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Cover Page Footnote

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War of the Worlds

Music and Cosmological Battles in the Balinese Cremation Procession

Michael B. Bakan

This article explores processional action as a form of cosmological intervention in Hindu-Balinese cremation processions, focusing on the multiple and intersecting functions of a particular type of Balinese instrumental music ensemble: the *gamelan beleganjur*. It explores the alternately “enlivening and protective aspects”¹ that underlie the use of beleganjur music in the *ngaben*, or cremation ritual, showing how beleganjur’s sonic power and rhythmic drive serve to combat malevolent spirit beings, strengthen and inspire processional participants in their efforts to meet challenging ritual obligations, and grant courage to the souls of deceased individuals embarking on their perilous afterlife journeys.

According to the *Aji Gurnata*, a palm-leaf (*lontar*) musical treatise “perhaps written prior to Dutch rule” in Bali, the gamelan beleganjur, or *bebonangan*, as it is otherwise known, is associated with “the demons of the earth” and the lower realms of the Balinese cosmos.² It is characterized as an ensemble of immense power and force. In Adrian Vickers’s English translation of an evocative passage from the *Aji Gurnata*, we read that “when the gamelan *bebonangan* is played, the world feels like it is shaking to the sound of thunder, and this creates fear in the mind, as if the earth feels like it is being destroyed by the sound of the *bebonangan*. It is the gamelan for the glorification of weapons, especially the king’s state weapons, and for the warlike dance experience of weapons in the great field [in front of the palace].”³ Beleganjur is also the gamelan that in precolonial times accompanied warring Balinese armies into battle and that today, as in the past, continues to function in a second crucial role as well: aiding Balinese human communities in their ritual encounters with spirit-world adversaries.⁴

Foremost among such rituals are the grand processions of cremation ceremonies. The *ngaben* procession takes on the quality of a war of Balinese cosmological worlds. It pits human forces of the earthly Middle World against demonic forces of the Lower World, with the ultimate prize being the *atma* (*atman*), or soul of the deceased. This is not a battle in which the goal of either side is to vanquish the other, however; rather, the objective is to sustain an always fragile cosmological balance that enables the benevolent and malevolent, the sacred and profane, the natural and supernatural, to coexist in the paradoxical matrix of enmity and mutual support that defines the Balinese universe. Within this matrix of cosmic encounter, the human ritual warriors of the Middle World—Balinese people—attempt to guide the *atma* to the Upper World of the

¹ Sue Carole DeVale, “Death Symbolism in Music: Preliminary Considerations,” *SPAJA Digest* 11/3 (1990): 62. Journal of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Project in Archaeology and Fine Arts.

² Adrian Vickers, “The Realm of the Senses: Images of the Court Music of Pre-Colonial Bali,” *Imago Musicae* 2 (1985): 146.

³ Vickers, “The Realm of the Senses,” 165 (square brackets in the original).

⁴ Ketut Gede Asnawa, personal communication, 1992.

gods and ancestors through their ritual actions, while their malevolent spirit adversaries, the *bhuta* and *leyak*, conversely aspire to capture and drag the atma down to their underworld domain. The stakes of ritual battle are high, and beleganjur music—as weapon, as shield, as escort, and as spiritual fuel—figures decisively in the ultimate outcome.

The primary purpose of this article is to illustrate the multiple ways in which this is so, though its final portion changes course somewhat in exploring how the ritual performance of beleganjur music has managed to endure in modern Bali, despite tensions between traditional notions of ritual propriety and modern cultural-aesthetic priorities. The article is based principally on data collected during five field research trips to Bali conducted between 1989 and 1995. My primary consultant and collaborator in this work, first in Bali and more recently in the United States, has been the venerable Balinese composer, ethnomusicologist, pedagogue, and gamelan musician Ketut Gede Asnawa. The research basis for the present article draws principally from the following sources:

- Transcripts of numerous field interviews, most of which were conducted in 1992 and 1995 with Asnawa in Denpasar, Bali.
- Ethnographic fieldnotes from dozens of Balinese cremation processions that I either observed or participated in as a beleganjur musician between 1989 and 1995.
- An ongoing ethnomusicological program of research on Balinese music and culture that is also reflected in several earlier publications.⁵

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that the perspective on Balinese cremation processions offered here represents a composite profile in which the above streams of research converge. Although there is a primary referent, comprising video recordings and additional documentation from a 1992 cremation in the Balinese village of Wanasari, Tabanan, that material serves less as a focus of the investigation than as a point of departure. The synthesis-oriented approach employed admittedly glosses over myriad complexities of the ngaben as a Balinese cultural and religious institution, but with the advantage of allowing for a close focus on the particular dynamics of interaction that most vividly illuminate the encounters of beleganjur music and its key human and supernatural interlocutors.

⁵ Michael B. Bakan, “From Oxymoron to Reality: Agendas of Gender and the Rise of Balinese Women’s *Gamelan Beleganjur* in Bali, Indonesia,” *Asian Music* 29/1 (1998): 37–85; “Walking Warriors: Battles of Culture and Ideology in the Balinese *Gamelan Beleganjur* World,” *Ethnomusicology* 42/3 (1998): 441–84; *Music of Death and New Creation: Experiences in the World of Balinese *Gamelan Beleganjur** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); “Preventive Care for the Dead: Music, Community, and the Protection of Souls in Balinese Cremation Ceremonies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Medical Ethnomusicology*, ed. Benjamin D. Koen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 246–64; “The Abduction of the Signifying Monkey Chant: Schizophonic Transmogrifications of the Balinese *Kecak* in Fellini’s *Satyricon* and the Coen Brothers’ *Blood Simple*,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 18/1 (2009): 83–106; “Italian Cinema and the Balinese Sound of Greek Tragedy: *Kecak* Contortions and Postmodern Schizophonic Mimesis in Pasolini and Fellini,” in *Performing Arts in Postmodern Bali: Changing Interpretations, Founding Traditions* (Graz Studies in Ethnomusicology, vol. 24), ed. Kendra Stepputat (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2013), 363–87; and “The *Gamelan Beleganjur* as Balinese Percussion Ensemble,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion*, ed. Russell Hartenberger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 253–64.

There is always the danger of oversimplification in the application of such a narrative strategy. For example, readers will come away from the article with an image of the ngaben as a ritual focused on cremation of a single individual, whereas in the majority of instances the crematory rites of multiple individuals—sometimes even dozens—are performed during a single event.⁶ Moreover, the infinite distinctions and nuances of caste, class, wealth, status, filial bonds, regional style, and narrative aspects of the ceremony itself that underpin ngaben ritual practice are barely touched on here.⁷ This is likewise true for recent inroads into the traditional cultural world of the ngaben, such as the frequent presence of tourists at ceremonies and the pervasive influences of contemporary musical styles on ritual beleganjur performance. Also largely absent is discussion of the larger frames of Balinese ritual life that help to situate beleganjur in its cremation procession context, from the music's integral connection to other forms of gamelan played in the same ritual space (e.g., *gender wayang*⁸), to its important role in other mortuary rites such as *memukur*, to its related use in the opulent spectacles of Tawur Agung (the Great Offering) and *melis* (ritual bathing of the deities). Such topics and issues have been addressed elsewhere in the literature, and interested readers are encouraged to consult those sources.⁹

Background

Bali is the only province in the Republic of Indonesia with a majority Hindu population. It is also host to the world's only Hindu-majority society outside of the South Asian subcontinent. For well over half a millennium, this small, densely populated island near the center of the Indonesian archipelago has cultivated a unique form of Hinduism known as Agama Hindu (Hindu Religion), or Agama Tirta (Religion of Holy Water), comprising a complexly syncretic tapestry of animistic, Buddhist, and other faith traditions and belief systems.

