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Socialization

"A Resource Within Ourselves"

The Cultural Politics of Balinese Children's Music

Introduction

Heather Montgomery writes in An Introduction to Childhood that "studying childhood is also a way of studying change, and it is often through looking at children's lives that these changes become most apparent. Political upheaval, globalization, economic development, and the spread of education and human rights have all had an impact on the ways in which children are understood and how they are treated." (HM, 234) In the last few decades, shifting gender roles and conceptions of national identity has allowed the Balinese gamelan to welcome child and female students and performers. This shift in the Balinese cultural practice and the culture around girl gamelan groups has revealed a fascinating intersection of Balinese and Westernized childhood ideologies as the Balinese conception of childhood is challenged by not only the Western schooling system, as placed by the Dutch, but also increasing economic and cultural "globalization".

This synthesis of current literature examines the ways in which Balinese gamelan music, as a socializing practice, performs the childhood ideologies around education, gender, and children's work. The social practices surrounding gamelan performance demonstrate that children's gamelan groups—and particularly girl groups—are being treated as both recipients and representatives of the most highly valued cultural events

through a new and developing sense of nationalized artistic identity; are seen and overtly discussed as a "resource" for both self- and broader cultural betterment; and are being utilized in a budding politicized tourist industry in competitive cultural festivals.

Gamelan and Gamelan Education

Gamelan is a very formal and highly structured classical musical genre, a percussion orchestra considered by the Balinese to be a high art that entails a great deal of group control and accuracy in performance. The gamelan is in essence a presentational musical performance ensemble, but also is used to provide musical accompaniment to other ceremonial events such as weddings, funerals, song and lyric poetry, dance, and *wayang* puppetry. Practiced throughout Indonesia, its instruments and tunes are deeply iconic of the local traditions within each island and region, with wide sonic diversity between regions produced through different shapes and types of mallets, or different metallophone and xylophone instruments. Margaret Mead notes in Childhood in Contemporary Cultures that the Balinese approach to artistic and cultural endeavor is notably different from many Western and non-Western traditions. On Bali, each act of practice or performance—nearly indistinguishable, as many have noted since from the first rehearsal, group practices often have spectators—is particularly formalized and endowed with great cultural and artistic weight. She writes that "there are virtually no amateurs in Bali, no folk dancing in which people do traditional things without responsibility to an artistic canon. There are enormous differences in skill and grace and beauty of performance, but… all do what they do seriously and become, in turn, critical spectators…" (Mead, 47)

Gamelan, like many Indonesian arts, places a high artistic value on complexity and additive interactions that arise and interlock in the group performance as the conductorless orchestra members play their own parts. Every individual part is formalized and dependent on a high level of education: head movements, hand movements, facial expressions, coordinated outfits, highly complex patterns are all coordinated and interlocking, and since no conductor is present, every player in the ensemble is individually responsible for maintaining internal rhythmic awareness as the ensemble navigates changing tempos and rhythms. This valuation of group technical complexity over, say, individual virtuosity on an instrument leads to a unique musical formation that allows highly technical and artistic music-making from a group of individuals with varying skill levels. The gamelan educator Sumarsam describes it thus:

"It is commonly thought that the structure of the music makes gamelan suitable for musical education. Consisting of several melodic layers, each with a different density, gamelan has aptly been described as an ensemble with melodic stratification… A common learning strategy is for beginning students to start learning instruments from the lower to middle strata of the ensemble, as they require less challenging playing techniques. Gradually, the student proceeds to the study of instruments in the higher strata, whose playing techniques and melodies are more complex and challenging. (Sumarsam, 71)

