

12 Performing vs. Recording: The Sound of Modern Bali

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Abstract

This chapter explores the connection between religious sounds and recordings in Bali. It describes the practices of a secluded village community that emphasizes the continuity of tradition. The music of a sacred gamelan ensemble cannot be recorded in accordance with local cultural prohibitions. In contrast, recordings of a yearly incantation of Javanese epic narratives are permitted. Looking at several Balinese sonic/performative practices reveals a textured landscape that factors in the history and politics of specific technologies and people. Foreign scholars have influenced the ways the world “listens” to Bali and how Balinese artists understand their traditions at the confluence of competing histories, technologies, and musical epistemologies.

Keywords: Bali, *gamelan*, religious sounds, recording, prohibition, tradition

This essay will discuss my ethnographic research with a Balinese village community named Tenganan Pegringsingan. I was very impressed with their ability to maintain performative traditions dating back to the 11th century. The village was filled with beautiful sounds during the ritual occasions, but I was not allowed to record them because it is considered inappropriate to record sacred rites. Even so, outsiders and participants can always enjoy the live sound during the ritual ceremony, which is then recorded in our memory.

Interestingly, while modern Balinese music has been recorded since 1928 by the record company Odeon and Beka, Balinese people seem to prefer live performances held in the villages. In 1945, with the emergence of RRI (Radio Republik Indonesia), Balinese people began to get used to sound



Figure 12.1 Pura Puseh, the oldest temple in Tenganan Pegringsingan village. June 2022. (Photo by the author)

recordings. Many music competitions are held in Bali and the growth of visual technology had an impact on the uniformity of musical production.

These developments provoke salient questions. How did Balinese people respond to modernity through sound recordings, while maintaining traditional sonic ideologies? How can a community maintain ritual traditions by rejecting recording technologies, if recordings are present as the extended life of the culture itself? Why does the recording, built upon a power relationship, produce a different experience if it is compared to the live cultural performance? Moreover, these questions interrogate and reconfigure interactions in the fields of ethnomusicology, performance studies, and religious practice.

Introduction

Ten years ago, I conducted research in a traditional village called Tenganan Pegringsingan, in Bali. I was very impressed by the continuity of traditions that date back to the 11th century and are still beautifully performed. As an ethnomusicologist, I am interested in exploring the performativity of the daily lives of the people of the village, using the conceptual lens of performance studies. Tenganan Pegringsingan is famous for its *Gamelan Sêlonding*, which is believed to be divine in origin and is still considered

sacred. Gamelan Sêlonding is used in every ritual performance. It is an invitation to the gods to celebrate the event, and, when the music starts to play, the *truna* (a young man from the village) always reminds the audience not to record the event.

Following Jaap Kunst's *Music in Java*, ethnomusicology can be understood as the study of the form, function, organology, notation, and playing techniques of a musical practice (Becker 1975). However, this approach cannot be applied to the instruments constituting the Gamelan Sêlonding, since the latter is deemed sacred in Tenganan Pegringsingan and therefore is off limits for regular research methods. Besides the prohibitions on recording its sounds, the Gamelan Sêlonding is located in Balai Banjar, a space of gathering for residents, which I am forbidden from entering, as only locals (*krama desa*) are allowed inside. I can only hear without seeing, touching, or making recordings. Not infrequently, the audience or other researchers who are amazed by the beauty of the Gamelan Sêlonding have made clandestine recordings and I have been a witness to such events. However, I have chosen to honor the community's rules and instead I imagine what the performance must look like.

According to local oral history, the Gamelan Sêlonding in Tenganan Pegringsingan descended from the sky (*piturun*). The locals believe this to be a true story, which imbues the Sêlonding instruments with a sacred celestial character, and makes them fit for ritual ceremonies. The gamelan functions as a holy symbol which is reflected in the honorific title by which it is known (i.e., *Bagus Sêlonding*; Yamamoto 1995). A gamelan ensemble consists mostly of metallophones made of iron blades. Older people in Tenganan Pegringsingan recount that three of the iron blades (out of forty) used in the Gamelan Sêlonding instruments fell from the sky with three loud roars over the village. The first landed in Bungaya, to the northeast of Tenganan Pegringsingan. The next landed at Tenganan. The three blades, now in Tenganan Pegringsingan, were said to be very pure. For this reason, the Gamelan Sêlonding is only played for ritual activities (Widiana 2019).

