

# Inspiration, Imitation, and Creation in the Music of Bali, Indonesia

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From the gecko's lone call to frog choruses, from crashing waves to delicate snowfall, the sonic environment has long been a source of inspiration for many Balinese artists. Through the use of mimicry, subtler forms of imitation, and conceptual frameworks, soundscapes have been interpreted, transformed, and imagined in music creations ranging from melodic phrases to entire compositions to new art forms that may be recognizable, alluded to, or remain abstract. Drawing on previous scholarship on Balinese music and on conversations with teachers, friends, and family from Bali, Indonesia,<sup>1</sup> this preliminary study explores connections between musical creations and the soundscapes of nature, real and imagined, in Bali and offers a glimpse into the aesthetic sensibilities of Balinese artists. Given the intensity and rapidity of change in the global landscape and soundscape, I hope to make explicit the influence of nature's voices on musical genres, explore modern creations of Balinese composers, and stimulate further Balinese music research in the area of sound and environment.

## **Inspiration and Embodiment**

My frequent visits to Pengosekan village in Ubud, Bali and my travels throughout the island reveal that the Balinese people live intimately and in tune with nature. Perhaps it is because most people in areas outside the dense city centers spend most of their time outdoors that the rhythm of life seems in sync with the seasons, daylight hours, other diurnal creatures, and the rise and fall of temperatures. Many people rise at dawn, take strolls in the morning or before sunset, have siestas during the hottest part of the day, bathe in the river before dusk, eat fruit as it ripens and falls off the trees, and retire from the day's activities as the sun descends beneath the horizon.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bali is an island and province of Indonesia.

<sup>2</sup> Exceptions have been observed among the youth community, in larger cities, and during major festivals.

Daily activities see farmers tending to their rice paddies; fishermen working out at sea; women making offerings out of banana leaves, freshly picked flowers, fruit, and leaves; and young girls sweeping the land with coconut leaf brooms. At a young age, children become acquainted with the texture, smells, sights, and sounds of nature. They fly kites as a pastime and play in the rice fields. Once a year, on *nyepi*, the annual Day of Silence festival, the whole island shuts down as an act to reinvigorate Mother Earth.<sup>3</sup>

Pavilions and houses are built for sleeping or for storage and have large verandas. Many people spend more than ten hours of their day outdoors, working, eating, and socializing on the verandas, effectively attuning themselves to the sounds of nature. They wake up to the overlapping crowing of roosters; they hear the birds sing, the dragonflies hum, the gentle breeze rustle the leaves, and the rain pitter-patter on the tall coconut leaves. In the evening, they take in the splendor of sonic layers and interlocking patterns created by amphibians and reptiles of all sizes, shapes, and sounds—most typically frog choruses and the call of the large *tokeh* gecko. For many Balinese, constant exposure to the outdoors fosters a sensibility to nature and its soundscape, and shapes a fundamental part of their habitus.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to work and play, the connection to nature is deeply embedded in their belief system. In accordance with the *lontar*, the sacred text of the Balinese Hindu people, house compounds and pavilions are built in harmony with nature. The size and location of a pavilion, the position and distance of pavilions to each other, and their distance from the brick wall demarcating their land represent some of the spatial aspects that are carefully considered with regard to wind currents, the trajectory of the sun, and the direction of the mountain and rivers. Belief in geomancy—the auspicious spatial arrangement of objects, buildings, and other sites—is not unique to Bali; it is also found in China, where it is called *feng shui* (“wind water”). Similarly, the spatial template serves spiritual and practical

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<sup>3</sup> During *nyepi* the use of electricity and motor vehicles is restricted. People are mindful of their behavior and emotions, speaking in a deliberate, calm manner. Some use the opportunity to undertake a one-day silent meditation that may include fasting.