Since the gamelan teaching methods were not co-opted to be taught in the Indonesian schooling system put in place by the Dutch in the early 20th century, gamelan training still reflects the developed aural and kinesthetic teaching tradition. Colin McPhee noted in the 1938 account of local gamelan performance in Sayan that "while traditional compositions are kept alive through group memory, as young men join the orchestra

and older men drop out, new music is taught by the composer through musical dictation. He may be a gifted member of the *gamelan* itself or, famed for his original music, engaged and paid for each composition taught." (McPhee, 71) His anecdotal account of observing an early gamelan lesson from an older virtuoso to a group of small boys illustrates just such a relationship between teacher, student, and music: "Nengah's teaching method in this first lesson seems strangely oblique. He says nothing, does not even look at the children. Without so much as an opening word, he begins by dreamily playing through the melody… He plays it through again. Then he plays the first phrase only, with more emphasis. He now indicates with a glance at the *gangsa* that they are to begin." (McPhee, 84) The living tradition of aural teaching and kinesthetic learning is also visible in the performance practices around the musical content itself; McPhee describes that "despite the elaborate orchestration, music survives almost entirely through oral tradition. A rudimentary notation exists to preserve from oblivion the nuclear tones of a composition. It is, however, no more than a bare reminder for the musical specialist, not meant to be read from at performance or practice". (McPhee, 71)

As applied to children's gamelan groups, these non-verbal and non-notational teaching methods express a broader cultural sense of a nonverbal, kinesthetic approach to children's learning. These practices, so contrastive with Western conceptions of learning, echo Balinese beliefs about children's relationships to adults and the role of the teacher. As Margaret Mead noted, "when there is teaching to be done, the teacher uses this flaccid adaptivity and, holding the hands and body of the learner with vigorous, precise intent, twists and turns them into place or pattern. Verbal directions are meager; children learn from the feel off other people's bodies and from watching, although this

watching itself has a kinesthetic quality." (Mead, 43) Gamelan educator Sumarsam's childhood experiences beautifully narrate these methods in practice in his mid-century local gamelan education, before he gained entry to one of the many formal conservatories for advanced gamelan players:

"Traditionally, when someone, often a very young child, wanted to become a gamelan player, he would have to spend much time listening to and observing gamelan playing… His skills reinforced by endless listening to and observing gamelan performances, he would ultimately become a musician. My early experience in learning gamelan reflects this traditional process. As a six-year-old village boy, I used to get together with my friends to play gamelan at the neighbor's house across the street from my house… Occasionally, one or two professional musicians in the village dropped by to give us guidance. A year later, I found myself informally joining a professional village gamelan group." (Sumarsam, 75-6)

Sumarsam's story illustrates the comparatively limited accessibility of gamelan traditions to children in the mid-century. Male children were included in the gamelan ensemble by only by continued displays of interest in the adult practices and by game-like after-hours sessions on the instruments, if they had access to them. Eventually, they would be supported by older musicians and had the potential to join adult groups as members; as Margaret Mead observed in her 1955 chapter that "the Balinese may comment with amusement but without surprise if the leading metallophone player in a noted orchestra is so small that he has to have a stool in order to reach the keys…" (Mead, 41).

This approach to children's roles in the gamelan ensemble, the formation of a somewhat permeable barrier to entry into an adult world of gamelan playing, has undergone a radical, though largely unnoticed shift with the past few decades. "When Indonesia achieved her independence from the Dutch in the 1940s, a plural society of hundreds of different ethnic groups was formed. Thus, maintaining Java's world of

difference became problematic. Some scholars and political leaders thought of elevating Javanese gamelan into a "national" music." (Sumarsam, 70) Beginning in the 1940s with Indonesia's independence from the Dutch and especially in the 1960s under Sukarno, a widespread and increased investment in the cultural nationalization of gamelan as an Indonesian high-art music stemmed from the urgent rhetoric around the creation of a nationalized Indonesian identity. Balinese politicians and veteran musicians alike have begun sponsoring the performance-oriented education of young children and, in recent years especially, young girls in Balinese gamelan groups; the Balinese conception of the child as a uniquely divine and complex being here acts in a fascinating conjunction with the emerging conception of the performing child as a cultural and politicized operative responsible for receiving and representing the most complex high-art traditions.

