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Sindhenan Banyumasan: An Example of Variation and Pluralism of the Javanese Female Singing Tradition

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ABSTRACT

Sindhenan Banyumasan, meaning the female traditional Javanese singing in the style of Banyumas, represents an interesting “regional variant” of sindhen vocal tradition. Flourished in the court of Surakarta in the 19th century, the sindhen practice has spread rapidly across the centuries, reaching many territories outside the court centers. Deeply connected with the ancient practices of the singer dancers, sindhen styles are still indicative of the local traditions and a testimony of differences and continuity with the formal teaching of central Javanese institutions. Despite the importance of the local variants, existing international studies on sindhenan have mainly focused on the styles of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, often neglecting rural areas, like Banyumas. The aim of this paper is to shed some light on sindhen practice in Banyumas territory, investigating its history, performance practice, repertoires and vocal style. Research outcomes reveal how Banyumas singing tradition has many common traits with Yogyakarta and Surakarta vocal practices, though it maintains some specificities, index of the pluralism of Javanese music and performing arts.

Keywords: sindhenan; Banyumas; musical pluralism

ABSTRAK

Sindhenan Banyumasan: Salah Satu Contoh Variasi dan Pluralisme dalam Tradisi Vokal Wanita di Jawa. Sindhenan Banyumasan, memiliki pengertian yaitu nyanyian atau praktik vokal tradisional wanita Jawa dalam gaya banyumas, yang mewakili “varian regional” yang menarik dari tradisi vokal sindhen. Berkembang di keraton Surakarta pada abad ke-19, praktik sindhen telah menyebar dengan cepat selama berabad-abad, menjangkau banyak wilayah di luar pusat Kerajaan (Kraton). Gaya Shindenan, yang masih sangat terkait dengan praktik konservatif dari para seniman penari dan penyanyi tradisional, masih menunjukkan tradisi lokal dan kesaksian tentang perbedaan dan kesinambungan pengajaran formal pada institusi-institusi di Jawa Tengah. Terlepas dari pentingnya varian lokal, terdapat studi internasional tentang sindhenan yang terutama lebih sering fokus dalam membahas gaya Yogyakarta dan Surakarta, dan seringkali mengabaikan daerah pedesaan, seperti Banyumas. Tujuan dari tulisan ini adalah untuk menjelaskan praktik sindhen di wilayah Banyumas, dan menelusuri sejarahnya, praktek pertunjukannya, repertoar, dan gaya vokal. Hasil dari penelitian ini mengungkapkan bagaimana tradisi sindhenan Banyumas memiliki banyak kesamaan dengan praktik vokal (sindhenan) gaya Yogyakarta dan Surakarta, meskipun hal tersebut tetap mempertahankan beberapa kekhususan, serta indeks kemajemukan musik dan seni pertunjukan Jawa.

Kata kunci: sindhenan; Banyumas; pluralisme musikal

Introduction

Sindhenan (traditional female singing) is one of the most widespread vocal traditions in Java. However, amongst the consistent production of studies on *gamelan* music, this practice seems to have not been devoted the attention it deserves. Central Javanese *sindhenan* can count on a discrete though not exhaustive bibliography (mostly for what concerns Surakarta and Yogyakarta styles, see (Walton, 1996); (Cooper, 2000); (Sutton, 1984); (Weintraub 2004). On the contrary, almost nothing can be found about *sindhenan* practice in other “regional styles” or local variants. Excepts for the studies of Van Zanten (1989) in Sundanese area and those of Rahayu (2017) in East Java, we currently have no mention of the female singing tradition in areas far from the central Javanese courtly centres. Particularly, the *sindhen* practice in Banyumas Regency (Central-West Java) known as *sindhenan banyumasan*, has still many undisclosed aspects that need to be unearthed. Amongst others, (Sutton, 1986) made a significant contribution to the study of “musical pluralism” in Javanese *gamelan* music. He has compared diverse *gamelan* musical styles including those of Yogyakarta, Surakarta, Banyumas, Semarang and East Java (Surabaya-Mojokerto). Also, he discussed the meaning of “authenticity” in music and the role of cultural politics in the development of regional styles, in continuity and contrast with the central Javanese style taught in the most renowned conservatories (ISI Yogyakarta and ISI Surakarta). Specific to Banyumas area, significant international studies are those of Sutton (1985, 1986, 1991) and Lysloff (1990, 1992, 1993, 2001, 2009). Other relevant works by Indonesian scholars are those of Yusmanto (2006) and Herusatoto (2008). On *sindhenan banyumasan* practice we find some interesting papers by Muriah Budiarti (2008; 2013), *sindhen* and vocal teacher at ISI (Institut Seni Indonesia) Surakarta.