Agama Hindu coalesced around the arrival on Bali several centuries ago of displaced royals from neighboring Java. These former rulers of the Hindu-Javanese Majapahit Empire, together with their families and entourages, fled Java for Bali under the weight of the Majapahit's collapse and the concurrent rise of the Islamic empire of Mataram (that is, the Second Mataram) in Java. They succeeded in becoming the ruling class of Bali, and over the generations they and their descendants established several small, rival Hindu monarchies on the island.

According to Asnawa,¹⁰ an enduring narrative of Hindu-Balinese cultural history holds that the beginning of Balinese civilization dates from the initial period of Majapahit arrival and rule (13th–15th centuries CE), which marked Bali's "golden age." Historical evidence tells a different

⁶ Lisa Rachel Gold, "The *Gender Wayang* Repertoire in Theater and Ritual: A Study of Balinese Musical Meaning" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1998), 663–64.

⁷ See Mark Hobart, "The Path of the Soul: The Legitimacy of Nature in Balinese Concepts of Space," in *Natural Symbols in Southeast Asia*, ed. G. B. Milner (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1978), 5–28; and Gold, "The *Gender Wayang* Repertoire in Theater and Ritual."

⁸ See Gold, "The *Gender Wayang* Repertoire in Theater and Ritual."

⁹ See, e.g., Bakan, *Music of Death and New Creation*; Gold, "The *Gender Wayang* Repertoire in Theater and Ritual"; Hobart, "The Path of the Soul"; and Vickers, "The Realm of the Senses."

¹⁰ Asnawa, personal communication, 1992.

story, as scholars such as Adrian Vickers and Lisa Gold have chronicled.¹¹ The origin of Balinese civilization in that historical view reaches back to a much earlier period. Though the era of the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries did indeed witness a greatly expanded Hindu-Javanese impact on Bali's existing cultural practices and political systems—from music, dance, drama, puppetry, and art to statecraft, religion, and cosmological ideas—close ties between the Hindu-Javanese aristocracy and contemporaneous Balinese society were actually established centuries earlier, so that Bali's so-called golden age may be better understood as the culmination of a large-scale historical process of acculturation than as a moment of conception.

Nonetheless, according to the still-pervasive golden age narrative, it was during this period that Agama Hindu crystallized into a state of perfection, replete with an extraordinarily rich culture of ritual and associated arts in which processions and processional music figured prominently. In this narrative, too, notes Asnawa, Bali's pre-Majapahit era is described as an age of chaos, while the post-golden age period is depicted as one of continual regression back toward chaos.¹² Only through the profuse and incessant practice of Agama Hindu ritual is there hope of forestalling this inevitable decline. Such ritual must be performed with great commitment, vigilance, and propriety to ensure that a proper balance between the Three Worlds (Triloka) of the Balinese cosmos be maintained, for in the absence of such balance, chaos and catastrophe are virtually assured.

The key to such balance from a praxis perspective is *yadnya*, the performance of ritual offerings. Agama Hindu ritual is centered in five categories of *yadnya*, known collectively as the *panca yadnya*, that is, the “five sacrifices” or “five offerings.” As I Gusti Putu Phalgunadi observes, Balinese Hindus contribute to their own spiritual evolution and the preservation of the natural and cosmic order through their performances of *yadnya*, which facilitates their ability to foster an essential balance between *buana alit*, the earthly microcosm, and *buana agung*, the universal macrocosm.¹³ All types of gamelan music performance are considered forms of *yadnya*. The category most salient to the present discussion is *pitra yadnya*, the particular class of rituals that is centered on providing offerings to the souls of the dead and to ancestor spirits; mortuary rites and rituals involved in the purification of souls define the *pitra yadnya* category.

Concepts and consequences of directionality represent another key dimension of the relationship between ritual performance, cosmology, and processional action upon which this article builds. As alluded to, the island of Bali and its human inhabitants are thought to constitute a Middle World situated between the Upper World of gods and deified ancestors located directly above the crater of volcanic Mount Agung (Bali's highest volcano), on the one hand, and, on the other, the Lower World of *bhuta*, *leyak*, and additional malevolent spirits, whose domain begins

¹¹ Adrian Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created* (Berkeley, Cal., and Singapore: Periplus Editions, 1989); and Gold, “The *Gender Wayang* Repertoire in Theater and Ritual.”

¹² Asnawa, personal communication, 1992.

¹³ I Gusti Putu Phalgunadi. *Evolution of Hindu Culture in Bali: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, 1991), 5.

at the sea's edge and descends from there.¹⁴ The Lower World is presided over by Yama, "the god of hell."¹⁵

Directionality is determined not by the cardinal directions of north, south, east, and west, but rather by a mountainward-seaward axis—the *kaja-kelod* axis—which runs from the peak of Mount Agung down to the coastal regions that define the island's perimeter.¹⁶ No matter where one finds oneself on Bali, one's *kaja-kelod* orientation counts immeasurably, for it is along that trajectory, from the pure and pristine to the profane and malevolent, that fates are negotiated and determined. Such spatial orientations and their consequences are by no means straightforward, however. They inhere in Balinese notions of space that, according to Mark Hobart, may best be understood "not as series of binary oppositions, but as continua between polar extremes, in which ritual movement parallels changes in social status."¹⁷ Such continua inform not only human ritual movement, but that of supernatural beings as well, including the *atma* of the deceased for whom the ritual purification of cremation is performed. For the *atma*, and for the community it leaves behind upon its departure from the earthly world, this ritual movement of transformation through procession is formed along what Hobart depicts as "the path of the soul."¹⁸ Gamelan music of different types, including *angklung* and gender wayang, mark key locations along that path,¹⁹ but there is perhaps no type of music with greater significance in charting its course than that of the gamelan beleganjur.

The Cremation Procession as a War of the Worlds

A complex web of relationships exists between Balinese people and the malevolent and benevolent spiritual entities with whom they believe they share the cosmos. This web also features complicated alliances and conflicts between the supernatural entities of the different cosmic realms. Perpetual vigilance from all parties involved—human and spirit—is essential to sustaining a balanced universe. The cosmic web takes shape and is continuously transformed through the activities of everyday Balinese life, but both its visibility and potency are greatly heightened in the practice of ritual. Ritual spaces are the primary battlegrounds of Agama Hindu spiritual and cosmic warfare, and no battlefield is more hotly contested than that of the Balinese cremation. The primary responsibility of every Balinese *banjar* (neighborhood organization or

¹⁴ John Stephen Lansing, *The Three Worlds of Bali* (New York: Praeger, 1983); Ira R. Abrams, dir., *The Three Worlds of Bali* (VHS recording, Watertown, Mass.: Documentary Educational Resources, 1981).

¹⁵ Vickers, "The Realm of the Senses," 150.