<sup>4</sup> The term “habitus,” as elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu, refers to a dynamic system of dispositions and values that are determined by and continuously influenced by one’s environment, perceptions, and interactions. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), 2.

purposes. For example, when constructing a house compound, builders must divide the land proportionately and include a family temple in the northeast corner—the space closest to the sacred Mount Agung and the sunrise. The west pavilion is designated for guests because of its favorable position—the veranda receives a pleasant breeze and is sheltered from the glaring hot afternoon sun.

Connections to nature are also embedded in musical tones. The tones associated with the *pélog* tuning system are considered *Panca Tirta* (five holy waters),<sup>5</sup> and correspond to the light and cardinal positions that have origins in the creation of the universe. The symbolism attached to musical tones is privileged information, of which only a few Balinese musicians have knowledge or awareness. For some composers, these philosophical aspects may govern the structure and development of their musical work, while the sounds of nature provide a vital inspiration.

Figure 1  
**The Five Tones of Pélog Represented by the  
 Balinese Solfège System**  
 Adapted from Tenzer<sup>6</sup>

Cardinal position	Color	Tone
East	white	<i>dang</i>
South	red	<i>ding</i>
West	yellow	<i>deng</i>
North	black	<i>dung</i>
Center (above)	five colors	<i>dong</i>

Below I will explore how soundscapes of the island have served as sources of inspiration for *genggong* (Balinese mouth harp), a vocal genre called *kecak* (ke-chack), and compositions written for Balinese gamelan.

<sup>5</sup> Indonesian music employs two tuning systems: *pélog* and *slendro*. See Michael Tenzer, *Gamelan Gong Kebyar: The Art of Twentieth-Century Balinese Music* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

### Imitation and Creation

#### *Genggong*

The Balinese mouth harps *enggung* and *genggong* are carved from the leaf stem of the *jaka* sugar palm tree.<sup>7</sup> There is speculation that the more complex *genggong* was developed from the simpler *enggung*. *Enggung* refers to one of many species of frogs in Bali.<sup>8</sup> According to ethnomusicologist and mouth harpist Deirdre Morgan, “the term ‘genggong’ is probably pure onomatopoeia,”<sup>9</sup> associated with the sound of the *enggung* frog. While the origins and history of the *genggong* remain uncertain, most Balinese people agree that rice farmers invented the instrument.<sup>10</sup> In addition to playing melodic material, interlocking figurations may be created when the *genggong* are played in pairs or larger groups (typically four to eight players).<sup>11</sup> According to Balinese musician and composer I Dewa Madé Suparta, the interlocking melodies were inspired by the overlapping croaking of *enggung* frogs heard after the sound of a heavy rainfall.<sup>12, 13</sup>

#### *Kecak*

*Kecak* is a popular vocal genre most often associated with a chorus of people chanting “cak” (*chack*)—a vocable that forms the basis of a variety of interlocking patterns. However, it is really an art form that combines dance, drama, and vocal music, inspired by the *Sanghyang Dedari* purification ritual. Although often called the Monkey Chant, the term *kecak* is derived from *cicak* (chi-chack), the Balinese name for gecko, which is onomatopoeia for a clicking sound that the gecko makes.<sup>14</sup> When this sound is made during activities such as speaking or praying, it is taken as a positive sign, an affirmation from the heavens. A Balinese priest explained this to me when a

<sup>7</sup> Balinese terms such as *enggung* and *genggong* are both singular and plural.

<sup>8</sup> Deirdre Anne Elizabeth Morgan, “Organs and Bodies: The Jew’s Harp and the Anthropology of Musical Instruments” (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 2008), 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 33, footnote.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Sound sample at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzJUlpSrNpI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzJUlpSrNpI).

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication, March 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Interlocking figuration is a characteristic feature of Balinese music.

<sup>14</sup> I Wayan Dibia, *Kecak: The Vocal Chant of Bali* (Denpasar, Indonesia: Hartanto Art Books Studio, 2000). Sound sample at <http://picasong.com/5p7X/>.

gecko clicked during prayer in his temple. Balinese friends express the belief by acknowledging the clicking sound with a head nod during conversations, particularly when discussing matters of significance. Speculation suggests that over time the *cicak* sounds were incorporated into ritual practice.