Considering that Banyumas Regency is located in a liminal territory, between central Java and Sunda, it is clear how its music and performance practice are exposed to many diverse influences coming from the neighbouring

territories. However, Banyumas is a cultural area preserving its own specificity and traditions. Arts that are highly distinctive of Banyumas style are for example: *wayang jemblung* (Rene T. A. Lysloff, 1990), *lènggèr* (René T.A. Lysloff, 2002) and *calung* (Lysloff 1992). The vast majority studies seem to agree on the vibrant and lively character of Banyumas music, its inclination to humour and parody, and its “popular” (*rakyat*) nature opposed to some extent to the court aesthetic. How can these elements be detected in the vocal practice and how does the latest differ from Yogyanese and Solonese styles? But, most important, what does Banyumas vocal tradition represents in the framework of Javanese music?

Methodology

I conducted the research on *sindhenan banyumasan* adopting the participant observation methodology (Solís, 2004) (Rice 2014) or practiced research (Dean & Smith 2009; Penny 2014). In 2017, I spent several months in Banyumas, in Pegalangan village, hosted by Mak Narsih (Narsihati) and Pak Chedi (Suchedi), owners of the Sanggar Seni Budaya Ngudi Luwesi Salira. On December the 12th, 2017, at 6 p.m., I arrived in Purwokerto station, the administrative province of Banyumas Regency. Outside the station, waiting for me, there were Mak Narsih and her family ready to give me a warm welcoming and to bring me to their village and into their lives. Two hours later, I was already joining one of the weekly rehearsals with the *calung* music group, inherited by local *sindhen* and *lènggèr* dancers. Mak Narsih, a charismatic woman, elegantly dressed with fine jewels and hair ornaments (a legacy of her long and honoured career of singer-dancer) offered me to become a teacher and a mentor. She was excited to have an “Italian *sindhen*” to train. It was an opportunity to disseminate Banyumas music knowledge worldwide and to share her experience of being a *sindhen* and *lènggèr* dancer in *tempo doeloe* (“old times”).

Over the period I spent in Banyumas, I often joined in rehearsals and performances, alternating active participation in the guise of *sindhen* and

audio-visual documentation (using a Tascam DR40 and a Sony Handicam HDR-CX625). To combine multiple activities (learning, performing and documenting) was determinant in order to master the vocal practice and to be able to achieve a double perspective (both “emic” and “etic”, Bartz & Cooley 1997). The direct involvement of the Pegalongan music community in my research activity was also determinant to obtain updated information on the performances and to gain the co-operation of artists and musicians who invited me to their houses for showing me local traditions, some of those very rare (like *buncis* and *bongkel*).¹

After completing my fieldwork in Banyumas, I decided to conduct a brief survey in ISI Surakarta, where I joined several classes of *karawitan Banyumas* with Pak Darno and Ibu Muriah, in order to have a meter of comparison.

Once I came back to Italy (my home country), I revised and selected the audio-visual material and the fieldnotes. I translated interviews from Indonesian to English and I transcribed music recordings in *kepatihan* notation. Further, I analysed data, comparing the music analysis with the ethnographic information, in order to establish connections and draw conclusions, also basing on my previous experience as *sindhen* and researcher in Yogyakarta (2014-2016).

Results and Discussion

Participant observation and existing literature helped to disclose many aspects of the *sindhen* activity in Banyumas, their music repertoire and vocal style. Before discussing the current research findings, it is necessary to offer an historical overview on female singers and singer-dancers.

1. Singers and Singer-Dancers

The *sindhen* tradition in Banyumas is strictly connected with the ancient practice of itinerant singer-dancers, known under different terminologies according to the geographic and cultural distribution

on the Javanese territory: *ronggeng* and *ketuk tilu* in West Java, *tayub* in central-East Java and *gandrung* in Banyuwangi (Yampolski 1991). Some of these practices have undergone a slow decline, especially during Suharto regime (Vickers 2005), while others have gone through processes of epuration and revival (it's the case of *ronggeng* and *ketuk tilu*, now converged in *jaipongan*, Baier & Manuel 1986, Saedipun 2015). In Banyumas, singer-dancers are called *lènggèr*, and the practice is still alive nowadays, though there are noticeable differences with the past. In the beginning, *lènggèr* was held in occasion of public and private celebrations such as births, marriages and circumcisions. The writer Ahmad Tohari (2012) described many ritual and social aspects of *lènggèr* in his best-seller *Sang Penari* (“The Dancer”). Singer-dancers of the past were believed to be the incarnation of Dewi Sri, the rice goddess (or the Indonesian Mother Earth) so they were considered a precious “property” for a village and its inhabitants. Music and performance were powerful tools to summon the goddess in order to guarantee prosperity and crops abundance. During colonial times, *lènggèr* became the itinerant practice of female singer-dancers performing for money, accompanied by a small music ensemble and two comedians (*badhut*). Members of the audience (often males) were involved in social dances and were used to offer a tip (*sawer*) to request songs or dance turns with the singer-dancer. Often, the requests might contain lascivious implications. For these reasons, *lènggèr* went through an epuration campaign during the New Order and appears nowadays in a more polite and standardized form. According to Lysloff (2001: 1), in the times of New Order, it was already possible to assist to *lènggèr* performances in the purged, “respectful and disciplined” (*sopan dan rapi*) form.