¹⁶ See Madé Bandem and Fredrik Eugene deBoer, *Balinese Dance in Transition*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995), vii–viii; Fred B. Eiseman, *Bali: Sekala and Niskala*, vol. 1, *Essays on Religion, Ritual, and Art* (Singapore: Periplus Editions, 1989), 2–10; and Jonathan McIntosh, "Performing Emotional Connections to the Balinese Landscape: Exploring Children's Roles in a Barong Performance," in *Performing Gender, Place, and Emotion in Music: Global Perspectives*, ed. Fiona Magowan and Louise Wrazen (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 38–62.

¹⁷ Hobart, "The Path of the Soul," 22.

¹⁸ Hobart, "The Path of the Soul," 22.

¹⁹ Gold, "The Gender Wayang Repertoire in Theater and Ritual."

village ward²⁰) is to ensure the provision of successful cremation and post-cremation purification rites for its members. Success equates with safe passage of the atma from the earthly Middle World to the divine Upper World. There the atma will await either reincarnation and a return to the Middle World or, in the most sublime of outcomes, the achievement of *moksa*—final liberation from the reincarnation cycle—which amounts to deification and permanent Upper World residency status.

The path of the soul to the Upper World is a dangerous one, however, and the prospects for ritual failure are high. The atma bears some responsibility for achieving its own ritual success, but the greatest burden falls on the shoulders (both literally and figuratively) of the banjar's members, who are intensely aware of both the ritual and narrative aspects of the cremation ceremony as these relate to the metanarrative of the afterlife journey of the soul.²¹ The first, and arguably the most arduous, portion of that journey is the opening procession, during which the body or exhumed remains of the deceased individual is ritually prepared, wrapped in a long white cloth symbolizing the soul's purity, the *lancingan*, and placed in the top section of a tall, three-tiered cremation tower called the *wadah* amid much ritual activity.²² This placement is significant since the three tiers of the *wadah* represent the Triloka, the Three Worlds of the cosmos. Locating the *lancingan* in the tower's top tier thus signifies the banjar's hopes and aspirations for the atma's ultimate safe arrival in the Upper World.

The *wadah*, accompanied by all members of the banjar and other ritual participants, is carried from either the home compound or the village center to the *sema*, or cremation grounds, at the banjar's extreme kelod, or seaward, end. This is where the *meancung*, the burning of the body to release the atma from its earthly bonds, will be performed. Though members of the host banjar are central to the proceedings, the ngaben procession is typically a community event in a much larger sense. An explosion of beleganjur sound at the outset (discussed further below) captures the attention of people in the vicinity from all walks of life—children and adults from neighboring banjars, shopkeepers and street market vendors, tourists and tradesmen—and all gather to view or even take an active part in the procession. Their role, though ostensibly tangential, is in fact important, for they contribute to the desired state of *ramé*, or “crowdedness” (“crowded busyness” may be a more accurate translation), that is essential to the success of every ngaben. They become part of the multimedia event that constitutes the procession as a performance of ritual as they merge into the beleganjur-dominated soundscape and the visual splendor of the occasion. The function of ritual action is not only to effect cosmological action; it is also to render the transformational ritual movements of denizens of different cosmic realms

²⁰ See Fred B. Eiseman, *Bali: Sekala and Niskala*, vol. 2, *Essays on Society, Tradition, and Craft* (Singapore: Periplus Editions, 1990), 72–73.

²¹ See Hobart, “The Path of the Soul,” and Gold, “The *Gender Wayang* Repertoire in Theater and Ritual.”

²² The body may have been buried for anywhere from a week or two to upwards of a quarter century before it is cremated. If the period of burial has been long, then the “body” prepared will consist of little other than exhumed skeletal remains. The time of waiting for ngaben, if any, has to do with the financial resources of the host family, as well as spiritual potency concerns related to the auspiciousness of particular dates or the desire to perform ngaben rites in conjunction with those of a high-caste or otherwise spiritually empowered deceased person. In the latter case, multiple ngaben may be performed simultaneously in a single grand ritual event, though the present discussion, as noted, is limited to ngaben rituals for a single individual.

manifest. The see-able and hear-able effort dedicated to combating the bhuta and leyak in the procession reifies those spirit beings and proclaims their foreboding presence. This, in turn, reinforces public awareness—on the part of both the banjar’s members and the wider community—of the integral role played by malevolent spirits in the eternal dance of cosmic balance. The loud volume and intensity of beleganjur sound will effectively serve as an amplifier of this reification of supernatural presence and animation of cosmic motion, both at the beginning of the procession and throughout the journey.

A group of men carry the heavy wadah on a bamboo frame to the cremation site. Depending on the size and grandeur of the ngaben (commensurate with the wealth and caste or social status of the deceased and their family), the tower may be of quite modest proportions or it may be enormous and spectacular. In the former case, nine or ten men will be sufficient for the task of carrying it, while in the grandest of processions—like those of high-ranking members of royal or priestly (Brahmana) families—upwards of 20 carriers, and in some cases as many as 100, may be required. The tower carriers must accomplish their physically demanding task with drive, energy, and unwavering confidence, for at any time, and most especially when the procession enters crossroads along the procession route, it is believed that the safety of the atma may be at great risk. Bhuta and leyak line the route, and there are many specific places and spaces along the way where their interactions with human or other supernatural entities can affect the course of the soul’s path, and even its ultimate outcome.²³ But it is at the crossroads that these spirit beings congregate in greatest abundance, attending to any moment of human weakness, vulnerability, or fatigue that may provide them an opportunity to charge the wadah, abduct the atma, and drag it down to the Lower World. The resolute strength and courage of the tower carriers are not enough to preclude such catastrophe; the atma itself must exhibit bravery as well. If it gives into its well-founded fears, the temptation to flee the wadah and return to the apparent safety of the banjar may prove too great to resist, but the consequences of such action will surely be dire. An uncremated soul is an unliberated soul, and to be in this purgatory-like state is unbearable. The atma, it is feared, will forever haunt and torment the surviving members of the banjar for failing in their ngaben efforts.²⁴ Therefore, all due attention is paid to preventing the soul’s flight.

There is also the role of the processional entourage itself: the assembled children and adults who contribute to the ramé atmosphere. In seeing and hearing the confrontation between benevolent and malevolent spirits that the ritual’s performance makes manifest to the crowd, they bear witness to the event in ways that reinforce the ngaben’s significance. They also contribute to the *gaya*, or energy, of the occasion. It is imperative that the right level and kind of energy be maintained throughout the procession. There can be neither lethargy nor anxious hyperactivity, neither distracted disregard nor obsessive concern. The proper balance of a collective state of calm demeanor, focused vigilance, and courageous purpose must be achieved to optimize the likelihood of a successful ritual outcome.

There is so much at stake in the ngaben procession—for the tower carriers and the other ritual participants, such as priests, the banjar’s members, and the atma itself. This does not even

²³ See Gold, “The *Gender Wayang* Repertoire in Theater and Ritual.”

²⁴ Asnawa, personal communication, 1995.

account for how a disruption of cosmic balance at the micro-level of an individual cremation might send shockwaves of disruption out into the larger sphere of macrocosmic realities, with potentially calamitous long-term consequences. The ngaben must be executed in the correct manner, and all participants must contribute effectively to ensure that this occurs. This is where music comes into play, and in particular the music of the gamelan beleganjur.

