

Indonesian experimentalisms, the question of Western influence, and the cartography of aesthetic authority

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Abstract: The eclectic profile of Indonesian creative musical activity designated by the term *musik kontemporer* drives and confounds attempts at definition. But among a chaotic mixing of conventions are exemplary practices which invite the labels experimental and avant-garde. Though suggesting links to a "now-global Cageian experimental movement," closer inspection raises a host of qualifications. The happening art of certain Javanese villagers has a seed that can be traced circuitously to Cage, but it grew in soil in which art never was so separate from life. The Western-oriented composers taught by the senior figure Slamet Abdul Sjukur after his fourteen years in Paris share with him a practical experimentalism, as the underdeveloped state of European classical music in Indonesia precludes a rigorous high modernism. Traditionally-based composers at the arts academy in Solo, spurred to innovate by director Gendhon Humardani and the notions of autonomous art he abstracted from Western philosophy, developed a practice of sound exploration which is otherwise independent of Western experimentalism, having more to do with the social relationships in traditional Indonesian musics and an Indonesian sensitivity to sound. Simplistic appeals to Western influence are clearly inadequate as an explanation for the emergence of *musik kontemporer* in Indonesia. In this paper, I instead take an ethnographic and cartographic approach, locating composers and scenes on a map concerned less with particular stylistic distinctions and more with the sources and distribution of authority for aesthetic positions and practices. Within Indonesia, the prestige of the now international but still predominantly Euro-American avant-garde is limited by the paucity of transnational connections for Western-oriented composers, while the nativist cosmopolitanism of traditionally-based composers resonates with official cultural policy and is reinforced by foreign acclaim.

I would like to start with an example—a somewhat extreme but nonetheless representative example of Indonesian *musik kontemporer*. This is a [series of clips](#) from a 22 minute piece titled *Daily* by the Balinese composer I Wayan Sadra from 2004.¹

What do we make of a piece like this? Why do we make what we make of it? An American graduate student in ethnomusicology, after hearing Sadra's account of the first piece in which he broke an egg, asked "This sounds just like a performance piece from New York! Isn't this just Western influence?" (Diamond 1990b: 14-15). In a previous paper (Miller 2006), I scrutinized this pervasive assumption in the response of Westerners to non-Western experimentalism. I argued that specificity is needed to avoid the idea of the all-powerful West projected by unqualified invocations of Western influence. It is important, first of all, to distinguish between specifically artistic influence and other types of influence, such as "the impact of technology and Western concepts" (Becker 1972: 3). Further, it is important to pay attention to the amount of influence, what role it plays, what paths it follows, the context in which it is received, and how all of these factors filter and shape its impact. Such factors also affect what I called a thing's *ethnological valence*—that is, they affect the logic by which ethnicity is perceived in or attributed to a thing. How is it that chocolate became Swiss? Is experimentalism necessarily Western? How might it cease to be so?

I argued that it was particularly important to identify types of influence when approaching a topic like *musik kontemporer* because of differences in how influence is primarily understood in the humanities versus the social sciences. *Musik kontemporer*, as a non-Western music on the one hand, but as a form of contemporary art music on the other, falls in the overlapping margins of musicology and ethnomusicology, and thus it is all too easy to slip from one disciplinary framework to another. It is too easy to go from recognizing the impact of several centuries of European presence in Indonesia, including a century of intensive colonial rule, to assuming that Indonesian musicians were subject to the kind of influence that humanities disciplines are concerned with—the influences that shape an individual composer's work, the most important of which are taken to be the work of other individual composers. Influence in this specifically artistic sense has been theorized most cogently by Harold Bloom, who in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1997) sorts out the different ways in which poets create themselves in relationship to their precursors—in other words, to a canon.



Figure 1. Java-centric cartological perspective of Indonesia.

In my paper today, I want to suggest that in thinking about contemporary art music in a place like Indonesia it is necessary to think about a broader range of sources of aesthetic authority: musical traditions, culturally-based aesthetic propensities, and ideological leanings on the general end; and on the concrete end, the institutions and support structures for the existence of contemporary art music. It is necessary because *musik kontemporer* consists not only of composers who define themselves in relationship to a canon of major figures in an avant-garde that is now international, but aesthetically grounded in European classical music. It also encompasses the work of traditionally-based composers such as I Wayan Sadra, whose foundations and primary involvements are in gamelan and other traditional Indonesian musics. These composers have a well developed curiosity towards other musics, including the international avant-garde, but it manifests in an mostly anxiety-free openness to whatever music they happen to encounter, rather than a privileging of a specific canon, Western or otherwise.