Artist Walter Spies, a Russian-born German expatriate, was fascinated with the *Sanghyang Dedari* ritual. In the 1930s, he and I Wayan Limbak, a dancer and choreographer from Bali, created an early form of *kecak*.<sup>15</sup> Elements of the ritual were adopted, transformed, and combined with a storyline and existing dramatic movements of solo dancers depicting episodes of the Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.<sup>16</sup>

To be sure, the *cak* chorus heard during the purification ritual imitated the affirming call of the gecko. As early as the '30s, *kecak* was known by “the nickname of ‘monkey dance.’”<sup>17</sup> This association continued through the 1970s with the standardization of *Kecak Ramayana*, and is still made today, as seen on concert brochures in Bali and abroad, in advertisements, and on internet travel sites. A common storyline of *Kecak Ramayana* is the abduction of Sita, wife of the Hindu God Rama, by Ravana, the king of demons. Rama enlists the help of the monkey king Hanuman, who calls upon the monkeys of the forest. The *cak* chorus represents the community of monkeys working together to rescue Sita.<sup>18</sup>

German scholar Kendra Stepputat observes that Balinese composers were developing an alternative form of *kecak*—*kecak kreasi* (*kecak* creation)—at the same time as *Kecak Ramayana* in the '70s. Today, both forms of *kecak* continue to exist, one aimed at tourists and the other “generally aimed toward a Balinese audience, though it draws tourists and expatriates as well.”<sup>19</sup> Composers and choreographers of *kecak kreasi* push creative boundaries by setting the musical dance drama to storylines inspired by Balinese history, everyday life, and whatever the imagination holds, rather than by drawing solely from Indian epics. They also add new movements and vocables:

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<sup>15</sup> Kendra Stepputat, “Performing *Kecak*: A Balinese Dance Tradition Between Daily Routine and Creative Art,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 44 (2013): 50-55.

<sup>16</sup> See Dibia, *Kecak: The Vocal Chant of Bali*.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Spies and Beryl de Zoete, *Dance and Drama in Bali* (1938; repr. Singapore: Periplus Editions, 2002), 83.

<sup>18</sup> Sound sample (starting at 2:20): [www.youtube.com/watch?v=TINNKDGHcp4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TINNKDGHcp4).

<sup>19</sup> Stepputat, “Performing *Kecak*,” 62.

“Dibia [a choreographer of *kecak kreasi*] said that many of the movements he uses are an ‘imitation of nature.’”<sup>20</sup> In addition to the typical “cak”, the 100-person chorus chants vocables such as “cik” or “cuk”, hisses, “sh”, and nature sounds that may have corresponding body movements. Ideas from the alternative form have made their way into *Kecak Ramayana*. Forming the live scenery for it, the chorus represents the monkey army (of the earth), and the forces of nature—water, wind, and fire—are imitated in their chants and movements.

### Balinese Gamelan Music

In order to explore how the sonic environment is featured in Balinese gamelan, I turn now to a brief discussion of *ombak* and the repertoire of Balinese music.

“Gamelan” refers to a set of percussive instruments made of bronze, iron, or wood that may number from two to fifty pieces. Fundamental to the aesthetic of gamelan music is *ombak* or “wave” in the Indonesian and Balinese languages, which refers to what ethnomusicologist Andrew McGraw calls “fluctuations in temporal and dynamic flows in Balinese gamelan repertoire generally. These waves are iconic of ocean waves, dance motions, musicians’ movements, and their breath.”<sup>21</sup> In a conversation with McGraw, Balinese composer I Wayan Gdé Yudane suggested that Nyoman Rembang, a renowned theorist on Indonesian music, “likened such musical flows to surfing . . . suggesting that melodies (in *gamelan*) are carried like a surfer on swelling and ebbing waves.”<sup>22</sup> *Ombak* can be heard in the gongs and is also created by paired tuning (i.e., intentionally tuning the same notes of paired instruments slightly apart). For many Balinese musicians and listeners, *ombak* is the primary aesthetic.<sup>23</sup>

An examination of composition titles belonging to popular, ritual, and contemporary gamelan repertoire further attests to the connection and inspiration that many Balinese artists have with, and receive from, their natural surroundings (Figure 2).

