

THE
KECAK
AND CULTURAL
TOURISM ON BALI

KENDRA STEPPUTAT



The Kecak and Cultural Tourism on Bali

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The Kecak and Cultural Tourism on Bali
Kendra Stepputat

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 UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER PRESS

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Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Note to the Reader	ix
Introduction	1
Part 1: The Present	
1 Kecak: The Music	13
Rhythmic Structures: Juru Klempung, Juru Gending (First Part), Pola Cak • Intermission: Scales in Kecak • Melodic Elements: Juru Gending (Second Part), Juru Tembang, and Pangalang • The Lead: Juru Tarek and Dalang • Use of Stage Space by the Jurus and Pengecaks	
2 Kecak: The Dance	44
Movements of the Pengecak Group • Genre Influences on the Solo Characters' Movements • Balinese Dance Characterization: <i>Halus</i> , <i>Keras</i> , and <i>Kasar</i> • The Solo Characters' Individual Dance Styles • Choreomusical Interrelations between Pengecaks and Soloists in Music and Dance	
3 Kecak: The Drama	86
<i>Ramayana kakawin</i> • Ramayana Adaptations in Balinese Performing Arts • The Kecak Compromise: Stage Design, Story, Entrances • The <i>Kecak Ramayana</i> • “Kepandung Sita” Kecak Performance	
4 The Social Organization of Kecak	125
Aims and Structures of Kecak Organizations and Groups • The Members of a Kecak Group • Teaching a Kecak Group • Performance Quality and Performance Quantity	
5 Kecak: The Tourist Performance	148
The Study of Tourism and Culture • The Development of Cultural Tourism on Bali • Kecak in Cultural Tourism • Tourists' Perspectives • The Authenticity Issue • Some Concluding Remarks on Kecak in Tourism	

Part 2: The History

- 6 From Sanghyang Dedari to Kecak 195
Ritual Structures • Musical Structures • Dance Structures • Sanghyang Dedari in the Early Twenty-First Century • Performing Sanghyang Dedari on Film and on Stage • Sanghyang Dedari in Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century
- 7 The First Kecak 237
1931: Kecak in *Insel der Dämonen?* • 1926 to 1931: Changes in Setting, Choreography, and Music • Related Kecak Experiments in the 1920s and 1930s: *Janger* • 1935: Kecak Documented by Vicki Baum • Villages and Organizations: Bedulu and Bona • Balinese Artists: I Wayan Limbak and I Nengah Mudarya • Expatriates: Katharane Mershon and Walter Spies • Colonial Power Structures • Who Created the Kecak?
- 8 Almost a Century of Kecak 286
1930s–1940s: Kecak Becomes a Tourist Attraction • Development in Bona and Bedulu • Early Tourists’ Conceptions of the Kecak • During and after the Second World War: The Kecak Deadlocked • After the Coup d’État and Political Persecution: Kecak Standardization • The Early Twenty-First Century: The Bali Bombings • An Alternative Kecak Approach: *Kecak Kreasi* • Some Concluding Remarks: Does the Kecak Have a Future?

Appendices:

1. Kecak dan Wisata Budaya di Bali (Indonesian Summary by I Wayan Sudirana) 331
2. Kecak Groups of Bali in 2000–2001 (Badung and Gianyar) 335
3. Facsimile of a Letter from Walter Spies to Leo Spies, 1932 343
- Glossary 351
- Bibliography 359
- Index 371

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To all kecak performers—hess hess byuk sirrrr!

Note to the Reader

Accompanying film and audio material is available under the following links:

Kecak performance “Kepandung Sita” by Sekaha Cak Puspita Jaya of Blahkiuh under the leadership of Ida Bagus Nyoman Mas. Filmed at Uma Dewi stage, Kesiman, May 7, 2001. <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/detail/o:115655>.

Presentation of kecak music and movement patterns by Sekaha Cak Puspita Jaya of Blahkiuh under the leadership of Ida Bagus Nyoman Mas, filmed in Blahkiuh, 2001. <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/o:115667>.

Compilation of the kecak performance “Rebat” by Sanggar Paripurna of Bona under the leadership of I Made Sidia. Filmed at the Arts Center in Denpasar, June 19, 2010. <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/detail/o:115656>.

Compilation of the kecak performance “Sunda & Upasunda—An Evening of Legend and Dance,” by students and staff of ISI Denpasar under the leadership of I Wayan Dibia. Filmed in Nusa Dua, April 27, 2001. <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/detail/o:115657>.

Tauern wax cylinder 5, sanghyang melody. Unknown artists, unknown place, Bali, Indonesia. Recorded by Odo Deodatius von Tauern, 1911. Digitized recording kindly provided by Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv (VII W 5456). <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/o:116531>.

Dalsheim wax cylinder 1, *gending sanghyang*. Unknown artists, Bedulu, Bali, Indonesia. Recorded by Dr. Friedrich Dalsheim, 1932. Digitized recording kindly provided by Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv (VII W 1644). <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/o:116530>.

