

# The Ramayana Epic and Traditional Indonesian Music

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Traditional Indonesian music consists of a vast repertoire of musical expression. This is because there are hundreds of different ethnic groups in Indonesia, each group having its own individual culture.

Within each sub-culture flourish many kinds of music. Some of these sub-cultures have as many as ten musical types. So you can imagine just how many and different kinds of music there are in Indonesia. Some musical types are similar in nature, while others are distinct, but all are part of the family of traditional Indonesian music.

Traditional Indonesian music has been influenced by diverse factors such as natural surroundings, religion, faith, politics, or social legend, for example. Social legend has often influenced musical composition, as musical performances accompany the performance of these social legends. In Indonesia each sub-culture has its own social legend. The Pasundan sub-culture in west Java, for example, has a legend called Sangkuriang. In Bali there is the Calonarng. Some legends exist in more than one sub-cultural area, such as the legends of the Panji,<sup>1</sup> the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In this paper I will discuss the involvement of legend, specifically the Ramayana, in the life of Indonesian traditional music.

## THE RAMAYANA EPIC

THE RAMAYANA HAS BEEN known in Indonesia since the beginning of the eighth century. By the ninth century episodes from the Ramayana had been carved on the walls of the Prambanan temples (the temples of Shiva and Brahma). In Indonesia the Ramayana epic lives and flourishes in areas which in the past were strong Hindu kingdoms, such as the Srivijaya kingdom in Sumatra, the Mataram Hindu kingdom in central Java, the Majapahit kingdom in east Java, and likewise in Bali which has the largest Hindu population.

The Ramayana (and also the Mahabharata) in its spread from India, was adapted by Indonesian poets. In the process the cultural themes of the Indian Ramayana which were not relevant to Indonesian culture were altered. It is estimated that 40% of Indonesian Ramayana differs from the original version (Soewito Santoso 1990:75). And it is this Indonesian Ramayana which influenced many forms of traditional Indonesian music in Java and Bali.<sup>1</sup>

Traditional Indonesian music is influenced by at least three kinds of Ramayana. These consist of the old Javanese Ramayana, the new Javanese Ramayana (the Serat Rama and Serat Lokapala), and the Ramayana which lives and flourishes in wayang society such as the Sapta Kandha).

The first type of Ramayana uses the old Javanese language, the second uses a mixture of new Javanese and middle Javanese language,<sup>2</sup> as does the third. The third Ramayana of wayang society has many different versions.

### DIFFERENT FORMS OF RAMAYANA INVOLVEMENT IN INDONESIAN TRADITIONAL MUSIC



AS I HAVE ALREADY mentioned the Ramayana is alive and flourishing in Java and Bali. So in discussions of traditional Indonesian music, I will focus primarily on these two islands.

## KECAK IN BALI

KECAK IS A GENRE OF performing arts which presents a combination of music and dance based on the Ramayana story. The Kecak is an extraordinary art form, both visually and musically. About fifty or more dancers sit in a circle, and in addition to dancing as they sit, they also function as vocal instruments producing the sound 'cak' in various rhythmic combinations. These sounds make rich interlocking patterns and create an extraordinary weaving effect. These sophisticated patterns, which can make a person's hair stand on end, were inspired by the sound of thousands of monkeys.

## GENDER WAYANG IN BALI

IN BALI THERE IS A special type of ensemble that accompanies wayang kulit (shadow puppet theatre) which is known as gender wayang. It is given this name because the main instrument of the ensemble is the gender. In the Mahabharata performance its musical ensemble uses only two pairs of genders. To accompany the Ramayana performance, however, two pairs of genders would be insufficient for the range of expression required. The genders are thought to be unable to support the movements of the monkeys and giants which dominate the Ramayana's scenes. For this purpose the Balinese add a pair of

kendhang (drums), a set of ceng-ceng (cymbals) and several gongs. The vocal element in this ensemble is provided by the dhalang (puppeteer) who sings a narrative of each scene. The singing is known as suluk. In this type of Ramayana presentation the dhalang's singing is taken from extracts of the old Javanese Ramayana.

#### THE MUSIC IN JAVANESE WAYANG KULIT AND WAYANG WONG

THERE ARE SEVERAL KINDS of wayang kulit in Java, one of which is called wayang kulitpurwa and whose story is taken from either the Ramayana or the Mahabharata. A performance of wayang kulitpurwa is accompanied by a gamelan ensemble. The same ensemble is used to accompany either story. The order of gendhings (pieces) is basically the same. The only difference is in the suluk. Although the dhalang sings the same melodies, the texts are different. Most of the suluk texts in the Ramayana story are taken from the new Javanese Ramayana.

