Musical Practice of the Javanese Gamelan

In 1827, in an account of the celebration of King George IV's birthday in the April 26th issue of the *Singapore Chronicle* held by the Resident of Singapore, at that time, Robert Fullerton, we are offered a description of the event where we come across an interesting excerpt:
On the 23rd the Hon: the Resident gave an entertainment in celebration of the anniversary of His Majesty's birth, unequalled perhaps in the annals of Singapore festivity. As night approached, the Government Hill was lighted up with innumerable lamps…spread mats in a square of considerable extent, surrounded by seats which received the visitors as they arrived whilst the area was occupied by a groupe of ***Javanese musicians and dancers****. The music of these performances was, to our ear at least, not unpleasing, but the dancing of the Javanese, if this could be considered a fair specimen of it, has little to recommend it….the sex of these professors formed matter of considerable speculation but whichever it may have been formed they formed a curious and characteristic groupe which occupied the attention of the company.*[1]

In a court in Singapore between 5th and 23rd March 1898, a Captain Crauford instituted a suit against a Mr. Wee Soon Chew under Section 290 of the Penal Code. The evidence he proposed to call would show that for the last few months defendant had been holding what was called a **Chinese wayang**, the loud beating of drums, and gongs or other metal instruments, and this had gone on almost every night until the summons was taken out. Further evidence in the proceedings would reveal that Captain Crauford liked music and did not object to the pianos that were played in the houses near. Corroborative evidence said the noise which had been going on for four months could be described as a continuous repetition of "**Kling-klong tan ching clok**" and so on. The Singapore Free Press this records that this description was accompanied by laughter although it does not mention the persons who laughed.

Eventually, it was discovered that the alleged noise and descriptions of "Chinese wayang" turned out to be the sounds of the **gamelang** [sic] by a band of **Javanese musicians**. Wee Soon Chew, the "Towkay Bali" liked it. In fact, when he felt sad, he had the music played. In his view, the big gong was essential to the music. Mahomet Yahya, President of the Malay Club, called upon as a witness against Towkay Bali, who had heard the noise personally said he did not like it. He also said that this music was made occasionally in the Club, but they made more noise as they had a big drum. Interestingly, Mahomet Yahya did not complain about the

Towkay's music. The Magistrate, in eventually dismissing the complaint, said he had to determine whether this was a public nuisance but in his judgment found the evidence so conflicting that he was not prepared to say it was so.[2]

Much of the description in the present context is drawn from Angela Lai's work on the practice of gamelan, in this case predominantly Javanese.[3] This form of music-making is now regaining popularity in Singapore through the activities of the Pachitan Gamelan at the Kampong Kembangan Community Club. Another gamelan exists at the LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts. Both are of the Javanese variety but the practice involves a balance between traditional repertoire and locally devised or composed ones. A substantial number of the older Malay community, who are of Javanese origin, recall active music-making by the gamelan in Singapore with events like wayang kulit (shadow puppet show), kuda kepang (horse dance), traditional dances and hikayat (folk-story narration). The establishment of the Pachitan Gamelan in 1990 helped to fuel this nostalgia, while significantly re-placing the gamelan in Singapore. A group of Javanese Singaporeans like Pak Nasan and Pak Ali Jafar have initiated the developing of skills for an ensemble, while the organisational infrastructure of the running of the ensemble has been facilitated by the Kampong Kembangan Community Club. There are at least four groups:

1. Kampong Kembangan Community Club Pachitan Gamelan Orchestra,
2. The Peoples Association Malay Orchestra,
3. Krida Taruna Cultural Troupe and
4. Singapore Kemuning Society.
5. LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts

The first two specialise in gamelan music-making while the other two also put up traditional Malay dances. Three of the four groups do not own a complete set. In any case, none of the four possess the full ideal set for the Central Javanese court. The set the Kampong Kembangan Community Club own cost S$35 000. Most of the money for the set is raised through sponsorship while the Singapore Kemuning Society is only capable of raising funds through performance revenues. The other reason is the lack of player facility in the other instruments. One group possesses the complete set but rebab, celempung, gender and slenthem were left untouched because there was no one with the skills to play them. The Singapore Kemuning Society possesses the kulintang, similar to the gambang except the kulintang has two sets of keys (like a harpsichord); a practice incorporating these instruments

found in the Minahassa region of North Sulawesi. The voice is an essential part of Central Javanese gamelan but it is not practised in the Singapore context. There is a perception of pesinden as *"old ladies with nothing but high, screeching voices and a big harido.*[4] Participants in the Singapore context who voiced such perceptions were in their 20s and 30s while the much older participants lamented their absence of sindhenan (female singing). The Kampung Kembangan group however incorporate the male singing (gerongan) while playing traditional Javanese music.

The Kampung Kembangan and Krida Cultural Troupe are tuned and practise the slendro equal-spaced 5-note system /pelog scale while the PA Malay Orchestra and Singapore Kemuning Society use the diatonic scale and their sets were custom-made in Bandung. The PA Malay Orchestra has experimented with various combinations of instruments.