Mangku Widia, in an interview in June 2011, reiterated that this gamelan was inherited from ancient times. In gamelan instruments, the iron blades are placed on a wooden structure called *têlawah*, which serves as a resonance box and is made of jackfruit wood. The blades are held in place by leather straps called *jangat*. In total, there are forty iron blades in the Gamelan Sêlonding.

The pieces performed by Gamelan Sêlonding can be categorized into three groups, namely *gënding Gëguron*, *gënding Pamiyos*, and *gënding Pëngiring Tari*. *Gënding Gëguron* is sacred, because this piece is played when the

rituals begin as an invitation to the deities (Yamamoto 1995). The song is relatively slow and the pattern is easy to remember.

When tracing the history of the Gamelan Sêlonding, it becomes evident that its use has never been separated from the religious activities of the Hindu community, as described by Collin McPhee in his book *Music in Bali* (1966). McPhee described the Gamelan Sêlonding in Tenganan as having the most sacred place in religious ceremonies. It is made of iron and is rectangular in shape and flat. The gamelan's size is unknown because only selected residents may touch it, and observe it up close, but it appears that it is not much different from other Gamelan Sêlonding outside this village. Only the size of the *kempul* gong is slightly smaller compared to Gamelan Sêlonding ensembles in other villages, such as Timbrah and Seraya (McPhee 1966).

From these notes, I feel somewhat relieved because it appears that even McPhee only witnessed the Gamelan Sêlonding from a distance, as I did, and he described the gamelan in uncertain terms and not in great detail. Nevertheless, McPhee's book became an essential reference in the development of ethnomusicology in general. How can we deal with this matter as ethnomusicologists? How can a traditional society maintain its sonic-sacred ideology by rejecting recording, while in other contexts of the same society recordings enjoy wide popularity and the act of recording is considered as an extension of the life of the culture itself?

The context of Tenganan Pegringsingan

Tenganan is a unique community in Bali, known as the Island of the Gods. The Balinese usually call the people of Tenganan the *Bali Aga*, which means that their ancestry can be traced back to the indigenous Balinese who settled on the island before the invasion of Javanese migrants. Therefore, it is assumed that their tradition is quite ancient, with written evidence going back ten centuries. The atmosphere and the environment of Tenganan vary from those in other villages in Bali. The differences, among others, are that they do not practice *ngaben* (cremation), they have no caste system, and men and women have equal social standing (Aryandari 2013).

The ancestors of Tenganan Pegringsingan have been successful in transmitting traditions, as life in present-day Tenganan has preserved aspects that the community perceives as ancient. Faithful adherence to the traditional rules of the village has served as a strong buttress against



Figure 12.2 Village atmosphere of Tenganan Pegringsingan. June 2022. (Photo by the author)



Figure 12.3 Daha (the young, unmarried women) prepare the offerings for Pura Puseh temple. June 2011. (Photo by the author)

the influence of other cultures, particularly of the majoritarian group in Bali, called Bali Majapahit.

Myths developed in Tenganan Pegringsingan are held to be powerful. The worship of Dewa Indra is based on a story that is unique to the Tenganan

community. According to this myth, Tenganan Pegringsingan came to be when Dewa Indra defeated Mayadenawa. To commemorate his victory, he sacrificed a horse named Oncesrawa. The horse had previously run away and the Paneges from the Bedahulu kingdoms (the ancestors of the present-day Tenganan community) were told to look for it. The horse was found dead and Indra bequeathed the Paneges a piece of land as vast as the odor of the dead horse.

The smell of the horse's carcass acts as an imaginary marker of space. This sign is likened to a fortress that represents Dewa Indra's power. Myths are associated with a series of ritual reactivations to bring meaning and inspire behavior, thoughts, and actions in the souls and minds of every Tenganan citizen. The assumption is that myths have meanings and they inspire behaviors that are vital for life (Bowles 1989; Lévi-Strauss 1978). Eliade states that activating myths in the form of rituals is the same as enabling meanings or behaviors that are useful for life, either concerning the higher forces of nature or relationships with other humans (Eliade 2012; Studstill 2000).