The texts which are found in the new Javanese Ramayana and the Mahabharata, for the purpose of suluk, can be divided into two categories, these being neutral texts and non neutral texts. Neutral texts do not mention the name of any Ramayana or Mahabharata character, for example:

*Kukusing dupa kumelun,  
ngeningken tyas sanga pekik,  
kawengku sagung jajahan, nanging*

*sanget angikibi, Sang Resi  
Kanekaputra, kang anjog saking  
wiyati.*

*(The smoke from the incense rises  
above the knight as he kneels in  
meditation. Although guarded by  
his soldiers there is still fear in his  
heart. God Kanekaputra descends  
from the heavens).*

This text comes from the Ramayana epic (Setat Rama),<sup>4</sup> but does not mention any Ramayana character. This kind of text is used to produce certain moods, as in the example above, to evoke the anxiety of a king meditating, irrespective of whether that scene is taken from the Ramayana or the Mahabharata.

A Ramayana text which evokes a feeling of melancholy is a scene in which Sita is in the gardens of Alengka where she receives Rama's ring, brought to her by Hanuman. As she cannot meet her beloved Rama face to face, she takes out her hair pin, called Cundhamanik, for Hanuman to give to Rama. She weeps and almost faints:

*Siyang pantara ratri, amung  
ciptapukulun, tana iyan kneksi.  
Mila katur, kang Cundhamanik,  
Prasasat rageng ulun kang*

*sumembah munggwing padanta  
prabu, Myang kagunganta singsim,  
saksat sampun prati, katon asta  
pukulun, wulaten narapati. Rama  
dewaningsun.*

*(I think only of you, both night and  
day. Since we cannot meet, I am  
sending Cundhamanik as a token of  
my love for you. When your ring  
came, it was like your own sweet  
hands stroking my hair. See how I  
am suffering, Oh Rama my love).*

Because of its beautiful but melancholy tone, this suluk has been used to establish a king's melancholy mood in the first scene of every wayang performance.

The musical accompaniment for Surakarta style wayang wong<sup>5</sup> came from that of wayang kulit. Yogyakarta style wayang wong, although different from wayang kulit in its accompaniment, does not differ in its use of ensemble or gendhings. As with wayang kulit the difference in the accompaniment is found in the text of the dhalang's singing.

#### LANGEN MANDRAWANARA IN YOGYAKARTA

THIS IS A GENRE OF DANCE drama which uses dialogue and

monologue in tembang (song) form, accompanied by a gamelan ensemble. The word 'wanara' means monkey, and the dance drama does take its story from the Ramayana which is dominated by monkey characters. The melodies are specifically composed to fit the characters' monologue and dialogue. Because they are so rich in feeling and beautifully expressed, they are performed as concert music in their own right. This has enriched the repertoire of gamelan music.

#### GAMELAN MUSIC IN CENTRAL JAVA

IT IS NOT ONLY THE MUSICAL accompaniment of traditional theatre that the Ramayana influences. This influence can also be found in concert music. Because of the literary beauty and philosophy of the Ramayana (Serat Rama), song texts of gendhings are often taken from the Ramayana, although the gendhings are not presented in their context. These gendhings may be performed to entertain guests at weddings, wedding receptions, or other ceremonies.

The texts most often chosen are 'The Disappearance of Sita,' Hanuman as an Envoy' and 'The Great War of Alengka.'

There are many new compositions in Javanese gamelan music which have been inspired by the Ramayana epic. One composition takes the text which tells of Hanuman singing, accompanied by flute and drum, in the middle a resting group of the giant soldiers of Alengka. Unaware that Hanuman is an enemy, the giants join in dancing and then fall asleep because of Hanuman's beautiful singing!

commanders are asleep, King Rama meditates until the God Naraha visits him.

5. A wayang performed by human dancers.

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#### NOTES

1. The Panji legend was derived from a fourteenth century historical event in the Kediri Kingdom in east Java.
2. The Ramayana is less popular in Sumatera and has not developed in the performing arts.
3. Middle Javanese language is the Javanese language which was developed between the old and the new Javanese language.
4. It tells of the time when King Rama nervously contemplates the eve of his attack on Alengka. When all the soldiers and their

