Archaic Instruments in Modern West Java

*Archaic Instruments in Modern West Java: Bamboo Murmurs* explores how current residents of Bandung, Indonesia, have (re-)adopted bamboo musical instruments to forge meaningful bridges between their past and present—between traditional and modern values. Although it focuses specifically on Bandung, the cosmopolitan capital city of West Java, the book grapples with ongoing issues of global significance, including musical environmentalism, heavy metal music, the effects of first-world hegemonies on developing countries, and cultural “authenticity.” Bamboo music’s association with the Sundanese landscape, old agricultural ceremonies, and participatory music making, as well as its adaptability to modern society, make it a fertile site for an ecomusicological study.

**Henry Spiller** is Professor in the Department of Music at University of California, Davis and the author of several books, including *FOCUS: Gamelan Music of Indonesia.*
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Archaic Instruments in Modern West Java
Bamboo Murmurs
*Henry Spiller*

Musical Collaboration Between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous People in Australia
Exchanges in The Third Space
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Archaic Instruments in Modern West Java
Bamboo Murmurs

Henry Spiller
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Notes on Names and Orthography

This book cites consultants and texts whose original language was English, Dutch, Indonesian, or Sundanese. Although English and Dutch orthographies have undergone various reforms and modifications over the decades, they do not require explanation here. Indonesian and Sundanese approaches to orthography, however, are sometimes confusing for readers of English and other European languages, as are the conventions of personal names and appellations.

Regarding spelling: it is customary to convey both Indonesian and Sundanese languages using the Roman alphabet, although in the past, Sundanese intellectuals have used other systems as well (e.g., aksara Sunda and the Arabic alphabet). In the current system, adopted in 1972, most consonants and vowels are pronounced as in Spanish or Italian; the exception is that the letter ‘c’ is always pronounced ‘ch.’ The vowel ‘e’ can be pronounced in a number of ways: some sources differentiate ‘è,’ ‘e,’ and ‘é’ while others provide no diacritical marks and assume that readers will know which vowel to pronounce.

Under Dutch colonial control, the official spelling for Indonesian followed Dutch-language conventions: ‘oe’ was pronounced as ‘u,’ ‘j’ was pronounced as ‘y,’ ‘tj’ as ‘ch,’ and ‘dj’ as ‘j’; it is important to note the date of publications in Indonesian or Sundanese to determine proper pronunciation. Official changes in orthography did not necessarily apply to personal names, however, and many individuals still spell their names using the old Dutch orthography. It is my understanding that Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno, for example, preferred to cast off the Dutch spelling of his name (“Soekarno”), while Indonesia’s second president, Soeharto, preferred the conservative connotations (if not necessarily the Dutch associations!) of the ‘oe’ spelling. It is my policy to honor individuals’ personal preferences when spelling their names; when directly quoting other sources, however, I use the original spelling.

Beyond spelling, Indonesian and Sundanese personal names present a variety of additional challenges to the “given-name surname” conventions of Europe and North America. (I am always amused, when reading very
short journalistic accounts of current events in Indonesia, by the proportion of the total verbiage that is devoted to quoting eye-witnesses: “So-and-so, who like many Indonesians goes by only one name, reports that …”)

Most Sundanese individuals use at least two names, but these do not necessarily represent the exact equivalents of given names and surnames. Sundanese parents typically give their children a formal name (or several) at birth. People with aristocratic roots often bestow flowery, Sanskrit-derived names. But these are rarely used. Instead, individuals are commonly addressed throughout their lives by a nickname, which may or may not be derived from their formal name.

More importantly: in everyday discourse, people take care to define their relationships with the individuals they address by prefacing their name—usually their most familiar name—with an appropriate honorific. It is instructive to interpret these conventions by examining how my interlocutors address me in different contexts. During my field work, I was introduced as Om ("[Dutch] Uncle") Henry to the young people in my karinding class, which consisted of teenage boys (see Chapter 4); presumably, my introducers wanted to minimize any status difference between me and my fellow karinding acolytes, despite our obvious age and status difference. University students, however, addressed me as “Prof Henry” (as far as I can tell, Prof is a relatively new honorific), to acknowledge my academic status. Most other people called me “Pa Henry”—“Pa” (short for “bapa” [father]), recognizing my advanced age. Notable exceptions: fellow academics, even much younger ones, typically called me “Kang Henry” (“kang” is an honorific that literally means “elder brother,” but actually implies a relationship of equals [comparable to “Mas” in Central Java]); by using this title, these individuals respectfully assert their equal status.