Balinese Childhood and New Responsibilities

Now that I have explored some of the training methods and cultural impetus behind forming and training these groups, I would like to examine some of the cultural work that these groups are doing. It must not be forgotten that the musics these children are performing are not "watered-down" or stultified abbreviations of classic standards. Balinese gamelan is simply not reflective of the Westernized concept of childhood musical education, whereby children begin their musical education with simple tunes and stock harmonies often extracted from folk melodies or simplifications of the classical symphonic repertoire. Perhaps because of the multiple skill levels represented in the gamelan ensemble itself, children performers are expected to perform both the

classical repertoire and new commissioned pieces at the highest level, whether as an accompaniment to singers and dancers or by themselves. An extremely complex and culturally valued art form with a strong received tradition with "no amateurs" as noted earlier by Margaret Mead, children are placed in a position of responsibility to perform as true artists. Colin McPhee, who supported the formation of a local gamelan ensemble in his village of Sayan, wrote in 1938 that "No heavy demands were put on any single player. No part was too difficult to be learned with a reasonable amount of application. Each instrument presented a single problem, to which the player could give his whole attention. Combined, the parts produced a full orchestral effect, sparkling with life and movement. This was not children's music they were learning, no mere bong-bong of some progressive rhythm class, but adult music, which, when learned, was fitting to be performed in the temple or at festivals." (McPhee, 89) McPhee's characterization captures the Balinese musical performance traditions as a natural extension of the broader, almost antithetically non-Western Balinese conception of the child: "In Bali, children are called "small human beings," and the conception of the nature and place of the child is different from that of the West." (Mead, 40). I believe that Balinese childhood ideologies are uniquely conducive for the new political and culturally representative work that children are being expected to perform through child gamelans. As girl gamelan scholar Sonja Lynn Downing comments on the conjunction of Balinese childhood ideologies and gamelan performance culture, "Children [are placed] at the center of this process, not only to benefit them and to prepare future generations of performing artists but also to make use of…their spiritual purity and brilliance. With participating children as the source of such purity, the rituals they create have more

spiritual power. In this way, children not only are learning and rehearsing in preparation for their future but are already active members in cultural and spiritual development and practice." (Downing, 36)

Rhetoric of Improvement: Girls, Gamelan and Cultural "Development"

The Balinese child's position of responsibility and cultural authority to represent what is is considered the highest "high art" of their own culture, is deeply linked to patriotism. As noted by Sonja Lynn Downing and Sumarsam alike, the nationalized gamelan is now being considered a vehicle by which to respond to threats of globalism and Islamic fundamentalism, considered a political expression of the integrity and value of Indonesian identity. Both for the individual and for the community, the gamelan is now considered to be a cultural tool for self-betterment and social change. Gamelan was once the exclusive domain of men. Even as late as 1938, when Colin McPhee was facilitating a children-only gamelan in Sayan, his observations were exclusively of young boys and men, with the barrier to female performers completely tacit in his reporting. However, with shifts in gender dynamics over the past two decades, the gamelan has opened up to the inclusion of women and especially girls in gamelan ensembles and the formation of girls-only training and performing gamelans. The inclusion of girls in the gamelan is closely linked to seemingly contradictory senses of cultural continuity, by which girls are now told that they are allowed to serve as the bearers and protectors of the high-art traditions, and cultural shifts in the Balinese perception of gender roles. Girls in gamelans today and for the past ten to fifteen years "undermine the national ideology of