Dalsheim wax cylinder 2, *gending sanghyang*. Unknown artists, Bedulu, Bali, Indonesia. Recorded by Dr. Friedrich Dalsheim, 1932. Digitized recording kindly provided by Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv (VII W 1645). <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/o:116532>.

Dalsheim wax cylinder 3, cak group. Unknown artists, Bedulu, Bali, Indonesia. Recorded by Dr. Friedrich Dalsheim, 1932. Digitized recording kindly provided by Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv (VII W 1646). <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/o:116533>.

Kunst wax cylinder 1, *gending sanghyang dedari*. Unknown artist, Celuk, Sukawati, Bali, Indonesia. Recorded by Dr. Jaap Kunst, August 3, 1925. Digitized recording kindly provided by Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv (VII W 2967). <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/o:116534>.

Kunst wax cylinder 2, *gending sanghyang dedari* (continued). Unknown artist, Celuk, Sukawati, Bali, Indonesia. Recorded by Dr. Jaap Kunst, August 3, 1925. Digitized recording kindly provided by Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv (VII W 2968). <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/o:116535>.

Kunst wax cylinder 3, *gending sanghyang dedari* (continued). Unknown artist, Celuk, Sukawati, Bali, Indonesia. Recorded by Dr. Jaap Kunst, August 3, 1925. Digitized recording kindly provided by Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv (VII W 2969). <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/o:116536>.

Kunst wax cylinder 4, sanghyang dedari cak group. Unknown artists, Celuk, Sukawati, Bali, Indonesia. Recorded by Dr. Jaap Kunst, August 3, 1925. Digitized recording kindly provided by Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv (VII W 2970). <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/o:116537>.

Kunst wax cylinder 5, sanghyang dedari cak group (continued). Unknown artists, Celuk, Sukawati, Bali, Indonesia. Recorded by Dr. Jaap Kunst, August 3, 1925. Digitized recording kindly provided by Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv (VII W 2971). <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/view/o:116538>.

Kunst wax cylinder 6, sanghyang dedari cak group (continued). Unknown artists, Celuk, Sukawati, Bali, Indonesia. Recorded by Dr. Jaap Kunst, August 3, 1925. Digitized recording kindly provided by Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv (VII W 2972). <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/view/o:116539>.

Introduction

In the early evening hours of another hot and humid day on Bali, I enter the outer temple courtyard in the twilight and find a seat on one of the plastic garden chairs arranged on three sides of an open space. The only illumination is from a candelabra-like lamp with several coconut oil flames in the center of the stage, casting a warm, unstable light on the scene. The audience murmurs, readies their cameras, tries to read a leaflet in the dim light, puts on mosquito spray.

Then, the first sounds are heard—“caaaak” followed by “cak cak cak . . .”—explosive, short calls by a large group of men, structured, complex. The performers are not yet visible, but their voices come from behind the split-gate temple entrance. Once the rhythms become steady, the men finally appear through the central temple gates, one after the other, until maybe one hundred Balinese men of all ages have made their way onto the stage. They hold their arms and hands lifted high above their heads and shake them rapidly while they continue their fast, interlocking “cak” calls. The men form several concentric circles around the central lamp and sit down cross-legged. The central illumination casts seemingly more shadows than light onto the dancers’ faces and bare torsos, giving the scene a mystical atmosphere. After a short break in which the dancers adjust their seating positions, the “cak” calls start again with great intensity, loud and fast. Suddenly, the dancers lift their arms up into the air simultaneously, their hands shaking, the rapid movements enhanced by the reflections of the coconut oil flames—the *kecak* has begun.

When I first witnessed such a scene, I was overwhelmed by the visual and acoustic impact the *kecak* had on me. It was unlike anything I had seen before and left me dazzled. I wished to understand the musical structures, to learn more about the story, and to be able to appreciate the dance and theatrical parts beyond the strange amazement of this first encounter. At the site, I did not notice any of the other tourists and ignored their flashlights. I knew nothing about the multifaceted history of this amazing dramatic dance performance. Upon my return home to Germany, I realized that Bali had gotten into my system and that I wanted to go back and explore more. Two

years later, I embarked on a year's stay on Bali during which I would study dance on a Dharmasiswa grant at the ISI (Institut Seni Indonesia, Institute for Indonesian Arts) in Denpasar (then called STSI, Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia, High School for Indonesian Arts), take gamelan lessons, and learn everything I could about the kecak.

I quickly learned that the kecak is one of the most popular Balinese dances performed for tourists. About twenty different groups in the south of Bali (Badung and Gianyar regencies) perform it regularly on different stages, in hotels, or in outer temple courtyards of the groups' villages. Compared to other Balinese dramatic dance performances, the most prominent feature is the lack of accompaniment by gamelan music; all sounds are made by the large group of men called *pengecak*.¹ Musicians and dancers in one, they vocally and physically accompany dance soloists who portray main characters from the Indian epics *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*. The most common plot in kecak is an abbreviated version of the *Ramayana* that focuses on the theme of the abduction of Sita ("Kepandung Sita"). This story centers on prince Rama, his wife Sita, and his younger brother Laksamana. While the three are in exile, Sita is abducted by the demon king Rahwana. In Rama's pursuit to free his wife, he finds important allies like Hanoman, the monkey general, Sugriwa, king of the monkeys, and Garuda, king of the birds. The *Ramayana* version portrayed in a kecak ends with a battle between Rama and his allies—including an army of monkeys—and Rahwana's demon army, led by Rahwana's son Meganada. The protagonist party wins, Rahwana and Meganada are killed, and Rama and Sita are happily reunited.