My argument is based on my dissertation research, which is partly ethnographic, partly historical, but perhaps most of all concerned with the discourse that surrounds *musik kontemporer*.² For this paper, I have found it fruitful to think about aesthetic authority cartographically—that is, to try and map the sources and distribution of aesthetic authority, and the movement of people, onto geographical space.³ Equally, I have found it instructive to be attentive to what might be called *cartological perspectives*—cartological, like ethnological, having to do with the logic of how places and the things that exist in them are imagined. [This image](#)⁴ is a humorous example of what I mean: an ironic rendering of the world as seen by a New Yorker who believes that he or she lives in the center of the universe, looking west from Midtown Manhattan across the Hudson River, an almost featureless continent, and the Pacific Ocean, with China, Japan, and Russia as indistinct shapes on the horizon. A more relevant

example is this map of Indonesia (figure 1), hastily sketched by gamelan musician I.M. Harjito for a class at Wesleyan University to show the location of the two old court cities of Solo and Jogja, with their principal and minor courts. Java and Bali—the smaller island to the east—are drawn much larger than they actually are, reflecting the Javanese perspective that they are the true seat of Indonesian culture; Sumatra and Kalimantan are a gesture towards the rest of the archipelago; Jakarta, Indonesia's capital and largest city, and the center of media, government, and commerce, also registers.

This map would seem to be a different kind of caricature, of the rather monolithic notion of Western influence exemplified by the reaction to *Sadra's Daily* (figure 2, left). It is that, but based as it is on a Google map in a variant of Mercator projection, it also demonstrates a more insidious form of cartological perspective. We know that Africa is actually bigger than Greenland, but perhaps not how many times bigger (fourteen, as the Wikipedia entry points out, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mercator_projection [accessed 25 May 2010]). This distortion aside, one could try to more precisely map "the internationalization of twentieth-century avant-gardes," alluded to by Georgina Born (2000: 20), from and to more particular centers (figure 2, right). One might do so by taking the composite of the paths of actual individuals, such as those of two figures who in introducing young Indonesian composers to the international avant-garde played key roles in the emergence of *musik kontemporer* (figure 3). In 1976, Slamet Abdul Sjukur returned to Indonesia to teach at the Jakarta Arts

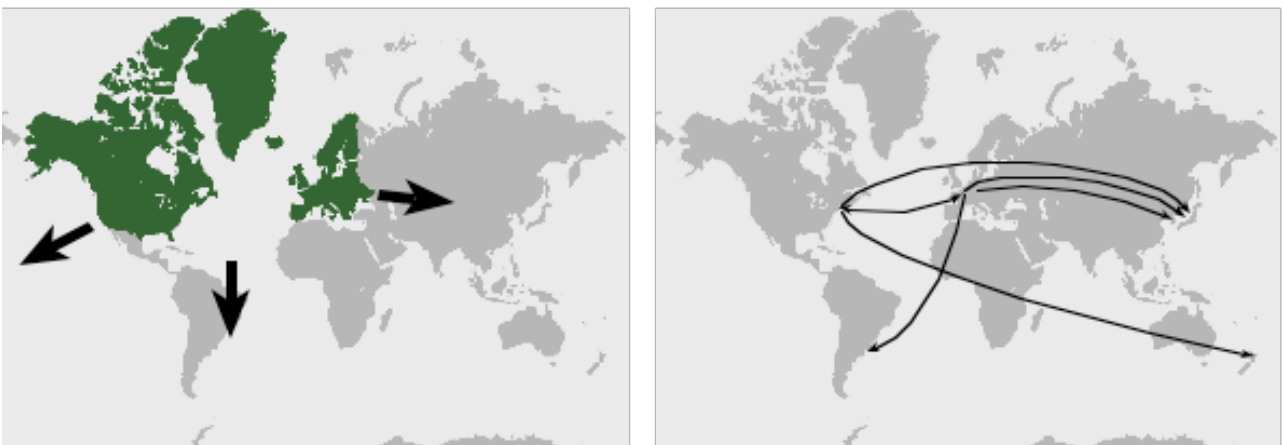


Figure 2. Caricature of the monolithic notion of Western influence (left), and a more nuanced mapping of instances of internationalization of the avant-garde from Western centers (right).