The Dewa Indra myth is kept alive in Tenganan, where some people define it as purely imaginary, but others understand it as a living entity that communicates valuable teachings. In the daily life of the Tenganan Pegringsingan community, inhabitants describe their actions by referencing several narratives that indicate Indra's power. Everyday and work-related activities can always be understood in relation to the myth. For example, when villagers participate in the *pandan war*—a yearly, ritual combat held in Tenganan—almost all residents stated that this was a way to worship Dewa Indra, as a figure who had made a sacrifice for the sake of all humanity.



Audiovisual sample 12.1

Bertarung Untuk Dewa (Fight for God), a short documentary (6:28) on ritual life in Tenganan. Directed by Citra Aryandari, 2009, http://www.citraaryandari.com/?page_id=41.

As can be observed in the *pandan war*, Dewa Indra is highly revered by the society of Tenganan Pegringsingan. This is due to the position Dewa Indra holds as the origin of the rules and the source of the power of the Tenganan Pegringsingan community over generations. As a primordial image, Dewa Indra has the potential to compel the inhabitants of Tenganan Pegringsingan to carry out rituals and religious practices. The *pandan war* ritual is understood by the community of Tenganan Pegringsingan as the

symbol of the struggle between *dharma* and *adharma*, where *dharma* stands for goodness and moral order, whereas *adharma* is the opposite, or lack of *dharma*.

The experience of seeing and recording

Once a year, in the morning at the end of the largest ritual festival, Tenganan Pegringsingan holds the *nyajah* ceremony, where the whole village is filled with smoke that carries the appetizing aroma of satay and roast pork. Throughout the village, youths prepare the food, as many guests will be present in the village for the closing of the month-long ritual festival. The guests of honor look different from the Tenganan community and indeed from most Balinese inhabitants. These guests come from the village of Budakeling, which is located approximately 4.5 miles from Tenganan Pegringsingan. Budakeling is a village in Bali where the population consists of Hindus from the Brahmin caste who practice a local form of Hinduism heavily influenced by Buddhism and who are historically related to Tenganan Pegringsingan. When the guests arrive and sit for their meal, the elders of Tenganan Pegringsingan begin the event. The most important part of the morning banquet is the reading of the ancient *prasi* (palm leaves manuscripts). Even though the Gamelan Sêlonding is not present, those of us familiar with the cultural prohibitions of Tenganan Pegringsingan do not dare to record this beautiful moment. I prefer to come back every year to just hear the recitation.

I once asked Ida Bagus Buda, a Brahmin from the village of Budakeling in charge of reading the *prasi*, which story he chose to chant, and he told me he had selected to sing from the Book of Sotasoma, together with Wayan Mudhita, a ninety-year-old Tenganan Pegringsingan resident. There was no specific reason why that fragment had been chosen. He said the *prasi* is still intact and well maintained in Tenganan Pegringsingan (see also Santoso 1974; Zoetmulder 1971). The Book of Sotasoma contains a Buddhist theme and it depicts a conflict between a just prince and a man-eating king. As seen above, the mythical origin of Tenganan Pegringsingan recounts how the unjust King Mayadenawa was defeated by Dewa Indra, and this has parallels with Sotasoma's narrative. This narrative also links Tenganan Pegringsingan to Budakeling, as well as to the story of Mpu Kuturan, who united all sects in Bali to turn towards the Hindu religion.

Reading the Sutasoma Book written in *prasi* is an interesting event to study. The presence of guests to close the ritual celebration of Dewa Indra

ended with the reading of a book that narrated a story similar to their central myth. The presence of others and outsiders can signify that the ritual has ended; it also means that the Tenganan Pegringsingan community is back to being part of the wider society. The Gamelan Sélonding no longer played in this celebration; on that closing day, instead, it was the chanting of the Sotasoma Book, originally from Java, that sounded solemn.

My interest in the *prasi* readings led me to return every year. Finally, at one meeting, I asked Ida Bagus Buda for permission to record the recitations and this request was granted. On the morning of July 3, 2019, at the residence of Ida Bagus Buda in Budakeling Karangasem, I recorded him chanting songs from the books, including the Book of Sotasoma, the Song of Tantri and the Story of the Prophet (*Hikayat Nabi*).