This was the first element that caught my attention: most groups perform "Kepandung Sita," and even more so, nearly identically. I expected to find reasons for this standardization in the historical development of the genre.

When I started to investigate the history of kecak, a seemingly contradictory aspect of this tourist performance became apparent; the kecak dance is rooted in the ritual, exorcist trance dance *sanghyang dedari*, yet the way it has been performed since the late 1930s has no connection to any ritual; it is a secular performing art. Then again, advertisements for kecak actively make use of the terms "the sacred," "ritualistic," and "trance." When I investigated

1 Throughout the book I use current standard transliteration of Balinese in Latin characters. Accordingly, *pengecak* should be written *pangepcak*. Because in any publication on kecak the term is written *pengecak*, I make this exemption from Balinese standard spelling and in this case stick with the older prefix "peng-."

this contradiction more deeply, I repeatedly encountered the name of Walter Spies, a German living on Bali between 1927 and 1942, who is credited with having “invented” kecak in the 1930s together with Balinese dancer I Wayan Limbak. That two people, one European expatriate and one local artist, could single-handedly invent and establish a genre that would become such a prominent dramatic dance seemed rather strange. An investigation into colonial social structures and the situation of the performing arts under Dutch rule, in particular the relations between prominent expatriates and Balinese performers, was essential.

My next surprise was that almost as soon as the kecak came into being, it became an icon for Balinese performing arts and is still perceived as such by tourists or people outside Bali interested in Balinese performing arts or culture in general. Balinese audiences, on the other hand, do not take any interest in the standardized kecak performance “Kepandung Sita.” Indeed, one day Eka, the ten-year-old daughter of the family I was staying with on Bali at that time, shyly asked if she could come with me to one of these kecak performances because she had never seen one and wanted to know what was so interesting about it. I took her to a tourist performance at the Uma Dewi stage in Denpasar, and we had a great evening, loudly discussing the Ramayana characters and commenting on the exciting plot as is done at any Balinese dramatic performance. In this case, people from the tourist audience started throwing angry glances in our direction and shushing us—so we continued our conversations in a whisper. This incident made it clear that a kecak performance for tourists is very much removed from a dramatic dance performance at a Balinese social, ritual, or religious event. That a dramatic dance can be such a prominent cultural representative without the backing of a local audience is unusual.

Yet, it soon dawned on me that to say kecak performances are outside the Balinese performing arts tradition would be far from the truth. Performing for tourists has a long tradition on Bali, and whole communities are involved in the organization and presentation of such performances. The audience is foreign, but the performance context is certainly Balinese. I needed to investigate the current social network structures of kecak performances and delve into the different perspectives tourists and kecak groups have on these circumstances.

The questions piled up and I wanted to find answers, first by looking into secondary sources with a focus on kecak. Perhaps I was a little naïve to think that a dance as prominent and seemingly important within Balinese culture as the kecak must have been covered in ethnomusicological or

ethnochoreological literature. Yet, this without a doubt prominent dramatic dance genre on Bali had made it onto six pages in Spies and deZoete,² two pages in Bandem and deBoer in the category “Epilogue: Some Performances for Tourists,”³ and another two pages and one paragraph in Dibia and Ballinger.⁴ Other works about Balinese culture in general include basic information, but the few facts mentioned in connection with kecak usually keep being repeated.⁵ Some articles or chapters focus on particular aspects of the use or function of kecak. McKean for instance explores differing symbolic meanings of kecak in its function as ritual or as tourist performance, Bakan analyzes the use of kecak sounds in Italian film productions, and Lim focuses on the colonial encounter between the gay “white man” and the “native boy” as a driving force behind kecak.⁶

When I became personally acquainted with Wayan Dibia, the dancer, choreographer, and teacher at ISI Denpasar and specialist on kecak in 2000, he told me about his book on the genre.⁷ Though this is the only book that focuses solely on kecak as a musical genre and includes many facets of the dance, including historical as well as contextual issues, in its briefness it raises more questions than it answers. These questions were the catalyst for me to start exploring the kecak in the field—and start working more with Dibia, who became one of my main interlocutors.

Since secondary sources were limited, the logical move was to explore primary sources. I spent considerable time in archives searching for substantial historical data: letters, films, and sound recordings. Soon an important connection became apparent: the correspondence between Walter Spies and ethnomusicologist Jaap Kunst. Traces of their exchange could be found in many places and collecting them all added more and more pieces to the puzzle of how the exorcist trance dance sanghyang dedari developed into early kecak and who was involved at what stage. The archives I worked with in the Netherlands are the Walter Spies Collection hosted at the Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden and the Jaap Kunst collection at the

2 Spies and deZoete, *Dance and Drama in Bali*, 80–85.

3 Bandem and deBoer, *Kaja and Kelod*, 146–47.

4 Dibia and Ballinger, *Balinese Dance, Drama and Music*, 92–93, 100–101.

5 E.g., Rhodius and Darling, *Walter Spies and Balinese Art*, 37; also Picard, *Cultural Tourism and Touristic Culture*, 150.