Figure 3. Paths of key teachers of Western-oriented composers in Indonesia: Slamet Abdul Sjukur (left) and Jack Body (right).

Institute after fourteen years in Paris, where he studied with Henri Dutilleux and Olivier Messiaen and worked in *musique concrète* studio of Pierre Schaeffer (Mack 2005). That same year, New Zealand composer Jack Body began a two-year stint as a guest lecturer at the Indonesian Music Academy in Jogja, after having studied with Mauricio Kagel in Köln and at the Institute of Sonology in Utrecht (Young).

But what of the traditionally-based side of *musik kontemporer*? This clip is from the 1988 piece *Sak-Sake* by Sadra's colleague A.L. Suwardi (from Diamond 1990a).

While there are some quasi-traditional patterns here, there is at least as much focus on shifting masses of sound, reminiscent of the stochastic clouds of Iannis Xenakis, using a mix of traditional and invented instruments and found objects reminiscent of Harry Partch. One account that seems to explain these resemblances is offered by Franki Raden, a student of Slamet Abdul Sjukur. Raden portrays himself as a conduit for inspiration from the international avant-garde (figure 4)—as having introduced the idea of "treating gamelan instruments as autonomous sources of sound" when he worked with Suwardi and other students at ASKI Solo (the Academy of Traditional Music) to produce a film score in 1977 (Raden "Suwardi, Al."), and as having influenced their thinking in his capacity as a music critic (Notosudirdjo 2001: 358).⁵ The claim seems somewhat self-aggrandizing, especially given that Raden, 24 at the time, had only himself been introduced to the Western avant-garde a few years earlier. That sound exploration became a cornerstone of the compositional process at ASKI Solo has more to do, I would argue, with the exceptional attentiveness to and appreciation for all manner of sound in traditional Indonesian cultures. This is manifest in such things as the abundance of onomatopoeic words (150 starting with the letter "k" alone in one Indonesian-English dictionary [Echols and Shadily 1998]), sound-making toys (which fascinated Suwardi as a child, as he noted when I asked when he first started making instruments [interview, 8 September 2004]), and a gamelan piece with a section where the musicians stop playing their regular parts and imitate the sounds of frogs.⁶

The push to experiment came at least as substantially from two non-musicians—from the renowned choreographer Sardono, with whom Suwardi and Sadra worked in 1973 and 74, (ibid.) and on a more sustained basis from the charismatic director of ASKI Solo, Gendhon Humardani, who urged students to "break the shackles" of traditional concepts (Perlman and



Figure 4. Franki Raden as a conduit for influence from the international avant garde on traditionally-based composers in Solo, Central Java.

Diamond 1991: 24), which they also studied extensively. Young musicians at ASKI were instilled with a perspective on art as an autonomous activity in which innovation was prioritized, but without being asked to emulate Western models.⁷ They did not learn to use Western staff notation—as Raden found out in 1975, in a failed attempt to have Suwardi and his colleagues read through a piece he was writing for gamelan "in the pointilist style of European post-serialism" (Notosudirdjo 2001: 340-342). Their awareness of the international avant-garde was thus limited, as is nicely illustrated by Suwardi's response to a review by Raden of a piece from 1984. Raden apparently hailed Suwardi's piece as finding what Cage had been searching for; Suwardi did not know who Cage was, but his curiosity piqued, he sought out recordings the following year when he was in the United States to teach gamelan (interview, 8 September 2004).

What the earlier interaction with Raden does represent is a foreshadowing of positive reinforcement for experimentalism that would come from another more immediate authority: the Jakarta arts establishment. The most important event in establishing *musik kontemporer* as a larger movement was the Pekan Komponis (Composer's Week), a more or less annual



Figure 5. Convergence of Western-oriented (green dots) and traditionally-based (brown dots) participants in the Pekan Komponis (Composer's Week) festival in Indonesia's capital, Jakarta.