The Gamelan Beleganjur and Its Music

Gamelan is the generic term for a wide range of different types of music ensembles originating in Indonesia and certain other parts of Southeast Asia. Percussion instruments (idiophones and membranophones) predominate in the instrumentation of most gamelan ensembles, although string (chordophone) and wind (aerophone) instruments, as well as voices, play significant roles in many of them as well. There is one type of gamelan in Bali, the *gamelan suara*, that consists exclusively of voices, which are used onomatopoeically to approximate the sounds of gamelan instruments. This “voice gamelan” is principally associated with a spectacular Balinese dance-drama called *Kecak*.²⁵

The best-known forms of gamelan outside of Indonesia are those of Bali and Java. The majestic court palace gamelan ensembles of Central Java known as *gamelan kraton*, along with the fiery and virtuosic Balinese ensembles called *gamelan gong kebyar*, are especially recognizable. Within the Balinese ritual cycle, however, it is the less glamorous gamelan beleganjur (Fig. 1) that is actually the most ubiquitous, functionally important, and essential of all Balinese ensembles.

The basic ritual obligations of any Balinese banjar may be met without a kebyar ensemble, but they essentially cannot be met without a gamelan beleganjur. Processions are the lifeblood of Balinese ritual and ceremonial life, and in every type of ritual procession gamelan music is indispensable. Other types of processional gamelan music may be identified with particular processions, but the default ensemble for most—whether employed separately or in combination with other types of gamelan—is the gamelan beleganjur. The functional significance of beleganjur music reaches its apex in mortuary rituals such as ngaben and memukur, the latter being the post-cremation ritual of purification through which the atma achieves its final release from the earthly realm.²⁶

²⁵ See Wayan Dibia, *Kecak: Vocal Chant of Bali* (Denpasar, Bali: Hartanto Art Books, 1996); Bandem and deBoer, *Balinese Dance in Transition*; Beryl DeZoete and Walter Spies, *Dance and Drama in Bali* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973 [1938]); Bakan, “The Abduction of the Signifying Monkey Chant”; and Bakan, “Italian Cinema and the Balinese Sound of Greek Tragedy.”

²⁶ Bakan, *Music of Death and New Creation*, 75–77.

Figure 1: The *gamelan beleganjur*, consisting of eight pairs of *cengceng kopyak* (crash cymbals) in the front row; a set of four *reyong* (kettle-gongs) plus the larger kettle-gong instruments *kajar* (or *kempluk*), *kempli* (optional instrument), and the two-pot *ponggang* in the second row, left to right; the *kendang wadon* (female drum, left) and *kendang lanang* (male drum, right) in the third row; and the *bendé*, *gong wadon* (female gong), *gong lanang* (male gong), and *kempur* in the back row, left to right. (Photo credit: Michael Redig)



The *gamelan beleganjur* consists exclusively of percussion instruments: gongs, melodic gong-chimes, drums, and cymbals. The *suling* flutes, *rebab* fiddles, and other nonpercussion instruments characteristic of other types of *gamelan* are nowhere to be found, though iconographic evidence suggests that the *suling* was likely part of the *beleganjur* instrumentarium in precolonial times.²⁷ Moreover, in contrast to the vast majority of other *gamelan* ensembles, there are no keyed metallophones or wooden idiophones in a *gamelan beleganjur*. A complete listing of standard *beleganjur* instrumentation, presented in the usual order of processional

²⁷ Vickers, "The Realm of the Senses," 166.

performance, is given in Table 1. All of the listed instruments are identified in the caption of Figure 1 as well.

Table 1: Instruments of the gamelan beleganjur listed in standard processional order

<p><i>First line of performers:</i> 1 kendang lanang (male drum) player 1 kendang wadon (female drum) player</p> <p><i>Second and third lines of performers:</i> 8 cengceng kopyak (crash cymbal) players</p> <p><i>Fourth line of performers:</i> 4 reyong (kettle-gong) players</p> <p><i>Fifth line of performers (playing different types of kettle-gongs):</i> 2 ponggang players, 1 kajar (or kempluk) player, 1 kempli player (optional)</p> <p><i>Sixth line of performers (playing different types of hanging gongs):</i> 1 bendé player, gong wadon and gong lanang (1 player for both), kempur player</p>

Beleganjur music’s melodic resources are extremely limited when compared to those of most other gamelan ensembles. They are confined to two small gong-chimes: a *reyong*, comprising four small hand-held kettle-gongs played in rapid interlocking patterns by four players; and a *ponggang*, consisting of two slightly larger kettle-gongs played by two players an octave below the reyong.

The ponggang furnishes a simple, ostinato core melody called the *pokok* (Fig. 2), meaning “root” or “trunk.”

Figure 2: *Pokok* core melody played on the ponggang, consisting of two pitches, *dang* and *dung*, which are approximately a semitone apart (for example, roughly A and G# in their Western pitch equivalents)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
dang	-	dung	dang	dung	dang	-	dung

The reyong executes embellishing figurations over the ponggang’s core melody, typically at a rhythmic rate of four to one (that is, “sixteenth notes” to the ponggang’s “quarter notes”). This melodic activity and the music as a whole are anchored in a gong cycle pattern called *tabuh gilak*, or *gilak* for short. *Gilak* is a relatively simple eight-beat gong cycle marked by alternating strokes on the large female (wadon) and male (lanang) *gong ageng* (“great gongs”) on beats 1

and 5, respectively; and by strokes played on another, smaller hanging gong, the *kempur*, on beats 6 and 8.²⁸ Each of the cycle's eight beats is also marked by a pulse-keeping instrument, the *kajar*.²⁹ Finally, the gong cycle is enhanced by syncopated rhythms played on a clangy-toned hanging gong called the *bendé*. Though other *tabuh* (gong cycles or colotomic forms) such as *batel*, *bapang*, and *tabuh telu* may be used in cremation procession beleganjur performances to cultivate different moods, facilitate communication with particular spirits, mirror aspects of the natural environment, or even facilitate the music's efficacy in human crowd control, *gilak* is by far the cycle most commonly employed. It may even be the only one heard throughout an entire procession.

Two drummers playing on a pair of drums called *kendang* (see Fig. 1) codirect the ensemble. One plays the *kendang lanang*, or male drum, while the other plays the slightly lower-pitched *kendang wadon*, the female drum. The drum parts feature complex interlocking patterns, which may be quite difficult to execute and coordinate. Although both drummers technically "lead" the ensemble, usually one player takes on the primary leadership role; more often than not in the beleganjur context, it is the player of the male drum (*juru kendang lanang*) who occupies this role, though in kebyar music the opposite is generally true.

Eight crash cymbal players perform unison and interlocking rhythmic patterns that enhance and reinforce the composite drumming part. Each pair of cymbals is called *cengceng kopyak*, or *cengceng* for short. The eight cymbal players perform three patterns that comprise a standard interlocking set of rhythms called *kilitan telu*. Like the reyong's interlocking patterns, those of the *cengceng*—and of the two *kendang* drums as well—generate a continuous stream of rhythmic activity at the music's highest level of rhythmic density, for example, "sixteenth notes" to the *kajar*'s "quarter note" pulse.