women's ideal roles by contradicting the notion that adolescent girls must be quiet, if not altogether silent… The dichotomy of girls as silent and boys as noisy must be extended… While women have found gamelan to be another outlet for noise making in the past few decades—albeit generally not as loudly as male groups—gamelan is still a relatively new location for girls and young women to appropriately 'make noise'". (Downing, 34) Where before Balinese conceptions of gender roles may have led to parents praying to have a son to continue the family line, as in Diener's article in A World of Babies ("A son is necessary for the continuance of the family line" (Diener, 100)), girls are now being seen as equally capable bearers of the culture, at least in this respect. I hypothesize that this shift in gender roles in relation to passing on and performing Balinese culture is related to "globalizing" or Westernizing ideas of the nuclear family, whereby the mother is largely responsible for the "creation" or shaping of the child as a social and cultural agent. Arts education in Western culture has historically fallen to women in the home and mothers; I believe that the new Balinese ideals of girls as cultural representatives is fundamentally linked to this nuclear family model. Especially in new commissions to be sung alongside the gamelan, great emphasis is put on gamelan training as self-improvement, as fundamentally linked to development of "character" and intelligence. Since gamelans travel and perform at festivals, having a gamelan in the community is a level of cultural representation and pride; girls in gamelans are thought to be improving the community as well as improving themselves by spending their time in an Indonesian art form. The widespread rhetoric of self-improvement through classical music training, found everywhere in interviews with parents, children, and politicians, is facilitated by the Balinese

conception of the malleability of a child's character and personality, as described by Diener. After the period of godlike infancy ("For about 210 days after being born, your baby will be divine; even after that, your child will continue to be the reincarnation of an ancestor whose spirit came down to inhabit the fetus." (Diener, 98)), it is the task of the adults in the community to reshape and retrain any bad traits may be reincarnated, such as bad temper or laziness. Girl gamelan groups work expressly to develop female leadership, promote strong relationships with elders and music masters in the community, and treat women as capable of performing highly complex tasks. Parents believe and children are taught that participating in child gamelan groups will improve them as people; the discourses I observed surrounding gamelan training and performance are profoundly hopeful and positivist, focusing on ideas of "brain development", being a better use of time than, say, electronic games like GameBoys, and building skills that cross into STEM disciplines, and business leadership. The interviews are strongly reminiscent of the discourses surrounding piano or cello lessons in the Western and Westernized world, citing "benefits" that we have seen are problematized in the innumerable ways they lead to cultural straightjackets for non-Western cultures.

Deeply linked to the concept of a refinement or development of the Balinese identity, "children's musical activities are located at the center of current debates about what Balinese identity is and how best to enact, embody, present, and represent it. Teaching gamelan to children is done with the motivation of cultural preservation to support local identity and establish difference from the national majority. Children's gamelans are often supported with the goal of cultural promotion for both local and national purposes to increase tourism through their performances at festivals,

competitions, and tourist shows. The activities of these organizations and the experiences of their members exemplify how children, especially girls, must negotiate competing influences of national educational policy and regional cultural policy, national and regional identity, and increasing global capitalism." (Downing, 43)

Performance as Cultural Work: Girls' Gamelans in Global and Local Competition

Scholars of Balinese culture recognize that the Balinese are currently facing a complex set of benefits and negative effects from the impact of tourism to the island. Tourism is an index of the ever-growing effects of neoliberal capitalistic "globalization"; gamelan groups, especially young girl groups, are being hired to hotels, cultural festivals, and other tourist hot spots, often to perform in juried competitions for placement or cash prizes that draw many tourists, mostly Indonesians from other islands. Some worry that juried performances and pitting local practices against each other in competitions disempowers the Balinese artists and displaces the artistic traditions; others theorize that these competitions are central to "the development of a truly competent generation of female Balinese musicians able to compete and perform on an equal footing with men. Such a development [requires] the creation of, and competition between, girls' ensembles." from Andrew Clay McGraw's 2004 "'Playing Like Men': The Cultural Politics of Women's Gamelan", (Downing, 40) After one girls' gamelan juried competitive performance during a Balinese politician's rally on to promote cultural arts, "the minister [of culture and tourism]'s speech *called on children* to participate in Indonesian cultural arts as an act of patriotism, describing the performers as an *example of what Indonesian children* should strive for… In so doing,

he discursively placed national and regional pride, the burden of upholding nationalist gender ideals and promotion of the tourist economy on the shoulders of ten- to sixteen-year-old girls" (Downing, 30-31), emphasis added. Perhaps the practice of putting classical musicians on display in competitions for prizes and placement may seem familiar to Western eyes accustomed to classical music competitions, talent shows, and even beauty pageants, but in fact, as we have seen the girl-groups competing in competitions and festivals represent a significant political act.