6 McKean, “From Purity to Pollution?”; Bakan, “Italian Cinema and the Balinese Sound of Greek Tragedy”; Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens*, 41–90.

7 Dibia, *Kecak*.

Bibliotheek van de Universiteit van Amsterdam, which contains Kunst's correspondence during his years in Indonesia. The archives of the KITLV (Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal, Land- en Volkenkunde, today the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies at Leiden) and the KIT (Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen, Amsterdam) provided most of the visual material, while the Filmmuseum Amsterdam (now Eye) provided historical film material. In Germany, the Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv kindly provided three historical wax cylinder collections of Balinese music (Odo Deodatus Tauern 1912, Jaap Kunst 1924, and Friedrich Dalsheim 1932), which I was able to take to Bali for a restudy with Balinese specialists. The Leo and Walter Spies Archiv in Berlin granted access to further correspondence by Walter Spies.

The more the historical audio, visual, and written sources came together, the more it became obvious that much that had previously been published about the *kecak* was misleading, or at least greatly lacking in precision. Without having initially planned to do so, I found myself reconstructing the genesis of the *kecak* in the 1930s. Fortunately, the state of the source material from the 1920s and 1930s is quite good. With the combined material provided by the archives, I believe it is possible to coherently describe and explain the development of the *kecak* as an independent performing arts genre out of the ritual trance dance *sanghyang dedari*. I am well aware of the danger of misinterpreting historical sources. Faulty interpretations can easily arise when background information about a primary source is ignored, for example the political intentions of the author or the academic standards and ideologies of a certain time period. I have tried to include all additional information on the sources in order to provide as complete a picture as possible. I leave it to the reader to follow my interpretation of these sources or to develop another perspective on the material.

Whereas the 1930s are well documented, the situation is much less satisfactory for the period from the 1940s on due to the political circumstances: the Second World War and the subsequent struggle for independence in Indonesia were socially and politically very instable times. Performing arts for tourists cannot be nurtured under circumstances where the local community's own daily survival is not guaranteed. Expatriates who—thanks to their privileged social standing—might have continued to document performing arts on Bali had mostly left the country, unwillingly or willingly, in the course of the decolonization process. Reports from local contemporary witnesses in the 1950s and 1960s constitute a further important source, yet I must confess that I did not delve deeply enough into these during my

initial fieldwork. One obstacle I ran into when asking older Balinese about the 1950s and 1960s was that there was first a civil war on Bali throughout the decolonization process and then mass killings after the coup d'état in 1965. Such times tend to be remembered poorly or even actively banished from memory. Altogether, the lack of information about those years comes as no surprise and clearly stems from the political and social circumstances on Bali at the time.

In contrast to the historical reconstruction, my research into the state of the *kecak* at the turn of twenty-first century was mainly based on fieldwork and participant observation. As I was unable to actively perform in *kecak* tourist performances, I had to “participate” in a different way. This included learning classical Balinese dance (*kebyar* and *legong*) and playing gamelan (*gong kebyar*, *gamelan beleganjur*, *gender wayang*) as well as privately learning *kecak* patterns and taking part in *kecak* workshops aimed at an international audience. While my active immersion into Balinese culture was guided by concepts elaborated on by Mantle Hood and Bruno Nettl,⁸ I was also inspired by the writings of John Blacking, who pointed out that it is necessary to view more than one performance of a kind in order to understand the social impacts as well as the music itself: “Analysis [...] must focus on the performance situation, and in particular on variations between one performance situation and another.”⁹ During my research, I was a member of the audience of as many *kecak* performances as possible, in different places and of different groups, in the attempt to understand what was “essential” in *kecak*.¹⁰ I witnessed and filmed all twenty *kecak* groups performing on Bali at that time; I visited some of them more than once. All of these groups were from Gianyar and Badung in the south of Bali. After watching at least ten different performances, I started to develop an idea of what the “essence” of *kecak* is: options for how it is performed, what can be varied and what must be included, to what extent the sound and movement elements in what is called a *kecak* can differ, in short, what makes the performance of *kecak* a *kecak* performance. By watching hundreds of *kecak* performances over the years and getting involved with *kecak* in workshops, I also learned to distinguish high quality performances from routine ones and to allow myself to judge a performance based on aesthetics and technical execution.

8 Hood, *The Ethnomusicologist*; Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology*.

9 Blacking, “The Study of Man as Music Maker,” 11.

10 Blacking, 13.

The gathered material; the outcomes of formal interviews with representatives of all twenty kecak groups as well as many informal interviews with specialists, performers, and tourists; and my experience as an audience member, tourist, researcher and, after a year on Bali, as a quasi-insider sometimes watching from backstage provide the basis for the analysis of the sound, movement, and drama incorporated in kecak that is presented here.

