

## Death Symbolism in Music: Preliminary Considerations

by Sue Carole De Vale

The investigation of symbolism is critically important in musicology and ethnomusicology as a fundamental process in understanding the meaning and function of music and musical instruments within a culture. Music for death has received considerable attention from scholars, resulting in a huge corpus of works on music for death contexts from the monophonic settings of the mass of the dead of the Roman Catholic Church and lament traditions found scattered around the world to the polyphonic settings of contemporary requiems in western and western-influenced cultures.

As we begin to further explore symbolism of death in music, whether that symbolism is found within or outside of death contexts *per se*, I would like to propose several questions to be raised at the onset and to underlie the research process. First, what is the socio-cultural meaning of death in the particular culture during the time period under examination, including its emotional content and the nature of the conception of an afterlife, if any? Second, how does the concept of death figure in cosmological processes and the human life

cycle within it? Third, what other cosmological aspects are at play in the context of death and death rituals? Fourth, what is the specific use and function of the music or genre under consideration in death-specific contexts? Fifth, is the genre death-specific in usage? Sixth, if death-specific, does it, and how does it symbolize death? Or, if not death-specific, does it, and how does it symbolize death?

In briefly exploring these questions, I will turn to Bali for selected examples. I use the term "selected" because rituals surrounding death in Bali are very complex and many, and can easily require the minimum of a year for even the most basic cycle of death rituals to be completed. These rituals arise from the Hindu-Balinese religion, called "*Agama Tirta*." It is multi-layered: a syncretic mixture of Animism and Buddhism with Hinduism. I will briefly explore two genres in the context of death rituals: *kakawin*, a form of sung poetry, and that of the ensemble known as *gamelan bebonangan* or *gamelan baleganjur*.

I begin with basic conceptions surrounding death. In Balinese culture, when a person dies, his or her spirit is believed to remain earthbound until the body is cremated.<sup>1</sup> It is only after the cremation ritual that the spirit is free to leave earth and enter into a cycle of reincarnation. Little sorrow is shown, at least publicly, during death and cremation rituals.

In fact, the opposite is true and a joyful attitude is maintained to celebrate the end of a good life and the successful transition of the deceased to the next higher step in the reincarnation cycle. Reincarnation is thus an intrinsic part of the human life cycle: birth, life, death, and rebirth.

Cosmological concepts are important in our consideration of the life cycle. When the body has been cremated, the spirit gains the privilege of leaving the middle world of humans (*bhawahloka*) and entering the upper world (*svahloka*) of the gods where it may eventually become a deified ancestor. This high status of the spirit remains for a period of time after rebirth. This is seen in the fact that infants are considered to be gods or godlike for the first half year of their lives (105 days in the Balinese calendar) during which time they are not allowed to touch the ground of the middle world. On the 105th day, a protective ritual is held to mark the point at which an infant officially enters the human world.

The Balinese are inherently wary of the presence of any loose spirits in their middle world, good or bad. Thus as soon as possible after death, *kakawin* (Old Javanese poetic texts incorporating *wirama* metres from Sanskrit classical verse) are sung to the dead person. Excerpts from *kakawin*, as specified in the pamphlet *Kidung Yadnya*, are sung solo for various death ceremonies, such as the preparation and washing of the corpse, carrying the bier to the cemetery for burial or cremation, etc.<sup>2</sup>

The texts of the *kakawin* performed in death contexts are in the nature of laments. The fixed, death-specific texts assure a smooth and peaceful transition from the middle, earthly world to the upper world for the spirit of the deceased. Other

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Family members riding the tower, carrying the body of the deceased, to the cemetery. The tower is carried by male relatives and villagers on their shoulders. Ubud, Bali, September 1989.

*kakawin* texts also help the family members and other participants to fully respect the dead person. They point out the good things a person

had done during life in hopes that they will forgive and forget any troublesome aspects of the deceased's life on earth.<sup>3</sup> *Kakawin*, however, are

not specifically reserved only for death rituals. They are performed, with other texts, in many contexts other than those surrounding death, including ones that are educational, social or entertaining in nature.

In exploring cremations, we note that they are performed as soon as possible, on the first auspicious day after death. But they can only be held when the family has saved enough money to afford a cremation with all its attendant rituals, food and offerings. If a cremation is to be significantly delayed for any reason, the body is buried and the remains are disinterred at the time of the cremation. Sometimes the period between death and cremation can be several years.

Cremations can be extremely simple or highly elaborate depending upon the wealth and caste of the family. Several kinds of musical ensembles may be employed during the rites. These include: *gamelan luang* (a now fairly rare and sacred ensemble), *gamelan angklung* (a small gamelan ensemble with a four-tone tuning system), and a single pair of *gender wayang* (the metallophones, played with two mallets with disk-shaped heads, essential for shadow plays where two pairs are used).

No matter how rudimentary and humble a cremation is, or how high or low the caste of the deceased is *gamelan baleganjur*, or *gamelan bebonangan*, is one ensemble that is always used. It is sometimes referred to as "marching gamelan." It is always used perhaps because of its early association with battles and war and the fact that it is carried and performed in processions, in a variety of contexts.

*Gamelan babonangan* is a very noisy, even boisterous, all gong and drum ensemble. It consists of at least five pairs of cymbals (*ceng-ceng*) of



Relatives and villagers carrying offerings and firewood to the cemetery for the cremation. Ubud, Bali, September 1989.

two different diameters and “pitches.” Each pair is played by an individual musician. A set of four small unmounted individually-tuned gongs (*bonang*) gives the ensemble its four-toned character and nature. Each gong is handheld and played by a single musician. Two large hanging gongs (*gong lanang*, the male of the two, and *gong wadon*, the female) and a medium-sized gong (*babende*), are all strung on ropes and suspended from poles carried on the shoulders of men. They are played by a musician walking beside each gong. Two drums (*kendang lanang*, the male of the pair, and *kendang wadon*, the female), with each drum strung with

a rope are looped over the back of neck of the single musician who plays it. The compositions are polyrhythmic and the patterns are played in interlocking fashion by the *ceng-ceng* and *kendang* players. The predominant melody arises from the syncopated “hocket” of the four *bonang* players, while the four-beat or eight-beat phrases of each piece are marked by the hanging gongs, female and male in alternation.