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Clay McGraw, *Radical Traditions: Reimagining Culture in Balinese Contemporary Music* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 168.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Figure 2  
**Compositions Inspired by the Sounds, Movements,  
 and Images of Nature<sup>24</sup>**

Composition Title	Translation	Composer	Date
<i>Merak Ngelo</i>	Peacock swaying from side to side	Unknown	Unknown
<i>Cicak Megelut</i>	Gecko embracing	Unknown	Unknown
<i>Jagul</i>	Fish	Unknown/I Wayan Beratha	1400–1900
<i>Candra Wasih</i>	Birds of paradise	I Nyoman Windha	1991
<i>Nir Jara</i>	Waterfall	Dewa Putu Rai	2003
<i>Kété-kété</i>	Cicada	I Dewa Made Suparta	2003
<i>Salju</i>	Snow	Dewa Ketut Alit	2007

For example, *Merak Ngelo* and *Cicak Megelut* (Rows 1 and 2) are both inspired by the movements of creatures. Dewa Ketut Alit was inspired to compose *Salju* (Row 7) after experiencing a winter season in Canada. While some contemporary pieces may not be known to the general Balinese public, they would be familiar to Balinese artists, particularly composers who are keenly aware of each other’s output and form a tight-knit community. Common among these compositions is sonic imitation of the sounds, movements, and visual imagery of nature, real or imagined, in direct or abstract ways that may or may not be recognizable. Nonetheless, the composition’s title is likely to evoke a shared sentiment among listeners and guide their imaginations as the composition unfolds.<sup>25</sup> Here I will briefly discuss two of these compositions.

*Kété-kété* is the name of one of many species of cicadas found in Bali. In 2003, a group of musicians in North Bali (Gamelan Dwi Mekar) commissioned a piece by I Dewa Madé Suparta for the Annual Bali Arts Festival, which caters largely to the local public, though gamelan enthusiasts

<sup>24</sup> The original composer of *Jagul* is unknown; however, the piece is performed with portions of it arranged by I Wayan Beratha.

<sup>25</sup> The title of a composition may reveal its intended sentiment and be felt in a general way by those who know the language or are provided with a translation, and by listening to psychophysical cues such as the dynamics, tempo, rhythm, and melodic contour. Knowledge of culture-specific cues (e.g., the selection of pitches, musical form, social constructs, local environment) potentially contributes to a deeper experience of the intended sentiment.

from around the world, tourists, and expatriates may attend (and sometimes perform). The festival's theme that year was the natural environment. In preparation for this event, ensembles normally rehearse three to six hours a day over a period of three months. Living in the south of Bali, nearly a four-hour drive from Singaraja where the group resided, I Dewa Madé Suparta was invited to stay with the artists. In North Bali, the *kété-kété* cicada is abundant and the overwhelming buzz of hundreds of them, if not thousands, is heard daily.<sup>26</sup> These creatures became the source of inspiration for Suparta's composition. While the theme of the *kété-kété* plays out in abstract ways, imitative passages are also heard throughout this piece. Pitches combine and interlock in unconventional ways to create a multi-layered texture that mimics the cicada's buzzing.<sup>27</sup>

*Jagul* refers specifically to fish in the sea.<sup>28</sup> It was composed for the *gamelan gong gede*, an ensemble of large iron metallophones and gongs played by up to 50 musicians that exudes majesty and grandeur, as befits the sea. Categorized under the *lelambatan* or "slow music" genre of Balinese gamelan music, it also evokes a feeling of timelessness. *Lelambatan* is characterized by long gong cycles (256 beats may elapse between two gong strokes). Like many compositions belonging to this genre, *Jagul* is long and complex, and it takes more than 29 minutes to perform. Throughout the piece the melody alludes to the greatness and calm of the sea, and variations in the musical texture reflect its unpredictable and changing conditions. After "being at sea" for 23 minutes, the drum evokes the playfulness of fish jumping out of the water (Figure 3).<sup>29</sup> Each line represents two 8-beat phrases which correspond to the gong cycle.