This book is divided into two sections that reflect the two approaches I took to the subject: fieldwork and archival study. The first part focuses on basic issues concerning the state of the kecak at the turn of the twenty-first century and the second explores the historical dimensions of the genre. I chose this order because the material is better accessible by first obtaining an impression of what the kecak is in terms of music, dance, and drama, as well as the social ramifications and naturally its relation to tourism on Bali, before going into how the situation came to be that way. With this knowledge—including the many specific terms related to the kecak—in mind, the different stages of historical development become much more intelligible. Changes in sound and choreographic structures are better accessible when they can be compared to the present-day situation.

At its core, this book is a study of kecak. Substantial sections of this work turned out to be quite descriptive since this is the first analytical publication about the kecak incorporating the three performance elements music, dance, and drama. Yet this book also contains sections that go far beyond the mere description and analysis of the music, dance, and social structures: In advertisements, documentaries, and performances aimed at an international audience, the kecak is often used as a showcase for Bali and even Indonesia. I steal this idea for the book, but with a twist: I examine the kecak from such an angle that it becomes a showcase for the tide of events on Bali in the twenty-first century connected to one of the main global factors influencing Bali: international tourism. Looking at kecak in its historical context holds up a mirror to the social, economic, and political developments on Bali in the twentieth century as well as the ups and downs of tourism on Bali.

The first part of the book answers the basic questions: *what, who, where, when, how, and why*. The answers to *what* can be found in the first three chapters, which deal with the basic musical structures of kecak as well as choreographic elements and include an overview of *pengecak* movements, a survey of genres that had an influence on the solo characters' dance styles, and a choreomusical take on the interrelation between sound and movement in kecak. My approach here is to show how tightly connected kecak sound and movement are. The separation of the two into distinct categories "music"

and “dance” is only done for the sake of analysis; I try to keep a holistic view of kecak as one distinct expression of art at all times.¹¹

The examination of kecak is rounded off by focusing on the theatrical component, the kecak as a dramatic dance performance in the Ramayana tradition. Answering the question *who* dances the kecak, chapter 4 presents the performers and the way kecak groups are organized on a social level including economic circumstances. The fifth chapter deals with the kecak in connection with cultural tourism with a focus on the performance context. It aims to answer *where* and *when* the kecak is performed. Addressing the question *how*, this chapter also introduces several contextual issues: how kecak performances are organized and established as an important part of the cultural tourism machinery on Bali, how kecak is promoted and used as a promotional tool in other contexts, how tourist expectations are met in kecak presentations, and what tourists perceive the kecak to be.

The question *why* the kecak is performed for tourists only and does not appeal to a Balinese audience hovers over the entire second section of this book. It can only be answered by considering the genesis and development of the genre and connecting it to the political and sociocultural circumstances of the time in question. The sixth chapter contains a survey of the ritual trance dance sanghyang dedari as it was carried out and performed from the 1910s to the early 1930s. It is here that the roots of the kecak are found. It is necessary to review this genre in depth in order to understand what was new in terms of movement repertoire, choreography, and sound structures as well as *how* this genre would soon come to be called “kecak.” The core of the second section is the seventh chapter, which examines the transition from sanghyang to kecak in detail. The interplay between local performers and expatriates under colonial circumstances is considered along with outstanding historical sources related to the genesis of kecak such as the film *Insel der Dämonen* (1931) and a kecak documentary by Vicki Baum (1935). In this chapter, I venture an answer to *how* and *why* kecak became a tourist enterprise back in the 1930s, which is considerably different from several other published accounts of this phase in kecak history so far. In the eighth chapter, the book concludes with a discussion of how the kecak continued to progress into a successful tourist performance in the late 1930s and how the genre has developed since that time, accounting for the decolonization process in the

11 For Balinese ontologies in the performing arts, in particular the inseparability of sound and movement elements, see Hood, “Separating Intertwined Traditions into Balinese Music and Dance.”

1950s and 1960s, political struggles and mass killings on Bali following the coup d'état in 1965, the consolidation under the military regime since the 1970s, and the shift to a republic in 1998. A special emphasis is on the standardization processes of the *kecak* ramayana that happened in the 1970s. An examination of the *kecak* in the early twenty-first century, in particular the political and economic influence of global crises like the Muslim extremist terror behind the Bali bombings in 2002 and 2005, completes the historical overview. A separate section within this final chapter is dedicated to *kecak kreasi*, a contemporary take on the genre in which *kecak* elements are used for contemporary dance productions that appeal to Balinese as well as international audiences. I close with a look into a possible future the *kecak* can have for any audience.

I remember a conversation I had with Owe Ronström at the 2008 ICTM (International Council for Traditional Music) world conference in Vienna. He talked about his research in Yugoslavia: By the time he was ready to publish, the country in which he had done his research did not exist anymore. A similar thing happened to me, though not as extreme. By the time this book was ready to be published, the Bali in which I had conducted my initial research no longer existed—although it is of course still a province of the Republic of Indonesia. If something is constant on Bali, then it is the affinity for change. Some “contemporary issues” have been historicized in the course of finishing the book; data from the turn of century is no longer current. Although I keep returning to Bali, I will never be able to go back to the Bali I lived in at the turn of century. But I hope that the material as it is nevertheless provides valuable insights into nearly one hundred years of *kecak*.