The female performer of the past was thus both a singer and a dancer. Nowadays, these two roles appear separated. The scission of vocal and dancing skills didn't happen only in Banyumas. According to Sutton (1984), already in the 19th century, female singer-dancers were hired in the courts of Surakarta

¹ *Buncis* (literally “green beans”), is an ancient trance dance accompanied by rattle bamboo instruments. *Bongkel* is another form of bamboo rattle music, usually played by a small ensemble and a singer.

and Yogyakarta, though in a different guise: some of those women were transformed in refined *bedhaya* and *srimpi* dancers (Di Bernardi 1995; Hughes-Freeland 2008) while others, trained in the vocal practice with court *gamelan* orchestras (Surtihadi 2014), became *sindhen*. The disjunction of singing and dancing was determinant in order to elevate the figure of the lascivious, terrain singer-dancer of the past in favor of the establishment of a new “refined” (*halus*) female performer, in accordance to court aesthetics. While, in central Java, *sindhen* can still be identified with the court ideal of the “heavenly nymph” (Walton 1996), in Banyumas they preserve a stronger connection with their ancestors. During my fieldwork in Banyumas, I encountered both *sindhen* and singer-dancers, though the latest were present on a minor degree. In fact, according to Mak Narsih, less and less young girls are capable to learn both singing and dancing and to perform them altogether, as in the past. In many cases, I witnessed *lènggèr* dancers accompanied by the sound of *calung* (bamboo ensemble) complemented by an ordained row of *sindhen* executing *banyumasan* music pieces (*Ricik Ricik*, *Sekar Gadung*, *Ilho Gondhang*), sitting and behaving like the central Javanese colleagues.



Figure 1. Singer-dancers in a *lènggèr* performance (Baturaden, June 21st, 2018, photo by Ilaria Meloni).



Figure 2. Singer-dancers in a *lènggèr* performance (Banyumas, Sanggar Seni Budaya Ngudi Luwesi Salira, January 13rd, 2018, photo by Ilaria Meloni).

In Banyumas, *sindhen* do not only join in *calung* and *lènggèr* performances but they also partook in *ebeg* (the local version of hobby-horse trance dance), *kenthongan* (bamboo and drums modern ensembles) and rarer genres as *buncis* (trance dance), *sintren* (trance dance) and *bongkelan* (small bamboo, drums and voice ensembles).

They also assume a significant role in *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet theatre) of Banyumas, which is more and more similar to the Yogyanese and Solonese one. However, the *banyumasan* style is still manifest in some present-day *wayang kulit*. In these cases, *lènggèr* dance is still carried out before the beginning of the performance and in some minor scenes (like the *perang kembang*). Expert *sindhen* accompany the dance singing the pieces of *banyumasan* repertoire, remaining kneeled on the right side of the puppeteer.

Thanks to Mak Narsih accounts, I could draw an evolving framework showing how *sindhen* and singer-dancers in Banyumas have shaped their beings and cohabited over the last decades. Mak Narsih constitutes a remarkable example. She was born on December 31st, 1965, in Banyumas and she is still renowned in the regency as one of the most famous *sindhen* and *lènggèr* dancers (for this reason, she



Figure 3. *Sindhen* in a *lènggèr* performance (Baturaden, June 21st, 2018, photo by Ilaria Meloni).



Figure 4. Mak Narsih and the other *sindhen* of Sanggar Seni Budaya Ngudi Luwesi Salira during a *calung* rehearsal (Banyumas, December 15th, 2017, photo by Ilaria Meloni).

is often called “maestro *lènggèr*”). She started her career in a very young age, learning *alami* (via aural transmission, or “naturally”) and measuring her skills directly on stage. She became a very popular artist during the years of Suharto. Mak Narsih still lives in the village of Pegalongan with her husband, Pak Suchedi, a *calung* player and a teacher in the local SMA (Medium High School). Mak Narsih house stands right in front of the recently built *sanggar*, inaugurated in 2014 thanks to the contribution of Pegalongan inhabitants. The *sanggar* is a great resource for Mak Narsih and Pegalongan artistic community. At present, *lènggèr* troupes don't perform very often like in the past. Therefore, to own an artistic space allows experienced artists to teach the children of the village and to train future musicians, dancers and *sindhèn*, transmitting a kind of knowledge which is rarely taught in conservatories. Every day, after returning home back from school, Pak Chedi takes care of the *sanggar* and prepares the material for the rehearsals and the *calung* music sessions. This place has constituted my daily routine over the months during which I intensively practiced *sindhènan banyumasan* with Mak Narsih and the musicians of the *calung* group. Giving the close relation I achieved with Mak Narsih, I decided that I wouldn't conduct a formal interview with her, because I didn't want to make her uncomfortable. Instead, I asked if I could turn on my Tascam recorder during our daily lessons, in the quiet atmosphere of the *sanggar*. Between a teaching and the other, Mak Narsih used to narrates her experience of singer-dancer:

I became a *lènggèr* when I was seven years old. I didn't know yet how to dance. I was pushed to go on stage and I just kept imitating the



Figure 5. *Sindhèn* in a *ebeg* performance (Banyumas, Sanggar Seni Budaya Ngudi Luwesing Salira, June 18th, 2018, photo by Ilaria Meloni).

other dancers. I didn't know how, but my body started to move with the music. People say I have the *indang* [the gift] (personal communication of December 15th, 2017).

It is common for *lènggèr* dancers to start their training while still very young. In Pegalongan village, Mak Narsih trains a group of little girls who attend classes at the *sanggar* every weekend. Dance is trained separately from the singing, even though, according to Mak Narsih, a true Banyumas female artist should be able to sing and dance at the same time, like in the old *lènggèr* tradition. However, in the current practice is more and more common to see a row of *sindhèn* sitting steady along the stage, accompanying mute dancers busy in *lènggèr* choreographic movements. Mak Narsih received the *indang* (the “gift” or vocation), which is rare amongst the new generations.

2. Education and Training

Nowadays, many young girls prefer to receive a formal education to SMKI (music high school) and music academies of Yogyakarta and Surakarta. A formal education is not only considered to guarantee



Figure 6. *Sindhèn* in a *wayang kulit* performance (Banyumas, December 23rd, 2017, photo by Ilaria Meloni).



Figure 7. Mak Narsih in a *lènggèr* performance (Baturaden, June 21st, 2018, photo by Ilaria Meloni).

more solid basis for early careers but also to give prestige and offer good job opportunities. Notwithstanding, *sindhen* trained in central Javanese conservatories often risk to lose their own cultural background in favor of a more standardized knowledge transmission, modelled on the music practice of the court centers. In many cases, *sindhen* coming from Banyumas end up to practice their native music style jointly to that of Surakarta or Yogyakarta, the first in the form of *music dareah* (“territorial music”) or regional variant. The implications are many, as noticed by Sutton:

The offering of formal classes in what have generally been seen as “folk arts”, of course, tends to change the conception of those arts. The very fact that students get credit towards a diploma by learning to play *calung*, for example, raises the stature of the *calung* genre. Moreover, the methods of teaching contribute toward a new conception of Banyumas music. Notation is pervasive. Blackboards and notebooks are full of the ciphers representing basic instrumental melodies for Banyumas pieces, and personal variants become inconsistencies, to be discouraged (Sutton 1986: 125).

I experienced both the *alami*, “natural” and *akademi* “academic” teaching methodologies, the first with Mak Narsih in Pegalongan village and the second with Ibu Muriah at ISI Surakarta. Classes with Mak Narsih were based on listening and imitation, without written notation. Once I had memorized a good number of *cengkok* (melodic patterns) and *parikan* (free-metered rhymes) I was ready to train new learnings directly on stage (in *calungan*, *wayang* or *lènggèr* performances). After few months I was able to sing the masterpieces of Banyumas tradition like *Ricik Ricik*, *Sekar Gadung*, *Bendrong Kulon* and *Eling Eling* and to create my own *cengkok* and *parikan banyumasan* without reading any notation. I even created my own *parikan* rhyme, reciting: “Baturaden, Karangpule, nyawang sindhen sing wong bule”. Meaning: “Baturaden [locality], Karangpule [village], we are watching a foreign *sindhen*”. To Mak Narsih, the real training was in performance. There, I could really challenge myself and, also, I could imitate other singers and learn through practice.

In May 2018, I joined several classes of *karawitan banyumas* (Banyumas traditional music) in ISI Surakarta. Guided by Pak Darno and Ibu Muriah, I could study *banyumasan* repertoire with a different methodology and I could discuss with my teachers about relevant aspects of Banyumas vocal practice. Ibu Muriah constitutes an excellent example of a *sindhen* who received a double formation (“natural” and “academic”):

I started practicing *sindhenan* at primary school, in a natural way. My father had a music group called Dwija Laras so I used to partake in rehearsals. Then, my uncle discovered that I had a good voice and suggested me to go to study to Purbalingga (interview of May 24th, 2018).