Scenes	Traditionally-Based Composers					Total	Western-Oriented Composers			Total
	Solo	Denpasar	Jogja	Bandung	Other		Jakarta	Jogja	Bandung	
I (1979)	2	2		1		5	1	2		3
II (1981)	2	1	1			4	1			1
III (1982)	1	1			1	3		1		1
IV (1983)	1	1			2	4		1	1	2
V (1984)	2	1		1	1	5				
VI (1985)	1	1			1	3	2			2
VII (1987)	1	1	1	1	2	6				
VIII (1988)	1	1			2	4	1			1
Totals	11	9	2	3	9	34	5	4	1	10
						77%				23%

Table 1. Representation of scenes at the Pekan Komponis, by number of pieces presented.



Figure 6. Western-oriented (green dots) and traditionally-based (brown dots) scenes at Pekan Komponis, with size of dot proportional to number of participants (top), compared to major cities on Java and Bali (black dots), with size of dot proportional to population (bottom).



Figure 7. Presence of European classical music in urban enclaves (top) compared to widespread presence of traditional Indonesian musics (bottom).

gathering of composers from different parts of Indonesia, produced by the Jakarta Arts Council and held in the capital (figure 5). Composers from ASKI Solo were included from the very first meeting, in 1979. In fact, they were the best represented scene over the festival's first eight years, with the traditionally-based scene from Denpasar, Bali, a close second. Together, they contributed the better part of the thirty-four pieces by traditionally-based composers, which is more than three times the number of pieces by Western-oriented composers (table 1) (Hardjana 1986; Dewan Kesenian Jakarta 1987; Dewan Kesenian Jakarta 1988). Although Jakarta remained the center from which curatorial control was exercised, and to which composers looked and came, a significant amount of aesthetic authority for the event, and thus for *musik kontemporer*, was invested in the two most prominent centers of traditionally-based activity, Solo and Denpasar. This map, in which the size of each dot represents the number of pieces from each scene, gives some sense of the distribution of aesthetic authority between these and other centers, and how little it has to do with the population of these cities (figure 6).⁸

There are several interconnected reasons why traditionally-based composers have outnumbered Western-oriented composers at the Pekan Komponis. An underlying factor is that Western classical music, although it has had enough of a presence to inspire some to take up composition, has never really thrived in Indonesia. As Suka Hardjana, the director of the Pekan Komponis, notes, Western art music has existed "only in enclaves" (interview, 14 September 2004). This is in contrast to both traditional Indonesian musics such as gamelan, which has until recently enjoyed widespread currency, and an increasingly dominant commercialized popular culture that is largely though not entirely based upon Western models, and that is very much centered in Jakarta (figure 7).

Another important factor is the prevalence of nativism, manifest in individual aesthetic positions as well as on the level of official cultural policy. Nearly without exception, the composers I term Western-oriented have worked with traditional musicians—even Tony Prabowo, another of Slamet Abdul Sjukur's students who describes his music as influenced by Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Messiaen, and Boulez (Tony Prabowo interviewed by Jason Tedjakusuma for the podcast "New Music from Indonesia," Episode 49, <http://www.equinoxdmd.com/podcast.html> [accessed 26 June 2007]).⁹ I get the sense that Prabowo would be just as happy composing exclusively for Western instruments, as he is able to do through a connections he's made in New York. Most others have embraced nativism more whole-heartedly, and not only out of necessity. A particularly intriguing case of nativism, and my last example, is that of Sutanto. A student of Jack Body, Sutanto won a prize from the Jakarta Arts Council for his chamber piece *Apa?* in 1978 (Dewan Kesenian Jakarta 1979), but as the happening he presented at the first Pekan Komponis suggests, he leaned towards experimentalism (Hardjana 1986: 43-54; Raden). Frustrated with the lack of support for this direction, he dropped out of the urban music scene. When he reappeared, it was with another happening presented at a performing arts festival in Solo in 1994 (Notosudirdjo 2001: 350-352).