When my mentor David Harnish held an early version of this manuscript in his hands, he said—tongue-in-cheek—that this book should be called “Everything You Never Wanted to Know about the *Kecak*.” Sometimes knowing a lot about a subject destroys the magic and the fascination. But twenty-five years after I witnessed my first *kecak* performance, it still intrigues me, and the more I dug into its history and meaning, the more fascinated I became. A sentence in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* captivates me: “The secret of the Great Stories is that they have no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. [...] You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don’t.” The first impression the *kecak* made on me has never faded. Every time I see a good performance, I am still blown away by the sounds, the movements, and the portrayal of one of the Great Stories, the Ramayana.

I hope that this book on kecak not only provides multiple insights into the kecak genre but also helps the reader to understand the processes behind the political, economic, and social influences on Balinese performing arts in the twentieth century.

Part 1

The Present

Chapter One

Kecak: The Music

The kecak, or *cak*, is based on noninstrumental, purely vocal sounds.¹ Kecak itself is an onomatopoeic word derived from the sound of the “cak” calls voiced by the *pengecaks*. Speculations about the meaning of the syllable “cak” range from a reference to King Kicaka from the Mahabharata to the chirps of the common house gecko *Hemidactylus frenatus*, which is called *cicak* in Bali. However, Dibia states that “most likely the sound ‘cak’ has neither to do with heroes or lizards but is in fact a purely man-made sound with no meaning at all.”²

When the word kecak (or the shorter form cak) is used, two meanings are inherent. The more common use of the word is to denote the genre also called the “monkey dance,” which is a dramatic dance performance with several solo dancers and a male vocal group that provides the musical accompaniment. Most authors use the term in this sense. However, there is a second meaning that may be attached to the term, namely the male vocal accompaniment group in sanghyang and kecak.³ Among Balinese experts, this use of the term is quite common. To differentiate between the genre and the group, the term *tari* (Indonesian for “dance”) is added to “kecak/cak” when referring to the genre. For the sake of consistency, I depart from this conversational use of the term and follow the more common convention of most academic and nonacademic publications: I use “kecak” or “cak” for the genre and “pengecaks,” “pengecak group,” or “cak group” for the male accompaniment in both sanghyang and kecak.

Kecak music is considered one of the great varieties of Balinese gamelan types, which also include genres termed “vocal gamelan,” or *gamelan suara*.⁴

1 The syllable “cak,” as in kecak, is properly pronounced [tɕaʔ] (International Phonetic Alphabet).

2 Dibia, *Kecak*, 3–4.

3 See, for instance, Dibia, 6.

4 Dibia, 4.

The cak group in kecak is comprised of 30 to 150 mostly male singers, who are called pengecak.⁵ They chant in unison, support the dancers' movements with certain vocal noises, shouts, or rhythms, and provide the tight texture of interlocking cak calls that is the basis for the entire performance. Several solo singers known as *juru* (Balinese for "person with a special trade") lead the rest of the cak group:⁶ the *juru gending*, the *juru tembang*, the *juru klempung*, the *juru tarik*, and the *dalang*.⁷ In order to paint a complete picture of the cak musical structure, I address each of the jurus and their functions in the cak as well as the group of pengecak separately, focusing on their rhythmic interlocking patterns (*pola cak*).⁸ In addition, unison interludes (*pangalang*) interspersed with interlocking sections are examined in order to obtain a complete overview of all the musical elements in a kecak performance. The function of each of the featured musical elements can be categorized as rhythmic, melodic, or leading.

Most of the sound elements addressed in this chapter are also represented in transcriptions. In transcribing kecak melodic structures, I have adopted the signs from the Balinese *ding-dong* notation based on vowels taken from the Balinese alphabet.⁹ Each pitch is represented by one vowel; for a system with five pitches, these are in ascending order: *ding* (vowel I), *dong* (vowel O), *deng* (vowel E), *dung* (vowel U), and *dang* (vowel A). In the classical Balinese notation of melodies, the *ding-dong* signs are notated without rhythmic structures. For the sake of clarity, I decided to notate them in combination and in accordance with the basic metric structures. In addition, I have notated the individual *ding-dong* signs in a line system that conveys their relative pitches. This should provide a reader unfamiliar with Balinese tuning systems a first impression of the melodic contour. In notating rhythmic structures by the pengecak group, I decided to employ an impact/no impact

5 Most kecak performances and groups do not include female pengecak, especially those that perform regularly for tourists.

6 The Balinese term *juru* is usually used in combination with a qualifier, for instance *juru banten* for a specialist in preparing elaborate offerings. In kecak, it is sometimes replaced by the term *tukang* ("expert").