The first vocal education of Ibu Muriah is aural, due to her artistic family descendance. Her first approach to Javanese music is from a “local” perspective, within Banyumas art context. Only at a later stage, Ibu Muriah is introduced to the use of written notation and to the Solonese style *karawitan*. The musicians of her first music group used to learn “by ear” (*menguru kuping*), in the same way that I experienced with Mak Narsih in Pegalongan village. Ibu Muriah discovered the Solonese *karawitan* thanks to the RRI (Radio Republik Indonesia) broadcastings. The radio, together with cassette recordings, has been a powerful media during the 50’s and the 60’s and it played a determinant role in the diffusion of “regional styles” (Lockard 1998: 84) which led to a widespread musical pluralism in the following decades. However, not all the “regional styles” could benefit of an equal distribution via mediatic channels. The style of Javanese cultural centers (mainly Surakarta) was often presented as an example of excellence, so it became a standard model to imitate. According to Ibu Muriah:

During the 70’s, the bedrock of *karawitan* music were the styles of Yogyakarta and Surakarta. My uncle introduced me to the classical *gendhing* (*Wilujeng*, *Puspowarna*) so I started focusing on that repertoire. I kept practicing *banyumasan* pieces only in the spare time (interview of May 24th, 2018).

From the 70’s, Yogyakarta and Surakarta styles started to be taught as major subjects in *karawitan*

studies even in conservatories and music academies, while other local traditions were acknowledged as subsidiary classes, often placed in *etnomusikologi* (ethnomusicology) department. Musical pluralism has started to be more and more encouraged between the '80s and the '90s. Students from diverse areas crossed their paths in the main music institutions and became able to improve their own creativity and to open the way to possible collaborations. Ibu Muriah enrolled in ISI Surakarta in 1982 and there she found a fertile ground to cultivate her "bi-musicality" (Hood 1960):

At ISI Surakarta, there were *sindhen* from all over Javanese island. They taught me many other styles: Sunda, Banyuwangi, Semarang, Madura and many others. Formerly I enrolled in *etnomusikologi*, then I also undertook Solonese style *karawitan*, so now I teach both (interview of May 24th, 2018).

Ibu Muriah acknowledges her "bi-musicality" as an enrichment other than a way to offer diversified perspectives and multiple approaches to her students.

In Pak Darno and Ibu Muriah classes, students use to learn with the aid of written notation that they find on apposite manuals. Students follow the scored notation for playing both *balungan* (skeleton melody) and *sindhenan* vocal parts. Ibu Muriah guided me in the execution of the piece *Ricik Ricik* showing me the written *cengkok* and adding some new ones which she wrote herself on the page, offering me more variation possibilities but still remaining faithful to the score. She made a calibrated use of both oral and written methods and adopted a critical approach, explaining me the musical history of the musical piece from the original version to the later additions by Ki Nartosabdo and Pak Rasito. Many *gendhing banyumasan* seems to have undergone the same manipulation over the past decades. The structure of the pieces and their playful spirit makes them particularly suitable for innovations, especially in the vocal elaboration.

3. Repertoire

According to Sutton, the whole of traditional compositions in Banyumas style (*gendhing banyumasan*) it's a:

[...] Small corpus of the traditional repertory (only about 50-60 pieces), the preference for "small" formal structures (pieces with short melodic phrases), and the limitation of this repertory to only two *pathet* (modes) within one *laras* (scale system). All traditional Banyumas pieces are in the five-tone *laras slendro*, *pathet sanga* or *manyura* (1986: 126).

While the central Javanese repertoire is very wide, so that many musicians say that it's nearly impossible to memorize all the melodies over a life-time, the repertoire of *gendhing banyumasan* is more restricted and usually expert musicians manage to master good number of pieces in a short time. Differently from the classical *gendhing* (which can count 8 to 256 beats per *gong* cycle), the most common form for the *gendhing banyumasan* is *lancaran* (an 8 beat per *gong* cycle structure). However, the limited corpus and the less complex musical structure led Banyumas musicians, teachers and composers to challenge their creativity with increasingly innovative solutions:

Musicians at SMKI Banyumas have begun to counter some of the limits in several ways. Some compose pieces in the seven-tone *pelog* system, and one of the most prolific is Rasito, one of the top music teachers at SMKI. While new compositions consist primarily of short melodic phrases, the use of *pelog* expands the sound resources of Banyumas tradition considerably (Sutton 1986: 126).