In this book, I sometimes include (hopefully) appropriate honorifics when discussing my interlocutors. For the most part, however, it is more expeditious (if not necessarily comfortable) to provide only their familiar name, without any honorific; in doing so, I intend no disrespect. When citing published works by Indonesian authors, I treat Indonesian names as any Western bibliographer would—as if the final name in their moniker were the surname by which the source is alphabetized.

Acknowledgments

Much of the first-hand information for this study was gathered during five months of field work in Bandung (March–August 2013) conducted with the support of a Fulbright Senior Scholar grant. I am grateful not only to the Fulbright commission for their financial support, but to the American Indonesian Exchange Foundation (AMINEF) for their practical support in Indonesia. The AMINEF staff in Jakarta—executive director Michael McCoy, program officers Ceacelia Dewitha, M. Rizqi Arifuddin, Astrid Lim, and especially Nellie Paliama—all deserve my special thanks.
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While in Bandung in 2013, my fieldwork focused on three musical organizations pursuing different approaches to bamboo music: (1) Angklung Web Institute (whose acronym, “AWI,” is the Sundanese word for bamboo), an independent organization dedicated to the promulgation of diatonic angklung music using the tools and methods of the internet age; (2) Galengan Sora Awi, a neighborhood-based group of musicians who play a variety of traditional Sundanese musical styles on bamboo instruments of their own invention; and (3) Karinding Attack, a group of heavy metal musicians who play their metal-inspired compositions on obsolete bamboo instruments adapted for their purposes. I also investigated related organizations, such as the famous Saung Angklung Udjo (SAU), which presents daily traditional and modern angklung performances to tourists, and the newly formed bamboo music program at ISBI, as well as influential individuals in the Sundanese bamboo scene, including Endo Suanda and Asep Nata.

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Introduction

From a global perspective, Indonesian music is all but synonymous with gamelan, the bronze-dominated percussion orchestras from Java and Bali. Since their initial appearances in the Western world at the late nineteenth-century great world expositions, awareness of gamelan has spread far beyond Indonesia. But there is another strain of musical traditions in Indonesia which has attracted less attention from international audiences and scholars, even though it involves far more people: musical practices that make use of bamboo. In West Java, bamboo music’s long association with a distinctly Sundanese landscape, with pre-modern agricultural ceremonies, and with the aesthetics of participatory music making, as well as its adaptability to modern West Javanese society, make it a fertile site for investigating how musical meaning commingles with environment and culture.

This book focuses on a very specific time (the present) and place (Bandung, the cosmopolitan capital city of Indonesia’s West Java province and the center of Sundanese culture). The pressing issues that modern residents of Bandung face, however—climate change and environmental crises, the continuing effects of first-world hegemonies on developing countries, cultural “authenticity” and ownership, and even the effects of UNESCO’s “Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage”—are widespread. An understanding how the residents of Bandung deploy bamboo music-making to respond to these globally pressing issues is relevant all over the planet.

Bamboo

Bamboo grows like a weed in the warm, wet climate of West Java. Culms of bamboo shoot up in dense clumps; when a breeze blows, they sway gracefully together in the wind to create a pleasing visual effect. Because the hollow stalks are sonorous, any movement also creates a melodious murmuring. The Sundanese people who dominate West Java manifest these qualities in the proverb that lends this book its title metaphor: “kawas awi sumear di pasir”—“like bamboo murmuring on the hill.” According to some, this aphorism adjures individuals to create harmony by working
closely with their neighbors; in any case, it drives home the notion that bamboo, the landscape, and Sundanese values are inextricably intertwined (Rusnandar 2009).

Nadia Bystriakova et al. estimate that there are nearly 1,000 species of bamboo in the entire Asia-Pacific region, with more that 1,500 documented uses (2003a, 7–8). In Southeast Asia, “most significant uses … are for building material, for making various types of baskets, … as a vegetable … as a source of raw material for making paper, for musical instruments and handicrafts” (Dransfield and Widjaja 1995, 19). Indonesia is home to a relatively modest number of indigenous bamboo species—fifty-six, according to Bystriakova et al. (2003a,10)—supplemented by a large number of imported species. There is no question that bamboo is an important resource for Indonesians—and for Sundanese.

Herry Dim provides a list of more than forty uniquely Sundanese bamboo items that continue to be useful in everyday life (2017). Marah Maradjo et al. (1976, 10–27) describe a few species of bamboo that have proven to be especially useful in West Java in making such items. Some varieties, for example, bambu talang (Schistostachyum brachycladium, called awi buluh in Sundanese) and bambu perling, with thin walls that are easy to split, are especially good for fine weaving (for walls, baskets, and kitchen implements). Bambu betung (Dendrocalamus asper) and bambu gombong (Gigantochloa verticillate) are large and strong and make excellent building material.