7 Dibia, 16.

8 The correct plural of a noun in Balinese and Indonesian is formed by reduplicating the noun (singular *juru*, plural *juru-juru*). However, for better readability in English I use plural "s" throughout the book.

9 McPhee, *Music in Bali*, 57.

method, which captures precisely the initial impact of each cak call in relation to the others and the metric foundation.

Another important decision in the transcription of Balinese music is where to place the gong.¹⁰ In all genres of cyclical structured music on Bali, the last beat of a cycle is the most important beat, on which the largest gong is sounded. Accordingly, this note should actually be placed at the end of the eight-beat cycle.¹¹ Nevertheless, I have decided to note the “heavy” beat—the *sirr*—at the beginning of the cycle for two reasons. First, the eighth beat is not only the end but also the beginning of each cycle and the *pengecaks* are likely to begin their interlocking on the eight together with the gong; second, this form of notation allows someone unfamiliar with Balinese music to better understand the music in terms of the emphasis on different beats in one cycle. When reading this notation, the reader unfamiliar with Balinese music will likely put the stress—consciously or unconsciously—on the first beat. The reader must only be aware that the cycle will not end on the last beat as noted here but will return to the first noted beat after several repetitions and end on the vocal gong, the *sirr*. To make the transcriptions even more accessible, a line on top shows the counts from eight at the beginning to seven at the end.

The transcription of *pangalang* is slightly different because I want to convey the importance of the melody contour in combination with the text as well as the tight relation between interlocking and unison parts. To achieve this, the sung syllables are directly written into a line system that is marked with the *ding-dong* signs at the beginning of each line.

The film material that accompanies this book includes a presentation by Ida Bagus Nyoman Mas and Sekaha Cak Puspita Jaya that incorporates all musical aspects as well as basic *pengecak* movements.¹²

10 Today composers of both classical and contemporary Balinese music use a variety of types of individual or institution-taught notation systems. The question of where to put the gong is recurring and not settled. See also a discussion on this topic in the thread “stress on 4 in Balinese gamelan” (starting April 29, 2005) on the *gamelan-list*, searchable in the *gamelan-list* archives at <http://listserv.dartmouth.edu/Archives/gamelan.html>.

11 See for example the notation included in Dibia, 14.

12 See the film at <https://phaidra.kug.ac.at/o:115667>.

Rhythmic Structures: Juru Klempung, Juru Gending (First Part), Pola Cak

The most basic and critical part of a cak performance is the juru klempung. He is the beat keeper whose function resembles that of the *kajar*, an instrument in several Balinese gamelan. A horizontal, bossed gong, it is usually struck on every beat;¹³ all other gamelan instruments depend on it and relate to it.¹⁴ To replace the *kajar* with his voice, the juru klempung calls out loudly “*pung, pung, pung, . . .*” in a high-pitched voice for the duration of the performance. Because this is a tiring task for one person’s voice, several members of the cak group take turns being the juru klempung. In the basic cyclic structure of the cak, the juru klempung will vocalize eight beats per cycle. The pitch of the *pung* calls is not fixed.

In all types of Balinese gamelan employing at least one gong, the end of every cycle (and thus the beginning of the next cycle) is marked by a beat on the largest gong. In cak, this gong beat is represented by a juru as well, the juru gending. The Balinese onomatopoeic word for the sound a large gong produces is *sirr*, with a prolonged, rolling *rr* to imitate the vibrating sounds of the gong.¹⁵ The juru gending utters the *sirr* on every eighth beat of the juru klempung. The other beats are filled with notes of a melody, which is how the juru gending acquired his name; *gending* is the Balinese word for “melody” in a gamelan composition. More generally it can be translated as “song” or “composition.”¹⁶ Dibia compares the juru gending to the *ugal* (a tuned metallophone), which is responsible for playing the basic melody toward which all the other more elaborating instruments orient themselves in the *gamelan gong kebyar*, the most common instrumental ensemble on Bali today.¹⁷ Although the juru gending sings a simple melody composed of three notes, his function is mainly metric. In particular, his syllable *sirr* marks the end and start of each cycle, allowing the rest of the cak group to orient itself in time. The basic melody (*lagu pokok*) sung by the juru gending in most cak performances is described in the section on melodic elements below.

13 See Sukerta, *Ensiklopedi Mini Karawitan Bali*, 71–72 for a thorough explanation of the *kajar*’s function in Balinese gamelan.

14 Tenzer, *Balinese Music*, 41.

15 The linguistic term for this sound is an *alveolar trill*.

16 Tenzer, *Balinese Music*, 14.

17 Dibia, 18–19.

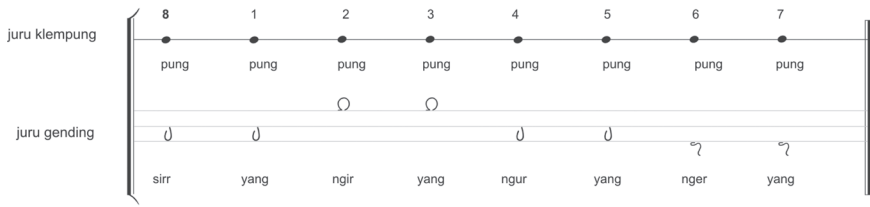


Figure 1.1: Juru klempung and juru gending, eight-beat cycle (transcription by K. Stepputat).