Variety in music elaboration (*garapan*) is undoubtedly a peculiarity and a strength of Banyumas music. For instance, in Yogyakarta and Surakarta practice, *lancaran* is often executed in a loud-playing style, in the first *irama* (tempo), mainly in the instrumental rendition with a *lagu* or *koor* (unison vocal melody or choral section), rarely with *sindhenan* improvisation. *Lancaran* are often used to mark transitions between a piece and another in *wayang* theatre, or function as ending pieces in *klenengan* (music sessions). They seem also to be the most suitable music forms to introduce new students in the basics of *gamelan* practice. In Banyumas, instead, *lancaran* form can be played according to several *garapan* (elaborations) in which *sindhen* voices play a pivotal role and they are needed to accompany a wide range of performative events (from *calungan* to *wayang* and also *lènggèr*, *ebeg* and so forth).

4. *Ricik Ricik* in The Vocal Style of Banyumas

Ricik Ricik is maybe the most well-known and widespread piece of Banyumas tradition. It is often adopted also in other areas, from Yogyakarta to Surabaya, thanks to its playful character and adaptability to many performative contexts. But only in Banyumas its vocal elaboration assumes the complexity which is undetected in other areas. The *balungan* (skeleton melody) of *Ricik Ricik* consists of 16 beats, divided into 4 *gatra* (groups of 4 notes) and marked by 4 *kenongan* (*kenong* strikes, signaling strong cadential notes):²

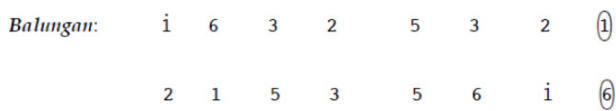


Figure 8. *Kepatihan* (cyphered notation) of the *balungan* melody of *Ricik Ricik* in *slendro sanga*.

The elaboration of this piece in the Banyumas style combines diverse sections, including: *koor* or *lagu*, *selingan*, *parikan* and *sindhenan*.

I recorded and transcribed a version of *Ricik Ricik* in Pegalangan village on December the 12th, 2017, during a rehearsal of the Sanggar Seni Budaya Ngudi Luwesi Salira *calung* group. The elaboration of the skeleton melody was articulated in different parts. The first part consisted in an instrumental introduction in *irama lancar* (fast tempo). The second section included a passage to *irama I* and a *koor* (female and male unison singing) as following:

Irama I (koor)



² The transcriptions have been realized by the author using *KepatihanPro* software.

³ PA (*putra* = male) and PI (*putri* = female) in the transcription.

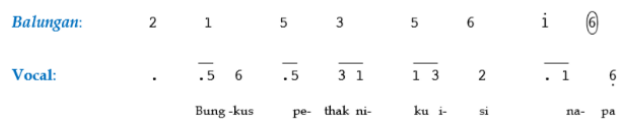


Figure 9. Music transcription of the *koor* or *lagu* section of *Ricik Ricik* in *slendro sanga*.

According to Ibu Muriah, this passage was not part of the original version (*khas banyumasan*) but it has been added by Ki Nartosabdo (Petersen 2001; Meloni 2019), so that it is often referred to as *semarangan* (in the style of Semarang), though lyrics are in *ngapak* (Banyumas local language). This version of *Ricik Ricik* (the title meaning “small rain”) is the most common to hear in Banyumas neighboring areas like Yogyakarta and Surakarta. In addition, other choral versions can be found according to the context. New *koor* parts are continuously composed by teachers and musicians to be included in *Ricik Ricik* elaboration. For example, another famous version, taught in ISI Surakarta, is the one composed by Pak Rasito (Kartawi 2016).

Another possible vocal elaboration of the skeleton melody is the *sauran* or *selingan*. It is also acknowledged as a later addition from the original version:



Figure 10. Music transcription of the *sauran* or *selingan* section of *Ricik Ricik* in *slendro sanga*.

This section, usually executed in the *irama II* (slower tempo) can be performed in unison or by a soloist, usually alternating male and female voices in an answer/question modality.³ The two parts

differ in the music register: the male part is lower than the female part. The use of *pathet miring* (a modulation of *slendro sanga* on *pelog* scale, Becker 1984: 348-349) is evident in the third line of the transcription (Picture 10). It is another strong hallmark of Banyumas style, probably born out of the necessity to overcome the limits imposed by the adoption of only one scale system. The *saوران* section is a sort of vocal game and it can be also performed by a solo *sindhen* alternated with a chorus or a *sindhen* and a *penggerong* (male vocalist). Differently from other central Javanese styles, in Banyumas vocal practice is not rare that female singers perform what is usually restricted to male singers (*gerongan*, *senggakan*, *alok* etc.). One of the most interesting cases is the mantra *Kajune purwa sejati*, used in shadow puppet theatre for introducing the comic interlude. In *wayang kulit*, mantras are usually carried out almost exclusively by the puppeteer. However, this specific mantra in Banyumas style is often sung by a female singer.

