Bali Remixed and Revisited

The launch of the remix competition of a track David Attenborough recorded in Bali in 1956 generated a lot of interest from gamelan specialists. Edward Herbst visited the village to discuss the distribution of royalties and provides context for the music.

PHOTOS RIO HELMI

The remix competition of a gender wayang track from Sir David Attenborough’s My Field Recordings from Across the Planet album was announced on May 10, in partnership with PRS Foundation. Soon after, news spread to musicians, scholars and fans around the world (via Gamelan Listserve, an email list for gamelan enthusiasts). Among the reactions was concern that the anonymous musicians (or their descendants) were receiving neither recognition nor royalties for this reuse of their work.

The music and instruments in the 1956 recording were instantly recognisable to people who knew the repertoire of the village of Teges Kanginan (three kilometres from the much-visited town of Ubud). The four musicians recorded by Attenborough might have been Madé Gerindem, Madé Locong, Ketut Gerinding, and Wayan Nyampuh – musicians I later came to know and perform with.

Gamelan gender wayang is a quartet of ten-keyed metallophones that accompany wayang kulit (shadow puppet theatre) and dance drama, as well as rituals of Bali’s religious life such as tooth-filing, marriage and cremation ceremonies, theatre) and dance drama, as well as rituals of Bali’s religious life such as tooth-filing, marriage and cremation ceremonies, including the Mahabharata epics that originated in India. In the 1950s, Attenborough was travelling for a TV series called Zoo Quest, collecting animals with a team from London Zoo. He only recorded music incidentally to use as possible background music. But in the 60s, Attenborough filmed The Miracle of Bali about the village of Teges Kanginan (a neighbour of Peliatan, including the gamelan guning kulit Gunung Sari ensemble performing the Odiy Zambulilingan dance. This was first broadcast in 1969 and it’s a performance of great historical value as documentation of changing choreographic styles. It features Ni Gusti Raka Raumi, who had performed the dance as a 12-year-old with Gunung Sari on a 1952 tour of the US, UK and France. In the opinion of dance teacher Ni Ketut Ariy Ariti, Raka’s Odiy movement in the 1968 film was supple, soft, and focused internally. In contrast with the Odiy of today, Balinese and many other Indonesian performing arts, while steeped in historical tradition, have reflected innovation, creativity and change, most rapidly since the 19th century. ‘Rêbong’, the piece excerpted in the 1956 recording, is played for amorous scenes. It may begin with a maidenservant, attendants, princesses and male counterpart encountering one another; the second section expressing momentum building as the two lovers circle one another in flirtatious play. During this movement, the recording fades out. The final section would lead into livelier, impassioned dance supplemented by servants’ comments and jokes.

The gamelan set Attenborough recorded in 1956 is presumed to have belonged to the village of Teges Kanginan for at least 100 years. The two lower instruments are intact and kept in the village temple. I’d learned the Teges repertoire from Gerindem during a 12-month visit in 1972. Before I returned to Bali in 1980, Wayan Nyampuh had passed away and the group was a man short. So Gerindem would regularly ride his bicycle to my home in the village of Bedulu at 6am to tell me of an imminent wayang performance and make sure I’d be there.

Since the early 60s, Madé Gerindem was the most active teacher of gender wayang in Teges, and since 1969, the musical leader of the 25-musician semar pagaîan group Gunung Jati of Teges. I knew his fellow musicians Madé Locong, Ketut Gerinding and Wayan Nyampuh well, and had played with them on countless occasions. I’d learned the Teges repertoire from Gerindem during a 13-month visit in 1972. Before I returned to Bali in 1980, Wayan Nyampuh had passed away and the group was a man short. So Gerindem would regularly ride his bicycle to my home in the village of Bedulu at 6am to tell me of an imminent wayang performance and make sure I could join them, always playing one of the higher-octave instruments. I received the standard remuneration as the others

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From the birth of recorded sound – and especially in our era of digitised audio so easily duplicated and disseminated – the names and locations of singers and instrumental ensembles have not always been recognised. But the first published recordings of Balinese music, made by Odeon and Beka in 1928, did provide such identification. As part of the Bali 1928 Repatriation Project, I’ve been doing field research since 2003 with a team of Balinese scholars and girls as young as eight years old and into their teens, with competitions and festivals focusing on this one genre.