In a *kuno*, or traditional ritualistic, performance by a beleganjur ensemble played during a ngaben procession, the music's continually evolving formal design is defined mainly by the alternation of two basic textures: sections in which the drums and cymbals play, and those in which they do not. Compositional development as such is a moot point, since the music's sole purpose is to serve the efficacy of the ritual occasion in which it functions. This creates a dramatic contrast to the aesthetics of kebyar genres such as *kreasi baru* (new creation), in which originality and formal development are prized.³⁰ Similarly, the neotraditional beleganjur genre of *kreasi beleganjur*, which was invented in 1986, applies a kebyar-inspired aesthetic sensibility to beleganjur music performed for the sake of competitive display.³¹ It is important to acknowledge

²⁸ In other notational systems, what I am referring to as beats 1 and 5 are notated as beats 8 and 4, respectively, while beats 6 and 8 similarly translate to beats 5 and 7.

²⁹ If the protruding boss (*pencon*) in the center of the instrument is sunken, it is a *kajar*; if it is raised, it may go by other names including *kempli* and *kempluk*. Additionally, a *kempli/kempluk* part may be added to the overall texture in an optional role playing "half notes" to its counterpart instrument's "quarter note" pulse. Terminology in this area is ambiguous and varied, but in the context of this article I will use the term *kajar* in reference to the main pulse-marking instrument, regardless of whether that is truly a *kajar* (that is, with sunken *pencon*) or not. This is consistent with common usage of the term in Bali, at least in my experience.

³⁰ See Michael Tenzer, *Gamelan Gong Kebyar: The Art of Twentieth-Century Balinese Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

³¹ See Bakan, *Music of Death and New Creation*.

that the kreasi beleganjur style has permeated the beleganjur kuno world profoundly in recent decades, to the extent that the quintessentially functional traditional approach to beleganjur performance highlighted in what follows has become more of an ideal type than a common feature of ritual performance. This creates a certain tension in the sphere of contemporary Hindu-Balinese ritual life, a subject to which we will return.

For now, though, the article focuses on the kuno, traditional realm of cremation procession beleganjur performance that dominated the soundscape of mortuary rituals in earlier times. It may still be heard in remote regions of the island, as well as in urban and semiurban environments where a conscious effort is being made to preserve it. The central figure to consider here is the aforementioned juru kendang lanang, the player of the male drum and primary leader of the ensemble, whose task it is to carefully monitor and musically respond to the myriad occurrences and complex dynamics of the procession as it unfolds. He must be attentive not only to leading the 20 or so men in his ensemble musically (in ritual performance contexts, beleganjur performance has always been an exclusively male domain³²), but also to the needs of—as well as the hazards posed by—everyone from the tower carriers and other processional participants, to the bhuta and leyak, to the atma itself.

Functions of Beleganjur Music in Ngaben Processions

Effectively executing a ngaben procession takes strength, energy, and endurance, and it is therefore customary for the members of the beleganjur ensemble to begin their day together with a high-protein, high-carbohydrate meal consisting of items such as hard-boiled eggs, skewered meats (*saté*), a ground-meat-and-vegetable delicacy called *lawar*, sweet rice cakes, and sweet black coffee. After eating, they typically carry their instruments to the roadside just outside the deceased's home compound and begin playing, this after being instructed to do so by a representative of the host family. The two drummers initiate the performance. They play an introductory interlocking duet called the *awit-awit*, which leads immediately to an energetic opening passage played by the whole ensemble, the *kawitan*. The sound of drums, gongs, and cymbals serves to summon all members of the banjar and others in the vicinity to congregate and prepare for the procession; it also energizes the crowd once assembled, contributing to the cultivation of a properly ramé atmosphere.

From this point forward, the beleganjur ensemble will play continuously until its arrival at the cremation grounds for the meancung burning ceremony at the termination of the procession.

³² Beleganjur groups consisting exclusively of women and girls first came into existence in the 1990s. The women's beleganjur phenomenon, though, has mainly been restricted to nonreligious demonstration performance contexts: to the best of my knowledge, women still never play beleganjur in ngaben or other Agama Hindu ritual processions. For more on women's beleganjur, as well as women's gamelan performance traditions more broadly, see Bakan, "From Oxymoron to Reality," "Walking Warriors," and *Music of Death and New Creation*; Elizabeth A. Clendinning, "Pedagogy, Performance, and Community in the Transnational Balinese Traditional Performing Arts Scene" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 2013); Sonja Lynn Downing, "Agency, Leadership, and Gender Negotiation in Balinese Girls' Gamelans," *Ethnomusicology* 54/1 (2010): 54–80; and Sarah Weiss, "Gender and *Gender*: Gender Ideology and the Female *Gender* Player in Central Java," in *Rediscovering the Muses: Women's Musical Traditions*, ed. Kimberley Marshall (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 21–48.

The gong cycle and the core melody, the latter played on the ponggang, are heard without pause throughout the procession, which may cover a mile or more. Meanwhile, the drummers, cymbal players, and reyong players come in and out of the texture at different times in response to the lead drummer's directives. He will cue their entries and exits in accordance with ritual needs, and his cues will additionally contain specific instructions to the whole group on matters of tempo, dynamics, instrumentation, specific rhythms and gong cycles to be played, and the requisite *gaya* (energy) of the moment.

The body of the deceased is ritually prepared, wrapped in the white lancingan cloth, carried outside, and placed into the top tier of the wadah amid a rich sonic accompaniment of beleganjur music and raucous shouts of encouragement from members of the growing crowd on the street who have gathered to participate in the procession. Ritual participants take their proper places in the processional entourage, led by women carrying colorful offerings of fruit on their heads followed by men bearing sacred daggers (*kris*) and other heirlooms. Another type of processional gamelan, the gamelan angklung, will ideally come next in the lineup, though in many cremations—especially smaller, modest ones—it is not used; unlike the gamelan beleganjur, its presence, though desirable, is not essential. In the grandest of cremations, such as those for high priests and members of royal families, a pair of gender wayang players is enlisted to perform processionally, too, as they are carried aloft on small platforms located on either side of the wadah. Their refined musical artistry provides a profound counterbalance to the raw force of beleganjur sound as the ngaben's ritual drama of the path of the soul unfolds.³³ A sarcophagus in the shape of a bull or other animal, which is elevated onto a bamboo frame and transported by its own set of carriers, may also be included in the processional entourage. The body or exhumed remains of the deceased will be inserted into the sarcophagus upon its arrival at the sema, after which the entire structure will be burned to complete the cremation. In smaller-scale cremations there may not be a sarcophagus of this type, in which case the act of cremation occurs in somewhat less spectacular fashion.

Directly behind the lead group of processional participants comes the wadah itself, the focal point of the occasion. It is lifted onto the shoulders of the men who will carry it to the sema with much bravado. The tower lifting is a difficult task that must be done with strength and coordinated effort. Beleganjur music aids in its proper execution. Just as the carriers begin to hoist onto their shoulders the bamboo frame on which the heavy and cumbersome tower rests, the lead drummer kicks his beleganjur group into high gear. The music's loud sound and intensity fortify the strength of the tower carriers, and its rhythmic structure assists them in coordinating this opening act of intense physical exertion. Ratcheting up the musical energy may be achieved simply by playing at maximum volume, or it may be accomplished through the sudden introduction of a special, driving rhythmic texture called *malpal*—literally meaning “to fight or come into conflict”³⁴—that will re-emerge at other high-energy points during the

³³ See Gold, “The Gender Wayang Repertoire in Theater and Ritual.”