Audio sample 12.2

Prasi recitation of Ida Bagus Buda, 2019, https://youtu.be/yR4_shxXSGk.

The Sotasoma Book owned by Ida Bagus Buda is in a different format than the one at Tenganan Pegringsingan. His copies of the Book of Sotasoma and Song of Tantri are printed on paper and only the Story of the Prophet is still in *prasi*. During the recording process, I asked Ida Bagus Buda to repeat his chants several times until I was able to record what I wanted in terms of sound quality and clarity. Although I obtained what I had hoped for, I realized when playing back the recording that it evoked a different feeling from the performance I witnessed in Tenganan Pegringsingan. The complexity of the performance in Tenganan Pegringsingan is etched into my memory and it has gradually accrued meaning over time for me, as I have experienced it over many years. However, the recording I made on a cell phone might become necessary data later, when I will need to note down or analyze the recording.

In the process of recording, I did not feel awkward approaching a local cultural expert, perhaps because we are both Indonesians. Even though we have different cultures and languages, we can communicate easily through the national language. Ethnomusicologist Jaap Kunst reportedly played an instrument before asking in exchange to a group of locals to play music for his recordings. When making a recording in Kampung Jopu Flores on July 5, 1930, Kunst first played the violin and sang Dutch folk songs before

asking a music group from Jopu to play for him (Kunst 1949). After the musicians from Jopu played their music, they finally agreed to be recorded and compensated with cigarettes, snacks, necklaces, pigs, and goats. This anecdote highlights that there is nothing “natural” about a recording process, as it always entails negotiations and power relationships.

While traveling in Eastern Indonesia, including Bali, compatriots assume that they can take recordings without requesting explicit permission during village events. However, recordings outside of these events require a different approach. When seeking permission to make a recording outside of village ceremonies, it is customary to offer local palm wine (*tuak*) and tobacco to establish rapport with people that one is not acquainted with. Often, this is accompanied by an invitation to share a meal. It can be said that when strangers come and share a meal as a family, a conducive relationship has been established.

When musicians in a community, who usually play for village events, get paid to play as an independent group, this undoubtedly becomes a very different kind of performance. When playing for village ceremonies and rituals, there is a shared sense of the communal value of the performance. This is compromised by the introduction of financial compensation, which indicates a different type of power relations.

Comparing performances

Around June or July every year, Bali holds the Bali Arts Festival (*Pesta Kesenian Bali*, PKB), which began in 1979. Every year while visiting Tenganan Pegringsingan, I take some time to witness a variety of events at PKB. In 2008, I first saw the opening parade of the festival, which was very lively. Streets in the business district of Bali’s capital Denpasar looked busy and crowded. I followed several PKB events at the Denpasar Art Centre. One afternoon I watched an *arja* dance-drama performance and then saw a *baleganjur* competition on a large indoor stage. *Baleganjur* is a Balinese gamelan ensemble played by an itinerant group to accompany traditional ceremonies. I was impressed by this performance at PKB since it was different from what I usually saw on the streets.

This *baleganjur*, which was presented as a competition on a large stage, looked different because it was clearly well-rehearsed, as could be seen from the costumes and lighting, as well as the inclusion of storylines. The creativity of the players was tested through a series of playing styles that are interesting for the audience. However, the following year my impression

changed. I saw a lot of repetition, which I had not expected as a spectator. I was looking forward to a different arrangement from the previous year. In many performances, I noticed similarities and a lack of creativity. I then tried to understand my own dissatisfaction—why did I feel this way about this performance, but not about the Tenganan Pegringsingan recitation which is the same every year? When one is a spectator in a commodified cultural performance, one seeks newness, but this is not the case in a ritual, where innovation is deemed to reduce the meaning of the ritual itself.