Not surprisingly, given bamboo’s sonorous qualities and ready availability, the sounds of bamboo have been a fundamental source for Sundanese music for centuries. Maradjo et al. also describe some bamboo varieties that are especially good for making musical instruments. Bambu tamiang (Schistostachyum blumei; called awi tamiang or awi bunan in Sundanese), with its thin walls and long segments (up to one meter) between nodes, is suitable for making suling (bamboo flutes; see Chapters 1 and 5) and other instruments. Bambu ater (Gigantochloa atter, called awi temen in Sundanese) and bambu hitam (Gigantochloa atroviolacea, awi hideung in Sundanese), with relatively large diameters (up to 13 cm) are useful for making percussion instruments, such as angklung (see Chapters 1 and 2), calung, and gambang (see Chapter 3).1

Bamboo music’s intimate connections with the Sundanese landscape and Sundanese culture extend well beyond the sounds that bamboo can make, however. Pre-modern agricultural ceremonies to honor the rice goddess, Nyi Pohaci (also known as Dewi Sri), typically featured bamboo rattles called angklung. Participants, each playing a single rattle, performed intricately interlocking parts—thus rooting an aesthetic manifestation of the kind of close cooperation that brought success to their agricultural season in bamboo technology (see Chapter 1). Traditional bamboo music, then, united the aesthetics of musical style with aspects of the physical environment, available materials and technologies, and principles of social interaction to create complex, multifaceted, and rich human experience.
In the twentieth century, Indonesians, like other colonial subjects, aligned themselves with modern Europeans by distancing themselves from their own Asian past either by erasing local history completely or finding ways to reconceive the past in ways consistent with modern European values. The so-called “New Order” government of Indonesia’s authoritarian second president, Soeharto (1966–1998), promoted what Jeremy Wallach calls a “‘top-down’ culture of timidity, fear, and docility.” The fall of Soeharto, in 1998, ushered in the era of reformasi (reformation), in which the “top-down” timidity was rapidly replaced by a “cacophony of unruly voices competing in a thriving democratic public sphere” (Wallach 2005, 17).

At least some of those unruly voices are echoes of Sundanese ancestors. In a wide-ranging essay, the Indonesian journalist Herry Dim identifies many modern problems that can be mitigated by paying attention to Sundanese ancestors’ experiences (“pengalaman leluhur”) with bamboo (Dim 2017). He points out that traditional rice growing practices relied on the presence of a small bamboo forest, called geger, in or near the rice fields, which complemented the intensive cultivation of rice by providing a habitat for various animals that could control the pest population and foliage that could absorb and store water (Dim 2017). Traditional knowledge of bamboo and its roles in premodern Sundanese life, Dim argues, can speak to contemporary environmental concerns as well as provide potential solutions to socio-economic problems (Dim 2017).

Various bottom-up approaches to music, including locally inflected underground metal scenes, also contributed to the cacophony Wallach describes. Some Sundanese musicians also turned their eyes and ears to bamboo for inspiration. Embracing bamboo is a way to reconfirm a relationship of Sundanese culture to the landscape of West Java. The musical qualities of bamboo recall a sense of Sundaneseness, even among the thoroughly modern residents of Bandung in the reformasi period.

Since the beginning of reformasi, one hears more and more bamboo murmurs throughout West Java’s capital city. Genteel groups of middle-class Indonesians perform arrangements of international easy-listening standards on angklung padaeng (diatonically tuned choirs of bamboo rattles). A multi-generation group of musicians from a local neighborhood plays well-known traditional songs on homemade bamboo xylophones, usually for environmentally themed events. Death metal rockers adapt their underground music to rural bamboo instruments, such as karinding (mouth-resonated lamellophone) and celempung (idiochord tube zither). These and other bamboo music activities represent a dramatic about-face for the predominantly ethnic Sundanese residents of Bandung, who until recently eschewed bamboo music as irrelevant to modern life.

About Bandung, West Java, and Indonesia

Like every locale, Bandung represents a unique and complicated nexus of geographies, histories, natural resources, and human relationships. The city
occupies a high-elevation river basin (768 m), surrounded by high volcanic 
peaks, in the interior of the western part of the island of Java. Its relatively 
cool climate (cool by Indonesian standards, anyway) and its natural defens-
bility (provided by the high mountains) made it attractive as a new capital 
for the Dutch colonial administration in the early twentieth century. But 
plans to move the capital from Batavia (modern-day Jakarta) were derailed 
by the Great Depression (pc, Budi Supardiman, May 7, 2013), then World 
War II, and finally Indonesian independence. (It’s interesting to note that 
twenty-first-century plans are proceeding to move the capital of Indonesia, 
this time to Kalimantan [Westfall 2022].)