I have argued that their capacity to form, perform in, and compete with the highest-caliber ensembles may be rooted in the Balinese conception of children as closer to the divine and thus capable of the highest brilliance and complexity possible, and the expansion of that conception to girls. However I also must acknowledge that it also represents a new and troubling capitalistic edge to the traditional roles of gamelan, both a non-competitive, non-adjudicated ceremonial practice and an acoustic and visual representative of unique, particular local cultures and histories. Student groups are selected to represent and compete, bringing wide audiences to see children--and now crucially girls--be young leaders; this brings a lot of money to hotels and cultural festivals, which is either never seen by the performers, who are given a pittance of a cash prize if anything. Sonja Lynn Downing interviewed instructors, parents, and performers of one such competing girl group that often refuses to perform in such competitions; she reported that "while they do not play for regular tourist shows, which they feel is detrimental to the spirit of their performances, when something special comes up they consider it and that the directors are always keen to increase the performance experience of and awareness about the girls' gamelan. Alit [the director] also pointed

out the potential benefits of using "the opportunity of tourism to improve" their work." (Downing, 41) The rhetoric, as seen here, is that an ensemble with discretion and with higher cultural ideals will not fall prey to the many chances to "sell out" to the tourist shows, though the right opportunity, as decided by the director, can allow the performers to maximize their cultural impact as a girls' gamelan ensemble. This capitalistic, maximalist mindset is a far cry from the types of discourse around children's gamelans—and the childhood ideologies and children's roles that they represent—that Colin McPhee had observed in Sayan within the very same century, centered around passion-driven individuals creating a performing ensemble from a rag-tag group of boys out of sheer interest in the art itself: "They are devoted patrons of the arts, would rather die than miss a play or *gamelan* performance. One would think, watching them, that the performance was given entirely for their entertainment." (McPhee, 74) As we have seen, by the time Sonja Lynn Dowling made her observations, the gamelan itself had changed drastically as an art form with its role in cultural nationalization; because of the shifts in the cultural role of the music itself, gamelan performers, and especially child performers, are doing new and unprecedented types of cultural work.

Conclusion

Taking into account the repositioning of Balinese female child performers, understanding the new and emerging role of children's gamelan practices in Bali could require a rethinking of some challenging assumptions about children's and especially girls' work as cultural agents, and the political roles they are now occupying, which recalls Heather Montgomery's thesis on childhood innocence:

"The child is both reified and politicized, and one of the central contributions that anthropologists can bring to contemporary debates about childhood is their understanding that there is no such thing as 'the child' and particularly not 'the innocent child'… The importance of an anthropological perspective on children's lives is that it shows so clearly that the concept of the innocent child, so important to national and international legislation, is but one cultural construct among so many others. There is nothing natural in how children grow up, what they know, or the choice of topics from which they must be protected." (HM, 235-6)

As cultural boundaries shift around what the Balinese child can do, what the Balinese girl can do, and what responsibility they hold to present themselves as representatives of a unified, nationalized Indonesia, there is no simple answer to the question of what role the gamelan plays—or should play—in the construction of Balinese identity and childhood ideologies. In Bali as in many cultures, "high art" and especially classical music as children's artistic practices are buoyed up by well-accepted discourses around self-and community betterment, but are also now cast over by the threatening shadows of the incursion of politicization, nationalism, and globalized capitalism that threaten the practices of those very arts, and by extension drastically altering the cultural roles and lives of the children that will perform them.

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