On a different occasion, I had conversations with another cultural expert in Bali, Made Sidia. I asked him about the development of Balinese artists' creativity, in relation to my thoughts on the *baleganjur* competitions at the Denpasar Art Centre, which, according to my observations, had not developed over time. A world-renowned *dhalang* (puppet master) from Gianyar, Made Sidia, told me that in each *baleganjur* competition, some rules must be observed by the participants; for example, the duration and the way the instruments are used. Besides these rules, he also noted how technological devices, which enable audiovisual recording, create references for future music groups that will seek to imitate these recordings. The winning *baleganjur* performance thus became a reference with its musical and visual elements now copied by others. During the competitions, both the organizers and the audience record the performances with professional equipment, as well as with cell phones. The recordings are then distributed via YouTube, enabling wide exposure and imitation.

The 1928 Bali Archives (Herbst 2019) include records of Balinese art competitions. In 1928, Bali—now in the Republic of Indonesia—was part of the Dutch East Indies, as the Balinese kingdoms had been conquered entirely in 1908. The system of traditional rule had collapsed. The practice of *puputan*—mass ritual suicides—signaled the collapse of an empire, and provided the royalty with a noble way to liberate their souls (Adams 1992).

Adrian Vickers quotes Schulte Nordholt, who in turns quotes from the Dutch East Indies commander (Vickers 1987):

[T]he Dutch diverted the center of their power to Denpasar. One morning on September 20, the King and his family, with thousands of fully armed followers, dressed in white and ready to die in battle, marched, marched, and prepared to confront the Dutch invaders. One by one, the warlords raged to the front lines, lunging at the enemy as if his body was immune to enemy bullets. The Dutch fired their weapons at “women who take up arms, spears or krisses while carrying their children,” which then “surrender fearlessly advancing towards the opposing forces and face

death”.... Surrender is not an option: “When we were trying to disarm them, the number of victims on our side has actually increased. Those who survived were forced to surrender but to no avail.” The King and his family and his followers continued to move forward, never to retreat, to kill themselves while to crush the Dutch troops that were within their reach. Later the Dutch tried to cover the number of fatalities, while the number of casualties on the Dutch side was reasonably mild; the death toll from the Balinese reached more than 1000 people.

Some experts suspect that the Balinese art explosion occurred after the fall of the Bali kingdoms. The rise of creative enterprises in the arts at that time was a way of healing the traumatic wounds opened by social upheaval and colonial occupation. The collapse of royal power and wealth led to the decentralization of art, away from royal centers and into local social units known as *banjar*. *Puput* means “end” but also a new beginning.

The year 1920 was a crucial time for the development of gamelan and singing in Bali because, at that time, there was a renewal in the arts, marked by the emergence of *kebyar* as a dominant new style in Balinese gamelan and dance. The gamelan groups demanded that the bronze-smiths, or *krawang pandé*, smelted the old gamelan instruments into new forms. The intense and ongoing competition between villages and regions stimulated young composers to develop a variety of innovative works and impressive techniques. Even in the early 1930s, McPhee quoted a composer, I Wayan Lotring: “Ké-Wěh! It’s hard to compose! Sometimes I can’t sleep well for days thinking about new work. That was mind-boggling. To the point of entering into a dream. Thin hair, I think about it” (McPhee 1966).

The intense competition gave rise to a desire not to lose. This triggered a common, but secret, practice of changing the work of one’s rivals and making it one’s own. In the early days of *kebyar*—possibly since the early 1900s—groups even sent spies to climb trees around the training grounds of rivals in the hope of “stealing” their work, so they could know their latest creations before they entered a contest. Intense competition also took place between long-established rivals, as happened in the neighboring villages of Kedaton and Bengkel, where artistic feuds spilled into the realm of politics, beauty, and even the use of sorcery. Although competition ignites the spirit of creativity, Bali’s art world has also developed as a result of close collaborations between artists from different villages and regions.

The explosion of artistic creativity in Bali at that time garnered international attention, and representatives from the German record companies Odeon and Beka visited Bali in August 1928 to expand the scope of their

recordings. They recorded traditional Balinese music in the hope that these records could be consumed by the local community. The LP labels were printed in Malay and some were even written in the Balinese script. The ambitious plan to develop the local market ultimately failed due to the limited interest of the Balinese people in the new and expensive technology, mainly because they could easily witness various performances first-hand, as they were performed every day in thousands of temples and houses throughout the island (McPhee 1966).