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It’s encouraging that these artists and their community’s cultural heritage are now being credited. In my recent meeting in the temple with village leader Wayan Sukaya, along with his staff and local musicians, we listened to the 1956 recording as Madé Windra, one of the current players, tapped out the basic melody on the gender and all the pitches matched. Everyone agreed Attenborough’s recording was of their gender wayang, based on each and every rhythmic and melodic phrase as well as the tuning. In Bali, despite a modern trend toward conformity, virtually every (older) gamelan is different, so that often perceived as exotic, without the dignity of personhood. So, it’s encouraging that these artists and their community’s cultural heritage are now being credited.

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Then the question arose concerning which musicians might have been playing on the track. I mentioned Gerindem, Gerinding, Lécong and Nyampuh. Someone added Wayan Udeke, the grandfather of Wayan Sudat, the 64-year-old gender player sitting next to me, and also Sudat’s father, Wayan Mondong. I asked Wayan Sudat whether they and another player of Udeke’s generation, Dewa Ketut Kali, were still alive during and after the massive 1963 volcanic eruption of Gunung Agung, and he confirmed they were. All agreed that there were at least seven skilled gender players in Teges during that era. Everyone was delighted that the 1963 recording was considered to be gender wayang of Teges Kanginan and that the royalties should go to the village. I then learned that the klain banjar (a local official), knows which family has the two upper-octave gender. It was discussed if the two instruments were indeed still there and how essential it was to reunite them with the larger pair. There was quick unanimity that the royalties from the record and my fee for this article might be enough to re-acquire them. It’s encouraging that these artists and their community’s cultural heritage are now being credited. In my recent meeting in the temple with village leader Wayan Sukaya, along with his staff and local musicians, we listened to the 1956 recording as Madé Windra, one of the current players, tapped out the basic melody on the gender and all the pitches matched. Everyone agreed Attenborough’s recording was of their gender wayang, based on each and every rhythmic and melodic phrase as well as the tuning. In Bali, despite a modern trend toward conformity, virtually every (older) gamelan is different, so that often perceived as exotic, without the dignity of personhood. So, it’s encouraging that these artists and their community’s cultural heritage are now being credited. In my recent meeting in the temple with village leader Wayan Sukaya, along with his staff and local musicians, we listened to the 1956 recording as Madé Windra, one of the current players, tapped out the basic melody on the gender and all the pitches matched. Everyone agreed Attenborough’s recording was of their gender wayang, based on each and every rhythmic and melodic phrase as well as the tuning. In Bali, despite a modern trend toward conformity, virtually every (older) gamelan is different, so that often perceived as exotic, without the dignity of personhood. So, it’s encouraging that these artists and their community’s cultural heritage are now being credited. In my recent meeting in the temple with village leader Wayan Sukaya, along with his staff and local musicians, we listened to the 1956 recording as Madé Windra, one of the current players, tapped out the basic melody on the gender and all the pitches matched. Everyone agreed Attenborough’s recording was of their gender wayang, based on each and every rhythmic and melodic phrase as well as the tuning. In Bali, despite a modern trend toward conformity, virtually every (older) gamelan is different, so that often perceived as exotic, without the dignity of personhood. So, it’s encouraging that these artists and their community’s cultural heritage are now being credited. In my recent meeting in the temple with village leader Wayan Sukaya, along with his staff and local musicians, we listened to the 1956 recording as Madé Windra, one of the current players, tapped out the basic melody on the gender and all the pitches matched. Everyone agreed Attenborough’s recording was of their gender wayang, based on each and every rhythmic and melodic phrase as well as the tuning. In Bali, despite a modern trend toward conformity, virtually every (older) gamelan is different, so that often perceived as exotic, without the dignity of personhood. So, it’s encouraging that these artists and their community’s cultural heritage are now being credited.

Although there is a local dalang who can perform ritual daytime wayang lemah, there are not enough musicians who are able to accompany him in the Teges style. A younger musician in the meeting commented that the original, older style was no longer known, since over time the pieces had changed. I told them that Nonesuch Explorer had released a full LP in 1971 and that I had recorded all the pieces Gerindem had taught me in 1972, with him playing the polos part for each piece, followed by the sangsih, so a listener could clearly differentiate the two interlocking patterns.

All assembled were elated that Teges might have its heritage regained, in this legacy gamelan and recordings that could serve as the basis for study. Those instruments would be treated as sacred heirlooms of the temple, receiving offerings and prayers from temple worshippers. After the discussion, a voice called out that Wayan Sudat and I should play ‘Rébong’ to conclude the meeting, and we compiled. At the time of writing, village representatives await an auspicious day in the Balinese calendar for a visit to the genders’ owners.

× COMPETITION See p14 for details on how to vote for one of the final six shortlisted ‘Gender Wayang’ remixes.