*Gamelan bebonangan* is played during the entire procession. It is played from the time the body is carried, all the way from the house, to the cremation tower and to the cemetery. The cemetery, located at the

seaward end of the village, is where the cremation takes place. At times the *Gamelan bebonangan* is also played during the actual process of cremation. The ensemble’s boisterous sound is uplifting. It helps encourage and raise the energy of the many men carrying the heavy tower. With the poles across their shoulders, these men roughly weave the tower around at every crossroad to confuse the spirit and thus prevent it from returning home.

The dense, fast, lively and syncopated sound of the ensemble contributes to *rame* (“crowded”), the Balinese’s aesthetically desired state of heightened excitement. In ritual

contexts this arises from the many colors, sounds, people, and the many kinds of activities occurring simultaneously. The sound of the ensemble facilitates both spiritual and physical benefits. It helps protect both the spirit of the deceased and those in the procession and at the cremation. The sound helps to appease and chase away any evil spirits that might be lurking nearby. At the same time, the sound is believed to protect all the participants from any physical harm, especially those carrying the tower.

These enlivening and protective aspects always underlie the ritual functions of the *Gamelan bebonangan* ensemble. They do so for cremations or processions of the sacred *barong*. *Barong* is the mask embodying the mythical “lionesque” defender of the good in the universe.<sup>4</sup>

The ensemble is also played during the great *mecaru*, the island-wide purification ritual. This takes place on the one day of the year devoted to making as much noise as possible to cleanse the middle world of all evil spirits of the lower world (*bhurloka*). The *leyaks*, evils caused by people who practice black magic are especially cleansed, i.e., on the day before *nyepi*, the day of silence.

The *gamelan bebonangan* or *gamelan baleganjur*, therefore, is not a death-specific ritual ensemble. Moreover, it is not always a ritual ensemble. A famous secular usage of this ensemble is the islandwide *gamelan baleganjur* competition. This begins at the local level with performances on August 17th, the Indonesian Independence Day. One can hear rehearsals being performed for the village competitions in every *banjar* (the small integral neighborhood communities into which every village is divided). And this happens each evening for at least the three weeks preceding the contest.



The gongs of the *gamelan baleganjur*, being carried and played on the way to the cemetery. Ubud, Bali, September 1989.



The cymbals of the *gamelan baleganjur* played in interlocking melodies, carried by their performers, in procession on the way to the cemetery. Ubud, Bali, September 1989.

Some of these groups add dancers and flag troupes to enhance their presentations and, hopefully, their chances of winning.

We have before us two musical genres, *kakawin* and *gamelan bebonangan*. They are essential to death rituals but not specific to them.

How, then, do these non-death-specific genres symbolize death in death-specific contexts? In the case of *kakawin*, the symbolism is found in the texts specific to death-ritual contexts. In *gamelan bebonangan*, the symbolism of death is always present. This is because the musical structure

of each phrase of every composition symbolizes the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth.

Cosmological concepts are the roots of the fourness of its tuning and

its phrase structure. Each represents the gods of the four directions and all their accompanying attributes. The gongs, alternately male and female, provide the androgynous musical

centre of the universe. And all sounds arise and return to them.<sup>5</sup> Every *bebonangan* piece and every phrase within it (like traditional compositions for all Balinese gamelan ensembles), is thus a *mandala*. It is a form of psychocosmogony; a spatio-temporal recreation of self and cosmos, including the process of emanation and reabsorption through the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth (DeVale i.p.)

In order to understand the symbolism of death in *kakawin* and *gamelan babonangan*, the two musical genres surrounding death in Bali, we considered the concept of after life and the emotions that arise from it. The human life cycle, including reincarnation and its relationship to the structure of the cosmos and the process within it, and how all of these aspects relate to music in these genres were also considered.

We explored their specific use and function in the Balinese contexts. We noted that both genres are not limited to death-specific contexts. Nevertheless, we discovered that both of these genres symbolize death.

In the case of *kakawin*, the symbolism is found in the texts used only in death-specific contexts. However, in the case of *gamelan babonangan*, symbolism of death is present at all times, regardless of context. It is inherent in the symbolism of the cosmic process which underlies each phrase of each piece. The questions taken into account in exploring these two Balinese genres are essential ones. They should underlie a further exploration of death symbolism in Balinese music and musical instruments. They are questions that could be useful, perhaps even fundamental, to the understanding of the symbolism of death in music in other cultures as well.



Family members atop and beside the black bull in which the body of the deceased will be cremated at the cemetery. Ubud, Bali, September 1989.



Women relatives and villagers at the home of I Nyoman Wenten in Sading, Bali, making palm leaf offerings for the purification ritual which took place three days after the cremation of his grandfather. August 1989.

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### Footnotes

1. For more information on cremations and other death-specific rituals, as well as on life in Bali and the Balinese in general, see Covarrubias 1937.
2. See Wallis 1979: 168 and passim, especially 130-173, for a deeper understanding of kakawin in Balinese culture.

3. From personal communication with I Wayan Dibia, June 1990.
4. For more information on barong, see Belo 1949.
5. For a deeper exploration of the ways in

which Balinese instruments symbolize cosmological concepts and the function of individual instruments and their overall orchestration mirror social structure, see DeVale and Dibia i.p.

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