another way *rasa* is expressed is through a performer's realization of a piece (*garap*). This expression could be how a *pesindhèn* (female vocalist) chooses to reach the final note of a phrase by way of *céngkok* (melodic contour). It could be how the drummer, one of the main determiners of tempo, decides to end a piece: rapidly and lightly in a *gecul* or *bérag* fashion on the one hand or, on the other, emphasizing the *regu* or *sedhih rasa* slowly in order to instill a deeper, heavier experience. Benamou visually illustrates these domains of perception in the structure of concentric circles, wherein factors like bodily sensation, faculty of the performer, and ability or knowledge of the performer are situated on the outer circles.[48] Through the act of performance, asceticism, and/or meditation, *rasa murni* existing within the realm of *batin* can be experienced.

*Rasa* in musical contexts connects with *sangkan-paran* and *kasunyatan*, origin-destination and the unity of existence. The performer who communicates the *rasa* of a piece through his or her art is emblematic of the spiritual cycle that underlies *kebatinan*. The communication of the particular *rasa* of a musical piece and its interpretation is

referred to as *pancaran*.<sup>[49]</sup> Effectively, the performer's experience with *rasa* is like a mystical experience. The quest of a practicing mystic is to achieve spiritual or supernatural power (*kesaktian*) and self-control through his or her rejection of earthly and bodily desires. Through this s/he can access the enigmatic realm of absolute truth and *rasa murni*, which is tied to deep understanding, intuition, unity, and harmony—*kasunyatan* and *rukun* with the surrounding world. On the surface level, practitioners and musicians of gamelan are not ostensibly or necessarily rejecting anything in order to access their inner being and achieve a state of calmness and unity, at least not consciously. Rather, through their disciplined practice and development of musical intuition individually and with the rest of the ensemble, they can access deeper realms of *batin* by playing or performing, which ultimately can illuminate and express the path to pure and deep feeling.<sup>[50]</sup>

### ***Karawitan* and *Kebatinan*: Musicianship and Mystical Practice**

Like the disciplined practitioner of *kebatinan*, such affairs are quite personal for musical performers as well and therefore, the experience and path to *rasa* through *karawitan* understandably cannot be generalized. However, some academics of Javanese ethnomusicology have attempted to delve deeper into the exploration of spirituality and performance of gamelan, the most notable of which are Susan

Pratt Walton, Marc Benamou, and Judith Becker. To date, there is not much scholarly literature on the subject linking musical and mystical traditions of Java. Walton's main example for contemporary study is the prominent Sumarah sect that incorporates influences from Islam, tantric Saivism, Mahayana Buddhism, and local practices.[51] She includes the stories of several prominent *pesindhèn*.

One of the most noteworthy points Walton draws attention to is the extremely personal nature of *rasa* and *karawitan*. She cites Warsadinigrat's foundational *Serat Wedha Pradangga*—a book on the history, story, and sacred knowledge of gamelan—in stating that “coming to an understanding of the inner meaning of gamelan music is an individual matter, just as gaining access to one's inner being is an individual matter.”[52]

In practicing, teaching, and performing *karawitan*, the significance of an individual's deeply internal feeling is paired with the whole group's refined sense of *rasa* and levels of responsibility. The importance and responsibilities between musicians and their corresponding instrumental or vocal parts do vary. This is evident by the function of the large gong in relation to the rest of the ensemble. Though the large gong is generally struck the least amount of times during a piece, the large gong player's role is one of the most important.[53] In central Java, the oldest and most experienced member of the group usually fulfills this role. It is utterly noticeable for even a moderately experienced musician or informed listener if a gong stroke is accidentally missed at the end of a cycle,

especially for longer pieces with as many as 128 or 256 beats per gong or *gongan*.<sup>[54]</sup> The *rasa* of a song is at risk of being lost and the other musicians prone to lose their place within the *balungan* (basic or skeletal melodic structure). This can be contrasted with the role of the higher register, fast-playing *bonang panerus*. Though this elaborating instrument requires a certain level of dexterity and focus, it does not carry as much structural importance and is sometimes considered to be the playful, less serious, less responsible half of its lower register *bonang barung* counterpart.

Despite the varying levels of responsibility, an effective performance depends upon an ensemble group's cumulative capability to play and feel together. With these variations in responsibility it is always necessary for all the musicians in a group to listen to one another and play—and ideally feel, *ngraosaken*—together, just as it is rewarding for the ascetic to meditate or fast with his or her fellow disciples.<sup>[55]</sup> Walton affirms, “in the Sumarah view, each individual has access to ‘ultimate reality,’ though access to it is hidden by his own limitations.”<sup>[56]</sup> In the same vein, a performer or an ensemble's experience is contingent upon the knowledge of its members and their ability to *ngraosaken* in harmony.