Due to this failure, one third of the Odeon and Beka recordings made their way to Europe and the United States. The famous music expert Erich M. von Hornbostel included five of the 98 phonograph records in his 1979 collection *Music of the Orient*. This collection introduced Indonesian music for the first time globally, both to the general public and to ethnomusicologists (Heins 1982).

Wayan Dibia, an internationally renowned professor at the Indonesian School of the Arts in Denpasar (ISI Denpasar), told me how music recording developed in Bali after colonisation. The presence of the national radio station RRI in the 1950s made the Balinese people aware of a range of arts that were recorded and broadcast. Nearly all of the RRI programs in Bali broadcast cultural performances, which was part of the government's anti-Western campaign at that time. Although radio is the leading source of entertainment for the Balinese people, daily performances are still full of visitors. But people still claim that the live performances are better than what is heard on the radio. Wayan Dibia said that some performing arts were lost because the artists were unable to meet the community's demands for greater creativity. In that case, the Balinese will prefer to listen to radio when live performances do not provide innovation or novelty.

Configuring the journey

The story fragments and fieldwork notes providing the basis for what I have written are but subjective reflections that open up many interesting issues. Bali, which has a very complex cultural life, is a reference on how modernity is present in a society that is attached to rituals perceived as sacred. Balinese society recognizes three concepts of performance based on their sacredness and spatiality. A performance known as *wali* is considered sacred if it is part of the rites and held in the center of the temple; another type of performance that accompanies the rituals is called *bebali* and it is often referred to as semi-ritual or semi-sacred. There are also entertaining

performances for the public outside the temple called *bali-balian*. Tenganan Pegringsingan as a space given by Dewa Indra can be considered as a sacred space parallel to the main center of the temple, hence as a *wali*, where the myth of Dewa Indra's power comes from storytellers driven by the flames of Tenganan Pegringsingan's fantasies. Dewa Indra's strength acts as a fortress preserving spiritual life in Tenganan Pegringsingan. Daily actions reiterate the power of the myth. Conversely, the myth allows people to explore meaning in daily actions and provides them a more expansive view of life as connected to a larger cosmos.

In the broader contemporary realm, performance becomes a medium for spreading myths. Myths are not only present as narratives but they are also explored in other forms. It is not only cultural custodians who carry out the transformation, but the audience also participates in the reproduction of the myths. This reproduction comes in several forms, which continue and contest the meaning of the myths. This dynamic keeps the myths alive and in constant transformation. In Tenganan Pegringsingan, myths act like guardians who are unable to penetrate the waves of modernity marked by new technologies.

The rituals preserved in Tenganan Pegringsingan produce religious sounds that are recorded unconsciously in collective memory. This memory forms archetypes that shape sound and visual images. These images, in turn, encourage specific actions that are guided by myths. The chanting of *prasi* at the *nyajah* ceremony is not considered a sacred activity even though it is held in Tenganan Pegringsingan. The presence of others—the guests from Budakeling village—is considered a sign that the sacred rites have ended. However, with a respectful attitude towards the ritual space, I chose not to record the events with digital technological media; rather, I relied on recurring memories of experiences that could be recalled at any time. At a later point, I managed to collect a recording of *prasi* recitation in the village of Budakeling for ethnomusicological purposes, and outside of ritual contexts, as my predecessors did. Likewise, in PKB, the recording is done for documentation purposes, which can be used as a reference in the creative process, although it does not always lead to the production of new work. The stage of PKB is considered a secular space and everybody is allowed to make recordings.

Performances in Bali are tied to the concept of space. The Tenganan community is concerned with maintaining the purity of the village space by forbidding recording of the ritual event. The prohibition to record also preserves the ritual's purported sacrality in the face of Bali's massive tourism. Is this evidence that the human-divine relationship does not

need technological mediation? Or is this evidence that divine mediations lose efficacy if captured and reproduced by technological devices? Does it mean that digital technologies for sound recording are understood along pre-existing theological considerations about purity and pollution? Or is it implied that by prohibiting recordings the ritual space becomes even more sacred, with a jealously protected element of secrecy and irreproducibility? More research in the complex performative heritage and sonic ideologies of the multilayered Balinese society will help unravel such questions.

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