That cool climate also made Bandung a popular vacation destination 
for Dutch expatriates living on Java in the first part of the twentieth cen-
tury, and for Indonesian tourists after independence. The burgeoning 
art gallery and café scene in the city’s northern Dago neighborhood, the 
thriving fashion and outlet store culture of the Cipaganti area (known 
as “jeans street,” which also features the Ciwalk open-air mall), and 
the massive shopping center, Paris van Java (PVJ), are testaments to 
Bandung’s ongoing appeal for visitors from other parts of Indonesia 
and beyond (the location of these landmarks are visible on the map in 
Figure 3.1 in Chapter 3).

Although Bandung is a relatively new city (see Chapter 4), and emi-
nently cosmopolitan, it is also thoroughly Sundanese. “Sundanese” refers 
to the ethnic identity of most of the region’s original inhabitants, who 
speak a language also called Sundanese. The Sundanese are the second 
largest ethnic group in modern-day Indonesia (after the Javanese); about 
40 million people speak Sundanese as their first (or at least as a heritage) 
language.

English-language accounts of Sundanese culture sometimes use the term 
“Sunda” as a place name. In the Sundanese language, however, Sunda is not 
a proper name for a geographic area, but rather an adjective that describes 
the culture of communities living in the interior, high-elevation parts of 
western Java (Eringa 1984, 724). Thus, urang Sunda means “Sundanese 
people,” and basa Sunda means “Sundanese language.” Historical names for 
the region—Parahyangan, Priangan, Preanger, Pasundan—are rarely used 
in modern geographical discourse. Although the present-day Indonesian 
province of Jawa Barat (West Java) is roughly coterminous with some of 
these historical territories, it does not precisely correspond to something 
that could be characterized as a Sundanese region.

Modern Sundanese look back nostalgically to the medieval Pajajaran 
kingsdom as the foundation of Sundanese culture. As Chapter 1 will 
relate in detail, however, Pajajaran fell to Javanese conquest in the six-
teenth century, and the Sundanese homeland has endured governance 
by outside authorities—Javanese, Dutch, and finally Indonesian—ever 
since. Typically, these outside authorities relied on the native Sundanese 
aristocracy—the menak—to govern, which helped to develop and maintain 
a unique Sundanese culture over the centuries.
Today, Bandung is the provincial capital and the center of regional government for West Java, which is one of thirty-four provinces in the modern Republik Indonesia (Republic of Indonesia). The boundaries of modern Indonesia are roughly the same as those of the Dutch colony called Nederlands-Indië (in English, Dutch [East] Indies), as consolidated in the twentieth century. It is anachronistic, of course, to use terms such as Indonesia or West Java when discussing matters that predate Indonesian independence in 1945; it is often more expedient, however, than expecting readers to memorize the various historically precise place names.

Bandung and Me

For me, the year 2021 (as I write these words) marks four decades of engagement with the Sundanese people, culture, and performing arts of Bandung. I first became aware of Bandung when I happened into the Sundanese gamelan ensemble course at University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1976. My gamelan teacher, Undang Sumarna, was a Bandung native and spoke often of the city and the various artistic activities that went on there. At the time, like many other Americans, I was completely unaware of the existence of a city called Bandung, even though, with a population of 1,452,000 (in 1980), Bandung ranked as the 125th largest city in the world. Indeed, I was only dimly aware of Indonesia, which was the world's fifth most populous nation at the time (after the breakup of the Soviet Union ten year later, it moved into fourth place).

When I expressed an interest in studying Sundanese music and dance in Bandung, Pa Undang put me in contact with Enoch Atmadibrata (1927–2011), a luminary in the Bandung arts scene who, among many other activities (see Rosidi 2003, 150), operated a government-supported project to promote Sundanese performing arts (Proyek Penunjang Peningkatan Kebudayaan Nasional Daerah Jawa Barat) and who had provided support for other Americans hoping to learn about Sundanese music and dance in Bandung. I arrived in Bandung for the first time in April of 1981 (along with fellow student and traveler, Michael Ewing, now Associate Professor of Indonesian at the University of Melbourne).

It is unlikely I would have been able to navigate Bandung, or even find evidence of its elusive arts scene, without the help of Pa Enoch and the various individuals to whom he introduced me: in particular, the dancer Abay Subardja and his family (who arranged for a room and board for me and Michael Ewing), and the dalang (puppet master) and musician Otong Rasta, who spent three long afternoons each week tutoring me in gamelan and drumming.

Before my trip, another American who was under the wing of Pa Enoch sent me a copious list of tips about how to cope with everyday activities in Bandung, compiled during a two-year stay in the city, including medical care, personal safety, food, drinking water, local businesses, the immigration office, and money changing. I had rarely given much thought to such