³⁴ Clyde Barber, *A Balinese-English Dictionary*, Occasional Publications No. 2 (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Library, 1979), 1: 376. According to one of the anonymous reviewers of the original manuscript for this article, “the term ‘malpal’ in traditional male dance performance denotes the action of ‘fast walking’ by the performer.” One

procession as well. The switch to malpal may be accompanied by a change in the gong cycle as well, often to bapang, which accentuates the desired mood of heightened intensity at such points.

The tower lifting marks the official start of the procession. Once the wadah frame is firmly secured on its bearers' shoulders, everyone begins to walk forward along the street at a pace that is brisk enough to project high energy, but not so frenetic as to suggest anxiety or haste. The lead drummer monitors the pace and situation and cues changes in the music's tempo, dynamics, texture, and rhythm to regulate the overall flow and energy. This requires skill and sensitivity on his part, since in the ngaben, as Gold has noted, "there is always a high level of tension in the air because the liveliness is really a frenetic way of masking a deep sadness."³⁵ He must function effectively in such conditions of ambivalence, not just as a musician but as a lay group psychologist as well.

The first switch cued by the lead drummer is from the high-octane music of the tower lifting to a more relaxed and sparse texture of *jejalanan*, or "walking along the road" music. Here the drums and cymbals either play lightly or else drop out altogether as the gong and ponggang continue at a moderate tempo, usually together with the reyong in a somewhat subdued role. The leader may cue the cymbals to contribute again to the musical accompaniment if he senses that there is lethargy in the procession; alternatively, he may drop them out and pull the tempo back if he detects a sense of anxiety or undue haste in the processional gestalt.

The energizing yet stabilizing mood of *jejalanan* music dominates the majority of the procession as it progresses along the roads and alleyways (*gang*) of the banjar to the sema. Something altogether different happens, however, as the procession enters each of the several crossroads along the procession route. These are the places of most profound danger, requiring vigilance and ritual action of the highest order. As the bhuta and leyak swarm the tower at the crossroads, special defensive measures are required of everyone, but the demands on the tower carriers and beleganjur musicians are perhaps greatest of all.

It is believed that the malevolent spirits can only travel in straight lines, and that having to contend with any kind of circular motion confuses and disorients them. Therefore, at each crossroads along the procession route, the wadah is spun fully around a minimum of three times in succession. Rotating the heavy tower requires strength, agility, and precise coordination on the part of the tower carriers. The role of the beleganjur group in animating this action is crucial. Just before entering the crossroads, the tempo, intensity, and volume of the beleganjur music escalate dramatically on cue. The drummers and cymbal players charge to the fore of the musical texture with extremely loud, fast, and aggressive playing. The mere entrance of the drums and cymbals, combined with the music's heightened volume and speed overall, may be deemed sufficient for the task at hand. To enhance the impact all the more, though, the lead drummer may cue a transition from the standard *jejalanan* texture to the more driving rhythmic texture of malpal at this point. This amounts to a sudden shift from the multiple-layered sixteenth-note interlocking

might speculate that this meaning also has significance, since malpal sections in beleganjur performances often accompany portions of the procession in which the pace accelerates or, in the specific case of the spinning of the wadah at crossroads (as described below), where the tower carriers move especially rapidly in their circular motions.

³⁵ Gold, "The *Gender Wayang* Repertoire in Theater and Ritual," 664.

patterns of cymbals and drums to a pounding and propulsive straight eighth-note pattern of alternating, interlocked on-beats and off-beats, which typically occurs together with a shift from the gilak gong cycle to the more urgently energetic bapang.

Regardless of which cymbal-and-drum texture or gong cycle is employed, the multiple functional purposes of this intense beleganjur crossroads sound are the same. First and foremost, the beating of the drums and crashing of the cymbals generate a sonic force that is believed to frighten bhuta and leyak and deter them from attempting to storm the tower. If deterrence is not enough, this same sonic force is called upon to serve a second function, that of shielding, for it is also believed that very loud beleganjur sound can quite literally deflect bhuta and leyak, scattering them in all directions. Direct collisions with the wadah can repel the evil spirits as well, and here, too, beleganjur music plays an important, if less direct, role. Spinning the wadah creates a moving target for the spirits, and the faster it is spun, the more difficult it becomes for them to find a clear path toward its penetration. To achieve maximum spinning speed requires great energy from the tower carriers, and they feed off of the intensity of beleganjur sound to inspire that energy. This is an instance where the enlivening capacity of beleganjur music enhances the protective, shielding ability of the tower carriers as they fight for the sanctity of the departing soul.

This takes us to a third key function of beleganjur music. That soul, the *atma*, is likely to be in an anxious state in the face of all the surrounding peril. If it chooses to take flight from the wadah in search of the security of home back in the banjar, the consequences, as noted, will be catastrophic. How to prevent such a disaster? This is another charge of the tower carriers and the beleganjur musicians. The spinning of the tower is thought to disorient and confuse the *atma*, much as it does the bhuta and leyak. It compels the *atma* to stay put, since without a clear path to the home compound or even a sense of how to get there, the safest option is to stay within the confines of the wadah rather than brave the precarious unknown that lies beyond it. Thus, the spinning of the tower serves to instill a healthy fear in the *atma*, preventing its premature exit. Beleganjur music meanwhile functions in a complementary but contrasting way. Its sound may frighten bhuta and leyak, but it emboldens humans and human souls.³⁶ The music is used to give confidence to the *atma* in the procession's crisis moments of crossroads passage, at the very same time that the spinning of the tower acts to temper its fear-driven proclivities for flight. The net result, if all goes according to plan, is an *atma* resigned to staying the course and possessed of the courage to do so.

Beleganjur music serves an additional set of more subtle purposes in the procession as well. To speak in black-and-white terms of battles between good and evil or of outright triumph versus abject defeat when accounting for the intracosmic encounters of Balinese ritual life risks falling short of the nuanced complexities of human-spirit interaction that are thought by the Balinese to characterize such encounters. Even in the most volatile of ritual spaces, such as at the crossroads during a ngaben procession, a certain level of decorum is deemed desirable. Lisa Gold captures this idea well in stating that a core ritual function of beleganjur music is to help "escort out the demon forces," which implies a rather different objective than seeking victory in a battle over

³⁶ Asnawa, personal communication, 1992.

them.³⁷ Where the ultimate goal is to secure cosmic balance rather than crush one's adversaries, the notion of escorting rather than vanquishing seems appropriate. The incentive to maintain good diplomatic relations with certain malevolent spirits may go a step farther as well, for the supernatural powers they possess are sometimes thought to be turned toward actually *protecting* the atma from abduction. This will only occur if they have been treated with due deference and respect, however, which is why much Balinese ritual activity is devoted to honoring and appeasing them.