Another section, which still results to be a later addition but is closer to the Banyumas original style, is the following:

Irama II - parikan

Balungan: i 6 3 2 5 3 2 ①

Sindhen: 3 3 5 6 . 6 6 i . 6 5 6 . 3 1 2³²²¹ 1
Ra- ma Ra-ma nja-luk ma- dang la-wuh u- yah

Senggakan: 6
E

Balungan: 2 1 5 3 5 6 i ②

Sindhen: 3 3 3 1 2 3 3 3 . 3 5 6 6 . 6 5 3 3 6 6
Mau-ma-dang la-wuh- e u-yah nja-luk bo-jo sing da-di lu- rah

Senggakan: . 1 2 1 2 1 1
O-ra na-na u-yah

Figure 11. Music transcription of the modern-style *parikan* of *Ricik Ricik* in *slendro sanga*.

The lyrics of this section resemble the *parikan* genre, meaning improvised riddles in a free meter, which is the specificity of the old-time *banyumasan* singing. Though, here, *parikan* are composed in a modern style and are articulated in an answer/question standard formula, intersected with *senggakan* (“filling” phrases, similar to the “counter melody” practice in Western Art Singing). *Senggakan* is another vocal form typical of Banyumas, though now used also in other central

Javanese styles. *Senggakan* is a fundamental element in Banyumas music since: “Good Banyumas vocal performance is generally described as *ramè*, a term indicating lots of activity, “busy” or “noisy” in a positive sense” (Sutton 1991: 93). It can be said that *senggakan*, together with *parikan*, are the very essence of Banyumas vocal practice. The original practice of *parikan* consists of the vocal elaboration of melodic patterns on free-metered short phrases ending in a rhyme. Presumably, they are in close relation with (or probably derived from) *pantun*, poetic meters typical of Sundanese region (Van Zanten 1993). The content is often humoristic and provocative, with a high potential of interaction and entertainment. *Parikan* are usually improvised in an extemporaneous and spontaneous way, with the aim to provoke and entertain the audience, even though some *parikan* became well-known and now they constitute a sort of stable corpus, handed down from expert *sindhen* (like Mak Narsih) to their apprentices.

Nowadays, it is not rare to find *parikan* riddles also in Yogyakartaese or Solonese music, especially in light pieces with a humorous purpose, like during *wayang kulit* comic interludes (Meloni 2021). *Parikan* constituted the most common repertoire of the ancient singer-dancers, before *sindhen* practice were introduced in Banyumas area together with the adoption of other textual forms like central Javanese *wangsalan*. The main difference between central Javanese *sindhenan* and *sindhenan banyumasan* lies precisely in the lyrics’ typology. While *parikan* is specific to Banyumas area, *wangsalan* (riddles in poetic form deriving from court literature) are typical of Yogyakartaese and Solonese styles. However, over the decades, the influence of central Javanese practice gave birth to a new form called *wangsalan banyumasan*, that we can also find in *Ricik Ricik* elaboration, as follows:

Irama I - wangsalan

Balungan: i 6 3 2 5 3 2 ①

Senggakan: . 2 1 2 3 . 5 3 2 1
Dhu- wa lo-lo ing

Balungan: 2 1 5 3 5 6 i ②

Sindhen: 2 2 2 2 . 2 5 5 5 6 5 3 6
Ja- nur gu- nung sa- ku-lon ban-jar pa-to-man

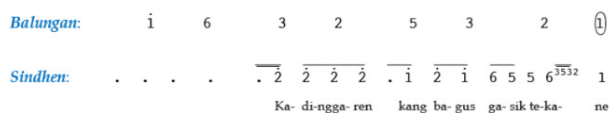


Figure 12. Music transcription of the *wangsalan banyumasan* section of *Ricik Ricik* in *slendro sanga*.

The difference between central Javanese *wangsalan* and *wangsalan banyumasan* dwells mainly in the origin (court literature vs extemporary improvisation) and in the content. *Wangsalan banyumasan* metrical structure remains the same of the central Javanese *wangsalan*: a total of 24 syllables divided in a *cangkriman* (“question”) and a *batangan* (“answer”) of 12 syllables each, furtherly divisible in groups of 4 and 8 syllables, which makes *sindhen* able to improvise *cengkok* (melodic formulas) on the stronger cadenzas of the skeleton melody. However, while central Javanese riddles originates from court literature and are written in a mixture of old and modern Javanese (often with words in *kawi*, derived from Sanskrit), *wangsalan banyumasan* are in *ngapak* language and they are based on common life experience or local folklore, rather than myths and legends of the glorious Javanese kingdoms. The *wangsalan* question which appear in this transcription (picture 12) recites: “Janur gunung sakulon banjar patoman”. Meaning: “The coconut tree growing in West Banjar Patoman [locality]”. The answer is: “Kadinggaren, wong bagus gasik tekane”. Meaning: “The name of the tree is *kadinggaren*, a good man poses the question”. The words *gasik tekane* recalls the word “Tasik”, a specific locality in which the tree grows in West Banjar Patoman, so that it makes easier to identify the tree type mentioned in the question.