Most of the performers [in this clip](#)¹⁰—I'm not certain about the ducks—are from Mendut, the village that Sutanto moved to in 1989 (figure 9). Much of the music and at least some of the dance draws on traditional forms, but they are juxtaposed with each other and with non-traditional elements such as a tape collage prepared by the American composer Nick Brooke.¹¹

"Happening art" seems to have caught on more broadly in the area around Mendut, presumably through events at Sutanto's gallery, and through mountain village festivals he's organized. A newspaper photograph from 2002 had the caption "Artist community from the slopes of Mt. Merapi present happening art at ritual forum" (*Kedaulatan Rakyat*, 19 December 2002). A (now defunct) blog from a Catholic church and educational center in the village of Selo, also on the slopes of Merapi, displayed photographs of "happening art" in conjunction with Christmas celebrations, and to counteract the use of narcotic drugs among youth (<http://egspi.blogspot.com/> accessed 18 October 2008). Further research is needed to determine what happening art actually means in these communities, but given that dance, theater, and music are traditionally integrated with each other, and with community life, its attraction



Figure 8. Path of Sutanto and his influence: relocation to Mendut after studying in Jogja in 1989, travel with performers to festival in Solo in 1994, and influence on artists in area surrounding Mt. Merapi.

probably has little to do with the concerns that gave rise to the form in the USA circa 1960. Sutanto's has written about Cage, Fluxus, and other instances of Western experimentalism (Sutanto 2002), but at the same time, he insists that the villagers he works with are more genuinely avant-garde than the urbanites involved in *musik kontemporer* (personal communication, 9 August 2004).

All of this complicates the notion of the internationalization of avant-gardism as a simple or even inevitable flow beyond its centers in the West. To be sure, the West—itself a cartological construct—is undeniably important. Although Suka Hardjana became a champion of traditionally-based *musik kontemporer*, his own authority derives from his seven years in Europe from 1964 to 1971, and his experience as a professional orchestral clarinetist (Manus et al. 1995: 120-124). Sutanto's knowledge of Western music, acquired through his education at an institution in the local big city of Jogja, no doubt helped secure the respect of mountain villagers. But in both cases, rather than instilling a sense of allegiance to a Western canon, they celebrate the independence of Indonesian music. Looking more closely at the sources and distribution of authority for aesthetic positions and practices draws attention to the agency in the relationships between different parties involved, revealing that what lies beyond the centers is not an unvaried periphery, but a landscape with its own constellation of centers.

Notes

1. Taken from personal video documentation of I Wayan Sadra.
2. My formal research consisted of interviews and archival research conducted over two three-month trips to Indonesia in 2004 and 2005. This research built upon two previous stays to Indonesia, from October 1993 through May 1995, and March through August 2000, during which I studied the performance practice of traditional Javanese gamelan and collaborated with Indonesian composers, including A.L. Suwardi and I Wayan Sadra.
3. The idea of thinking cartographically comes first of all from my fascination with maps, and also from a more general interest in the visual display of quantitative information, inspired by the work of Edward Tufte (2001). It was

not until after I had submitted the first draft of this paper that I learned of Franco Moretti, a scholar of literature who believes there is much "to be learned from the natural and social sciences" (Moretti 2005: 2); I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to his work.

4. Drawing for cover of 29 March 1976 issue of *The New Yorker*, posted on <http://strangemaps.wordpress.com/2007/02/07/72-the-world-as-seen-from-new-yorks-9th-avenue/>, (accessed 22 May 2010).

5. Note that although Raden usually goes by Franki Raden, some of his scholarly work has been published under his official name, Franki Notosudirdjo (2001; 2003).

6. The piece is titled *Gendhing Kodhokan*.

7. See also Roth 1987, Rustopo 1991, and Sadra 1991 for accounts of the emergence of *musik kontemporer* at ASKI Solo, and Rustopo 1990 for a profile of Humardani.

8. In 1981, the population of Jakarta proper was approximately 6.5 million, while that of Solo and Jogja was under 500,000 (Way 1984: 137-138).

9. For a profile of Tony Prabowo and his work, see Griffin 2003.

10. Taken from video documentation of the Nur Gora Rupa festival from the archive of Taman Budaya Surakarta.

11. I had a small part in this piece, speaking the words "so sexy" extremely slowly into a microphone, so that it might be confused with "*suksesi*"—a veiled reference to the taboo topic of who would succeed President Suharto.

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