Finally, after its lengthy journey along the banjar's roadways and several harrowing crossroads battles, the procession reaches the sema at the kelod, or seaward extreme, of the banjar district near the Pura Dalem. The Pura Dalem is the Temple of the Dead, dedicated to Siwa (Siva), the god of death and destruction within the divine trinity known as the Trimurti. Siwa is perceived "as a vigorous force that energetically breaks down everything that Wisnu has protected and Brahma has produced."³⁸ The sema, an open-air temporary burial ground and ceremonial cremation space, is typically the size of a large playing field. When the procession enters the sema grounds from the street, its pace accelerates to near-running speed in a rush of energy symbolizing the community's enduring strength and resolve. A sudden, final increase in musical tempo and dynamic power prompts and mirrors this intensification and accelerando. Then, just before the tower is laid down on the ground, it is given one last series of at least three turns, accompanied by a final burst of malpal or other high-energy beleganjur music. This leads to a closing cadential flourish with which the performance—and in turn the procession—officially concludes. It also marks the point of transition to the meancung burning ceremony.

The lancingan is removed from the top tier of the tower and the "body" undergoes final ritual preparations for cremation (including insertion into its animal sarcophagus, if present). While this is taking place, a member of the host family escorts the beleganjur ensemble to a shaded area on the other side of the sema where they rest for a while, eating snacks and drinking coffee. Then, just after the meancung begins and the smoke rises upward, the musicians, now from a relaxed, seated position, start to play again, but this time in a quiet and reserved manner. They may perform in a style called *ocok-ocokan*, in which the lead drummer's part is largely improvised and the reyong highlights melodic figurations not normally heard in the standard processional style. Alternatively, they may play simplified, beleganjur arrangements of pieces from other gamelan repertoires, most commonly tabuh telu pieces from the ancient ceremonial repertoire of the *gamelan gong gedé*. These pieces carry specific mood and locational associations that animate the proceedings at this crucial moment of transformation in the soul's journey. For the banjar members and other assembled guests, they bring a calming effect that helps settle the mood after the anxiety-ridden vigilance of the foregoing procession. However, it is on behalf of the departing atma itself that the music acts most significantly, for it is believed that this dignified and reserved style of beleganjur forms a ladder of sound upon which the atma may now begin its final, post-cremation journey to the Upper World, where the gods and deified ancestors await its arrival.

³⁷ Gold, "The Gender Wayang Repertoire in Theater and Ritual," 680.

³⁸ Eiseman, *Essays on Religion, Ritual, and Art*, 23.

A successful cremation represents just the first step toward the ultimate liberation of a Balinese soul from its earthly bonds. Several post-cremation rituals ensue in the days and weeks following the ngaben, culminating with the week-long memukur. In memukur and other post-cremation rituals, beleganjur music also serves important functions and is essential to the successful performance of mortuary rites. Yet within the Agama Hindu cultural matrix, there is arguably no context in which the gamelan beleganjur's function, presence, and value are more central than in the ceremonies associated with the Balinese cremation. Moreover, within the sphere of cremation rites themselves, nowhere is the place of the gamelan beleganjur and its music more iconic than in the ngaben procession.

Beleganjur, Musical Modernization, and the Ngaben Procession

As alluded to earlier, the performance of beleganjur music during ngaben processions today is often markedly different from the traditional kuno style described above. The source of this difference is readily identified: the creation of the neotraditional, competitive genre of kreasi beleganjur in 1986. It was in that year that a government committee decided to produce a grand music competition as part of eightieth-anniversary commemorative ceremonies marking the heroic martyrdom of the Puputan Badung, a mass ritual suicide during which scores of Balinese chose to take their own lives rather than surrender to invading Dutch forces.³⁹ The committee selected gamelan beleganjur as the vehicle par excellence for this music competition due to its historical association with both human warfare and afterlife battles.

In order for beleganjur music to work effectively as a music of competition, however, its content and approach had to be overhauled. It would need to have flash, virtuosity, showmanship, visual appeal, musical and presentational originality, and formal and structural complexity. These are the qualities that kreasi beleganjur introduced to transform the kuno style into something brashly new. I have examined that transformation in depth in earlier published works,⁴⁰ but here such level of detail is not needed, for the central point to emphasize is that such qualities were essentially absent from the quintessentially functional milieu of ritualistic beleganjur music prior to the advent of the kreasi genre: the purpose of that older music was never to draw attention to itself, but rather to faithfully serve the needs of ritual.

And so the cultural architects of kreasi beleganjur turned to another iconic genre of Balinese gamelan music, that of the gamelan gong kebyar, for models and inspiration in the invention of the new kreasi style. They drew upon other Balinese gamelan traditions as well, for example, grafting a three-part, fast-slow-fast formal design with contrasting musical movements onto the essentially nonvariegated formal template of traditional beleganjur style. The three movements thus imposed—*kawitan*, *pengawak*, and *pengecet*—derived their names from the classic forms of ancient ceremonial repertoires such as *lelambatan* (associated with the gamelan gong gedé and temple ceremonies). Even though these separately designated formal sections in kreasi beleganjur

³⁹ See Margaret Wiener, *Visible and Invisible Realms: Power, Magic, and Colonial Conquest in Bali* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁴⁰ Especially Bakan, *Music of Death and New Creation*.

were mere tokens of their namesakes in terms of formal complexity and sophistication,⁴¹ they still had the effect of introducing set formal plans of distinct musical movements with contrasting tempos, styles, and textures into the beleganjur idiom. Such developments have had a decisive, and arguably compromising, effect on the integrity of ritual beleganjur performance.

The key factor accounting for this impact was the middle movement of the new form, the pengawak. In classic repertoires such as lelabatan, the pengawak is the main, central movement of the piece, and is characterized by slow tempos and high levels of melodic development. The limited resources of gamelan beleganjur instrumentation ensured that this “melodic” movement could have only limited developmental possibilities in the kreasi beleganjur context, but even within this narrow range of possibility, composers proved highly resourceful in figuring out ways to make beleganjur music sound quite un-beleganjur-like by virtue of the melodic richness they achieved, especially in the reyong parts. This new melodicism, paired as it was with tempos that were generally slower than even the slowest-moving passages in a typical ritual beleganjur performance, became a huge asset to the fruition and popularity of kreasi beleganjur as an innovative style of competitive musical display, while at the same having problematic repercussions on beleganjur’s continued life as a music of ritual.

Why? Because the same players who flocked to the banjars to participate in the exciting new kreasi beleganjur phenomenon—mainly teenage boys and young men in their early twenties—also became the beleganjur musicians for cremation and other ritual processions. These youth tended to have little interest in playing the old, functionality-driven style of ritual beleganjur kuno, which started to fall out of fashion in the wake of the dazzling new musical pyrotechnics of kreasi style. Progressively, these young players defaulted to playing the kreasi arrangements they had prepared for beleganjur competitions not just in contests and other “secular” settings, but in cremation processions and different types of religious rituals as well.⁴² According to Asnawa, they did this with little regard for ritual propriety.⁴³ Thus, for example, the musicians often played the slow, melodic pengawak section of a kreasi arrangement just at the moment that the tower entered a crossroads during a procession, stripping the music of power to embolden the tower carriers and the atma, let alone intimidate or deflect menacing bhuta and leyak; or they would launch into a rapid-fire pengecet variation at a moment when slow, calm music would have traditionally been played to quell anxieties apparent among the processional entourage.