Treatment of the instruments as **gong ageng** is the same; the instruments are regarded as sacred. However, the Javanese mode of sacred respect involves flowers and incense each Thursday night and bestowing a name. The Kampung Kembangan group does this one Thursday a month. The other groups make the offerings either before performance or on Prophet Mohammed's birthday.

Repertoire of gamelan music in Java consists of traditional classical pieces and new music for gamelan. The latter types have been created in the last four decades. Sutton (1993:47) refers to three categories; traditional; new creations, and; kontemporari/experimental. In the Singaporean context, traditional pieces are played but the contemporary repertoire include traditional Malay songs (Lenggang Kangkong, Dayong Sampan, Tequila and even (*xiao ren wu de xin sheng*) which have been transcribed onto the slendro or diatonic scale of the gamelan.

In performances in Singapore, gamelan supports kuda kepang but also a number of secular modern day rituals, which are devoid of the sacredness held in Java. There is no issue raised over the participation of females playing instruments other than the **gender;** an instrument reserved for Javanese gamelan if ever a female was involved besides singing. Additionally, **Uyon-uyon** are sponsored by either an individuals for entertainment or rituals. There is no concert tradition. In Singapore, the Kampong Kembangan Pachitan Gamelan Orchestra performed to a ticket-

paying audience at the PA Auditorium in 1992. Having said that, there was a recorded occasion of the Krida Taruna Cultural Troupe performing during a Malay wedding at the void deck of a flat in Clementi—beginning at 7.30 and ending by 10pm when the guests had left. It was observed that the same music was played continuously. Such a performance for half a day would cost $350 while performances for a full day would cost $600.

According to Angela Lai[5] most of the respondents indicated no desire to merely perform traditional Central Javanese gamelan but seemed content to adapt some aspects of the Javanese tradition and saw fit to attempt to infuse traditional Malay and even Chinese folktunes in their practice. While I hesitate to refer to this form of activity as Angela Lai does *to develop a style that is distinctively Singaporean,* I would suggest that the efforts to fuse other traditions are possibly efforts of accessibility to an audience that may be less informed of the intricacies and mannered conduct of the practice but are entertained by a sense of familiarity or enamoured of the skill of fusing in practice aspects of different traditions.

Such values seem to bear consonance with the objective of the Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts 1989:15, which states that:
Singapore has a multi-cultural legacy drawn from the rich traditions of its immigrant peoples. The traditional art-forms are still alive in varying degrees. This collective heritage has always been treasured. Our Government's policy has emphasised widespread interest an excellence in the pursuit of the arts in our multi-cultural society. It has also encouraged the appreciation of one community's culture by another.
The same Report maps out various strategies and recommendations for the realisation of a culturally vibrant society by 1999, including improving cultural facilities, increasing accessibility of arts in the community, and greater assistance to cultural groups. Which makes it all the more curious that gamelan practice has gained in popularity elsewhere around the world but seems not to have gained much of a foothold. Although the gamelan tradition practised in Singapore bears much resemblance to the Central Javanese Court tradition, one is not a clone of the other neither does it lay claim to mimic or emulate the former practice. Certain characteristics of the practice are held common; performers remove their shoes, refrain from stepping over the instruments, treat the instruments with care and respect and musical retained certain musical structures such as using the gongan and certain playing techniques. In terms of the repertoire, respondents in the practice indicate a preference for transcriptions of popular English and Chinese songs. It also helps when the diatonic system of tuning makes such cross-cultural attempts more amenable. The gamelan groups in Singapore are at least influenced

by commercial ventures such as private functions, opening ceremonies, exhibitions, weddings and public festivals. Respondents seem to treat gamelan music-making as a source of relaxation rather than a source of community development.

By this point in time, quite a few more Gamelan ensembles have already been initiated; one at the National University of Singapore and another at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and this does not include a few more schools which may have invested in this form of musical activity. Many questions still persist. If the practice of the Javanese musicians and dancers in 1827 correspond to the Javanese gamelan tradition, at which point was the dance superseded by the music? Moreover, there is a considerable gap, narratively speaking, in the practice of the Javanese gamelan between 1898 and the recent present. Was there ever a fading out of the practice or was it 'hidden' from discourse until more recent studies? Finally, the present context brings to bear the collision and convergences of tradition as evolving and tradition as repository of human conditions of their 'being in time'. Perhaps this is where scholarship may be most helpful in beginning to address these questions and problems.

REFERENCES

1 Singapore Chronicle Issue 80, April 26 1827.

2 Music Hath Charms, Singapore Free Press, 5 through 23 March 1898.

3 Angela Lai Aun Kay, Playing Diffferent Tunes: Gamelan Music in Singapore and Central Java, Academic Exercise, National University of Singapore, 1995, p.14.

4 Ibid., p.14.

5 Ibid., p.51.