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<sup>26</sup> Sound sample at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlNDUnGNvfg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlNDUnGNvfg).

<sup>27</sup> Sound sample 1 at <http://picosong.com/5pMx/> and sound sample 2 at <http://picosong.com/5pMd/>.

<sup>28</sup> *Jagul* is the name of two other pieces belonging to two distinct repertoires (*Semara Pegulingan* and *Bebarongan*). It is not unusual and unique to music in Bali for different pieces to share the same name but have different meanings. Conversely, the same piece may be given different names.

<sup>29</sup> Sound sample at <http://picosong.com/5p7y/>.

Figure 3  
**An Extract of the Drum Pattern in Jagul that Evokes Fish  
 Jumping out of the Water**

<i>du</i>	<i>dut</i>	<i>du</i>	--	<i>du</i>	<i>dut</i>	<i>du</i>	--	<i>du</i>	<i>dut</i>	<i>du</i>	--	<i>du</i>	<i>dut</i>	<i>du</i>	--
<i>da</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>da</i>		<i>da</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>da</i>		<i>da</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>da</i>		<i>da</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>da</i>	
<i>du</i>	--	<i>du</i>	<i>du</i>	--	<i>pak</i>	<i>pak</i>	<i>pak</i>	<i>pak</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>da</i>	--	<i>pak</i>
<i>da</i>		<i>da</i>	<i>dat</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>dut</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>ka</i>

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The soundscapes of Bali, like other places in the world, have been impacted by industrialization, commercialization, and tourism. In the village of Pengosekan, the frog choruses that once inspired *genggong* music are no longer heard just beyond the gate of house compounds but are now found in more distant rice fields and river streams. The gentle rustling of palm leaves is mixed with the din of motor vehicles congesting the narrow village roads. Fewer than forty years ago, the intermittent engine sound of a scooter humming over a gravel road was cause for excitement among villagers, who would run out of their house compounds in awe. Today, the sounds of revving engines—large and small, from tour buses to scooters—and impatient horns, cause fear, frustration, and stress in the community.

In spite of this, the beliefs and values of the Balinese Hindu people promote preservation and protection of their environment. As I mentioned earlier, the *lontar*, their sacred text, serves as a guide to living in harmony with nature. Geomancy governs the construction of house compounds and pavilions, and ensures that a symbiotic relationship between humans and the forces of nature is maintained. Furthermore, the height of buildings is restricted to three levels, and until recently the building of large bridges, tunnels, and underground roadways was prohibited. For the time being, the respect and support of village leaders—as well as that of government officials with the power to grant and deny construction permits—has ensured that the first drops of rain are heard on the treetops.

Fundamental alterations to the landscape and soundscape seem imminent as the government of Bali considers the latest tourism development plan to construct luxury facilities and hotels, apartments, a large theme park,

and entertainment centers on reclaimed land at Benoa Bay in the southern part of the island. The proposal for this major reclamation project has met with disapproval and province-wide demonstrations. In recent months Balinese artists have come together and constructed a makeshift stage in the bay, where they gather to voice their opposition and concerns, through new musical creations, over environmental destruction.

Unique artistic expressions—inspired by both visceral experiences and conceptions of nature—may evoke nostalgia for past or disappearing sounds, or can serve as wake-up calls for changes, some of which are inevitable and others still uncertain. In this paper I hope to have illustrated the vital role of Balinese artists as historians and activists in sounding their environment.

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