Wangsalan can be sung in alternation with *isen isen* (filling non-sense formulas) or *senggakan*. *Dhuwa lolo* (which appear in the first line of the transcription) is a common Banyumas formula, often used with “filling” purpose (like a *senggakan*). It is another strong trait, very specific (*khas*) of *banyumasan* style and it can be heard in many other pieces of Banyumas repertoire, while is uncommon in other regional variants like in Yogyakarta or Surakarta styles.

Another interesting issue to notice concerns the many *irama* transitions (mainly *irama I* and *irama II*, but it’s not uncommon to listen to versions

extending until the *irama III*) which is unusual in a *lancaran* form, according to the central Javanese musical practice.

In conclusion of this analysis, it can be said that the main features of music elaboration in Banyumas are: a majority of pieces in *lancaran* form; a great flexibility in the music elaboration even on short-cycled (8 or 16 beat per *gongan*) structures; a great variety in the vocal elaboration, including: choral or unison piece (*koor* or *lagu*), alternate singing between male and female parts (*saoran* or *selingan*), solo *sindhen* in central Javanese style and spontaneous improvisation of free-metered riddles (*parikan*) with “fillings” (*senggakan*) in order to make the piece “noisy” or “busy”. Voice is thence a very important element in Banyumas music, especially female voice, which is often described as *sindhengan banyumasan* but, as we have seen in the previous paragraphs, it includes miscellaneous vocal traditions.

5. Specificities of *sindhengan banyumasan*

To sum up the specificities of the female singing in Banyumas style, from what emerged from the analysis and the discussion, is it possible to say that the main features are, as listed below:

1. The singing is mainly articulated on short-cycle music pieces (*lancaran*). Therefore, the *cengkok* (vocal patterns) results less ornamented and articulated than central Javanese ones. On the other hand, vocal elaboration includes multifold variants other than *sindhen* solo (or *srambahan*) and it often includes parts that in central Javanese practice are associated with *penggerong* (male singers).
2. Specific lyrics of *banyumasan* singing resulted to be either *parikan* and *senggakan*, free-metered phrases sung in a spontaneous and humorous attitude, though central Javanese texts (*wangsalan*) and modern composition (*koor* or *lagu*) are increasingly becoming an integrated part of Banyumas vocal music.
3. The singing is often accompanied by *calung* (bamboo instrumental ensemble) instead of *gamelan* (bronze music ensemble). This element might contribute to the diversification of the

sindhèn voice quality, which in central Java results “sharper” and more crystalline (as it should resonate on higher frequencies to be hearable without microphones).

4. The music knowledge is mainly handed down via oral transmission (or *alami*, “natural” way) with a preference for direct practice (or the *indang*, “gift”, in the past) though classes of Banyumas music and singing are available in some central Javanese academies, like ISI Surakarta.
5. *Sindhèn* is still often associated to singer-dancer (of *lènggèr* genre) due to the common origins and the present-days coexistence, though it has undergone many changes after New Order. For this reason, *sindhèn* staginess in Banyumas results to be often more playful and uninhibited if compared to central Java, whose *sindhèn* are more strictly linked to court aesthetics and observe a rigid ethic.

Conclusion

Sindhènan banyumasan or female traditional singing in the style of Banyumas reveals to be not only a peculiar variant of the central Javanese vocal practice, with differences and common traits, but an interesting vocal tradition itself. Its peculiarity is often labelled with the adjective *kasar*, which according to central Javanese aesthetics means “rough” and is the opposite of *halus* (“refined”) (Anderson 1972). This aesthetic categorization is often motivated looking at some of the main features of Banyumas music. While in central Java we find long and complex *gendhing* (musical pieces) in Banyumas we mainly find short-cycled form (*lancaran*). While central Javanese lyrics, *wangsalan*, constitute a prestigious heritage of high court literature, *parikan* and *wangsalan banyumasan* express the open and jovial spirit of Banyumas people.⁴

Notwithstanding, I argue that rather than an example of the dualism existing in court aesthetics, Banyumas vocal practice is more likely the testimony of a musical and cultural pluralism embedded in the Javanese territory as well as in

the whole Indonesian archipelago. *Sindhènan banyumasan* is only a small example of how local traditions can merge together, be transformed in time and undergo processes of transformation which resemble the epochal changes. It is also an example of how living traditions are constantly innovated and in dialogue with each other, and how “unity” is more in “similarity” and “pluralism” rather than in “diversity”.

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⁴ Like their dialect, in which the vowel “a” in final position of a word is not turned in “o” like it happens in central Javanese dialect, this proving an attitude of openness and frontality, according to Herusatoto (2008).

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