Given the high stakes involved in the ngaben procession—for the safe passage of the atma, the quality of life of the banjar, even the cosmic balance of the universe—I was struck during my field research in Bali that such seeming musical improprieties would be allowed to not just exist but flourish. The subject came up in an opportune manner during a 1992 interview with the legendary gamelan composer, performer, and tuner I Wayan Beratha, whom many regard as the most influential Balinese musician of the twentieth century. He offered the following explanation:

⁴¹ Asnawa, personal communication, 1992.

⁴² It is important to note that even in ostensibly secular performance contexts such as beleganjur competitions, the music is never entirely divorced from its religious and ritual associations.

⁴³ Asnawa, personal communication, 1992.

Each type of ceremony has its own unique character, and the music of the beleganjur should reflect this character. The mood for the cremation procession is one thing; for the temple festival, it is something else. Very holy processions like *melis*⁴⁴ are different again. The style of the music needs to be different for each of these, but nowadays, because [groups] learn kreas style, they always use it, even though it is usually not right. We are afraid of this! Young people like the strong and energetic character of the new style. They get carried away and forget where they are. For example, in the melis [ceremony], at the same time as the beleganjur is playing we also have the singing of [slow, sacred chants called] *kidung*. The beleganjur should be soft and calm to go along with the kidung, but very often now, it is not. They play loud and fast and that is not right. It is dangerous.⁴⁵

Then why, I asked Beratha, were such practices being allowed to proliferate? Why were he and other senior members of his banjar community not intervening on behalf of the integrity of Agama Hindu ritual life? His response was enlightening:

It is a difficult question to answer. The young people are very excited by the new beleganjur music. They like to play it very much, and that is good, because it means that they stay interested in the Balinese culture instead of just going to the discos and things like that. If we try to tell them not to play their style, maybe they will not want to play anymore for the ceremonies. We cannot take that chance. Even if we are not so happy with how they play the beleganjur all the time, and even if we are afraid that the wrong way of playing may be bad for the ceremony, it is still better than if they decide not to play. That would be worse. If they are staying involved with the traditions, we do not want to discourage them. That is the most important thing.

Beratha's overarching message was clear: better to rely on the benevolence of the gods and ancestors than to gamble on the fickle fancies of youth.

The functional use of music in Balinese ritual remains as central today as in the past. There is no danger of it becoming obsolete, whether in cremations or other ceremonies, and beleganjur's uniquely important role in the matrix of Balinese ritual life is as strong as ever. Nonetheless, in the contemporary world of beleganjur, as in so many other domains of cultural performance in Bali—and indeed throughout the world—continuous mediation, continuous compromise, and continuous concession define the basic constitution of life as it is lived and negotiated.⁴⁶ Elsewhere, I have defined tradition as “a process of creative transformation whose most remarkable feature is the continuity it nurtures and sustains.”⁴⁷ Such a definition adheres well to the tradition of beleganjur as it moves dynamically from its ritualistic root to its

⁴⁴ See Bakan, *Music of Death and New Creation*, 80–82.

⁴⁵ Translation by the author, with the assistance of Ketut Gede Asnawa.

⁴⁶ Relative to Balinese music specifically, see David Harnish, “Teletubbies in Paradise: Tourism, Indonesianisation, and Modernisation in Balinese Music,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 37 (2005): 103–23; Brita Renée Heimarck, *Balinese Discourses on Music and Modernization: Village Voices and Urban Views* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Edward Herbst, *Voices in Bali: Energies and Perceptions in Vocal Music and Dance Theater* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1997); Meghan Hynson, “From Tradisi to Inovasi: Authority, Music and Change in Balinese Shadow Puppet Theater” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2015); Colin McPhee, *Music in Bali: A Study in Form and Instrumental Organization in Balinese Orchestral Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); Andrew Clay McGraw, *Radical Traditions: Reimagining Culture in Balinese Contemporary Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Peter Steele, “Balinese Hybridities: Balinese Music as Global Phenomena” (Ph.D. diss., Wesleyan University, 2013); Kendra Stepputat, *Performing Arts in Postmodern Bali: Changing Interpretations, Founding Traditions* (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2013); and Tenzer, *Gamelan Gong Kebyar*.

⁴⁷ Michael B. Bakan, *World Music: Traditions and Transformations*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 29.

kreasi efflorescence and back again, contested and contorted along the way but always resilient enough to endure.

Conclusion: Cosmic Balance in a War of Worlds

This article has examined battles waged between Hindu-Balinese people and their malevolent spirit adversaries in the context of cremation processions. The goal of cosmological battle in the Agama Hindu ritual context is, again, not for good to vanquish evil, but rather for their proper balance to be achieved and perpetually maintained through the profuse and constant performance of ritual. It is perhaps telling to note that according to Balinese lore, the gamelan beleganjur itself was originally bequeathed to humans of the Middle World *by* denizens of the Lower World for use as a weapon and shield against those very Lower World inhabitants. At that time, as is reported in what Andrew Clay McGraw describes as “an ostensibly ancient *lontar* palm-leaf manuscript entitled the *Prakempa*,”⁴⁸ the spirit forces of the Lower World were concerned that they were gaining too much of the upper hand in their ongoing dealings with their Middle World rivals, and so they gifted the Balinese people the gamelan beleganjur to help them even the score.⁴⁹

The music of the gamelan beleganjur has for centuries been a catalyst for the waging of both earthly and intracosmic warfare. As explored here, both the procedures of such battles and the stakes involved in their outcomes are nowhere more clearly articulated and displayed than in cremation processions. From crossroads encounters with bhuta and leyak to the construction of sonic ladders upon which souls of the deceased may rise upward on their afterlife journeys, beleganjur music, across the full range of its enlivening and protective ritual functions,⁵⁰ is an essential material and spiritual artifact of intracosmological mediation, balance, and agency. And those roles extend to the more mundane realities of generational conflict as well, as is seen in the seemingly paradoxical situation of “inappropriate” kreasi beleganjur musical style being performed by young musicians on the high-stakes spiritual battlegrounds of ritual processions.

Processions are always on the move. That statement defines what and how they are. It might be argued that it defines *why* they are as well, for in processions, dynamism and the transcendence of physical space become deeply metaphorical of what it is like and what it means to live humanly and culturally. The ability to stay in motion while maintaining balance and order, to shift and be flexible while remaining steadily on course, to nimbly attend to whatever comes along whenever it does, to follow the path of the soul while at the same time directing its progression—these are the essential qualities of processional performance, and at a larger level they are also the prerequisites to a well-functioning cultural life. As we follow the gamelan beleganjur along the pathway of the soul’s journey, and as we witness the resilience of Balinese ritual even in the midst of profound currents of transformation, we learn important lessons about the structures and mechanisms of culture. Processions teach us well about how such things work, and about why it is important that they do.

⁴⁸ McGraw, *Radical Traditions*, 116. See pp. 115–18 for a summary of the ongoing debates concerning the contested ancient origin of the *Prakempa*, which McGraw and other scholars suggest may actually be relatively recent.

⁴⁹ See Madé Bandem, *Prakempa: Sebuah Lontar Gambelan Bali* (Denpasar, Bali: STSI, 1986).

⁵⁰ See DeVale, “Death Symbolism in Music,” 62.