The emphasis on togetherness and unity of *rasa* and playing in order to realize a particular *garap* (musical treatment or interpretation) seems to have always existed in gamelan traditions. Again, *yang penting rasanya*.<sup>[57]</sup> There is such a large repertoire of traditional pieces: *Ladrang Liwung* of Yogya or *Gendhing Bonang Babar Layar*, to name

a few, that continues to be performed today. Since gamelan music has become more accessible with ensembles all over the world including many groups associated with academic institutions in the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom, change is most prominently witnessed in new compositions, a type of which is called *gendhing kreasi*, or collaborations with other non-Javanese genres.[58][59][60]

Upholding and passing down traditions beget the meaningful development of musicianship and mystical practice. The emphasis on maintaining customs that are linked with the musical tradition, such as staying low when standing around the instruments and never stepping over them, continues to evolve. Even in her work from several decades ago, Becker points out the changeability of music and the cultural and meta-cultural contexts (such as Java in the Netherlands or Java in the United States) in which they dwell. She informs us:

Musical change, like any other, is not of one kind. All music systems are in flux, and only the most detailed notation can momentarily hold time still. Often it is only ignorance of detailed histories that gives the outsider (in space or in time) the illusion of stability. However, the changes occurring in Javanese arts today are quantitatively more than, and of a different nature from, the usual accumulative changes of an oral tradition, and these changes are directly linked to changes occurring in the society and in the philosophic beliefs that support and sustain the society.[61]

Becker describes the changes that occurred between the medieval period in Java (7th century-16th century CE) that was defined by its hierarchical social structure and the

subsequent Dutch occupation (1603-1942, 1945-1949 CE) in order to contextualize the changes that affected 20th century Java. Furthermore, Indonesia's recognized independence in 1949 (or 1945, when the declaration of independence was drafted and as it is conveyed by Indonesians) was another catalyst for the Javanese to redefine their sense of identity and how it is expressed through the arts—from a “king-centered, stratified society” to the “modern state” it is considered today. [62] The national tension during this period, where relative social inequality shifted to a supposed democratic agenda, is evident in the young republic's choice to decree a lingua franca based on Malay (today's Bahasa Indonesia) the national language rather than Javanese with its intrinsic hierarchical structure.[63]

## Conclusion

The connection between musicianship, musicality, and social values has nonetheless withstood cultural change. In spite of transformations in the musical sphere, such as the addition of new instruments and the introduction of notation as opposed to oral teaching, one thing did remain relatively unchanged: “what remained constant is the one essential element for musical survival: the “fit,” the congruence, the harmony, the consonance between the values of the society and the implicit values of the music system.”[64] When she published this work, Becker astutely remarked that Javanese art and music are transforming more into products and

“museum traditions” rather than spaces for ritual that are imbedded into quotidian life.[65] This is another trend that pervades Southeast Asian traditional performing and plastic arts.[66]

Now that several decades have passed, the argument that *karawitan* is becoming a museum tradition appears to be prescient. Naturally, with the waning of the emphasis on traditional customs in musical practice, even in the meta-cultural spaces outside of Java where they may not have ever existed prior, the mystical elements of *karawitan* also become diminished or, at least, deemphasized. Judith Becker and Nancy Florida’s translation of a passage from B.Y.H. Sastrapustaka’s (a renowned court musician from Yogyakarta) *Wedha Pradangga Kawedhar* reveals that

...if one studies and strives to cultivate the artistic skills of gamelan playing, the aim and intention is not the cultivation of physical skill alone. The aim of study is nothing other than the surrender to the primary aims of ethical behavior, *rasa* and beauty that are secreted within the spiritual and physical self, accompanied by sharpness of consciousness, refinement of *rasa* and strength of purpose.[67]

Sastrapustaka is not alone in defining *karawitan* and the practice and performance thereof as derivative of a deeper experience, i.e. the journey from *lahir* to *batin*. Most if not all of the teachers Benamou cites in his recent work, the older generation of Javanese musicians and philosophers, such as Rahayu Supanggah and Suharta, recognize and express this seemingly implicit idea. It is clear that without a cultivated sense of *rasa* neither a musical composition nor mystical

practice in Java are complete. The particular contexts of disciplined asceticism and musical practice provide spaces for the transformative and uniting experience of *rasa*. Moreover, these spaces, even the meta-spaces and musical diasporas outside of Java, preserve Java’s cultural and artistic legacy against the currents of modernity and nationalism by harnessing and connecting musicianship with the experience of deep spirituality, understanding, and unity of existence through *rasa murni*.

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