In some parts of the performance, the juru gending sings shorter, two-beat structures known on Bali as *batel*. According to Ida Bagus Nyoman Mas, *batel* is appropriate in situations in which all members of the group are moving because the shorter the pattern, the easier it is to hold all pengecaks together and maintain an isochronic rhythm.¹⁸ There is also no narrative element in these passages.¹⁹ The musical structure *batel* is commonly used in the shadow puppet play *wayang kulit* for situations in which people move quickly, travel from one place to another, or fight.²⁰ Similar to the musical appropriateness mentioned by Ida Bagus Nyoman Mas, it is used in the cak performance while the pengecaks are moving on stage to indicate a transition in the play. In *batel*, the juru gending will sing “*sirr byuk*,” with every syllable falling on one beat vocalized by the juru klempung. There is no melody or notable pitch in so far as the *byuk* most likely resembles the *klentong*, a small, bossed gong that is vertically hung, which is played in turn with the large gong or *kempur* represented here as *sirr*.²¹ In some instances, the juru gending as well as the entire cak group will repeat “*sirr byuk*” while only the juru klempung keeps the basic beat.

18 Personal conversation (June 20, 2001) with Ida Bagus Nyoman Mas, head of the Sekaha Cak Puspita Jaya and teacher at the ISI Denpasar at the time, generally known as Gus Mas. Unfortunately, Gus Mas died in January 2021.

19 Interview with I Wayan Subawa, July 24, 2018.

20 Gold, “Musical Expressions in the Wayang Repertoire,” 262–63.

21 Also *kemong*. See Sukerta, 89–90.

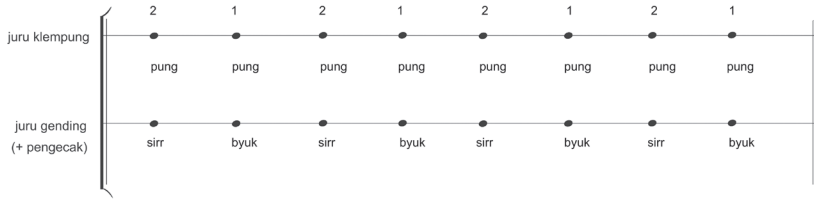


Figure 1.2: Juru gending and juru klempung, two-beat cycle *batal* (transcription by K. Stepputat).

In addition to eight-beat and two-beat cycles, there are also four-beat cycles called *bapang*, which are primarily used in intense situations during the performance, for instance in the showdown between the demon king Rahwana and the pengecaks.²² In all of these cyclic structures (two-beat, four-beat, and eight-beat cycles), the juru klempung and juru gending provide the orientation in tempo for the pengecak group as well as the dancers.²³

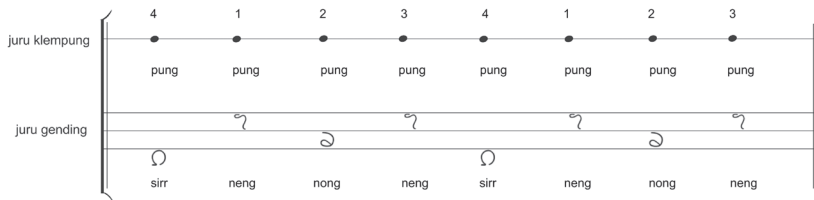


Figure 1.3: Juru klempung and juru gending, four-beat cycle *bapang* (transcription by K. Stepputat).

The function of the pengecak group is to provide the tight, interlocking structure of cak calls, which gave the genre its name, and to form the most important part of the overall sonic impression. The technique of interlocking rhythms is fairly common in Balinese music. Tenzer describes this phenomenon, known as *kotekan* in Balinese, as follows: “Kotekan is usually expressed

²² Dibia, 10.

²³ In several performances Rahwana replaced the juru tarek for the duration of this scene.

in English as ‘interlocking parts,’ because although it sounds as one melody it is actually composed of two interdependent musical lines that are incomplete when played alone and dependent exclusively on each other for obtaining the desired result.”²⁴ The two *kotekan* parts are *polos*, which is usually the lower pitched, mostly on-beat part, and *sangsih*, the higher pitched, off-beat part. In Balinese, the term *polos* means “simple, straightforward” while *sangsih* translates as “different, conflicting.” Countless different forms of two-part interlocking *kotekan* are used on Bali and musicians are perpetually developing new ones. In kecak, not just two but most often three parts are interlocked: *polos* and *sangsih* as in the other genres, and the additional *sanglot*. The Balinese term *sanglot* can be translated as “the one falling in-between.” All *pengecaks* are constantly interlocking as each member has to sing one part—*polos*, *sangsih*, or *sanglot*—throughout the performance.

There is not just one *cak kotekan* with three voices but several different *cak* patterns, or *pola cak* (Balinese *pola* = “pattern”). All of these patterns are sung at the same time. In the following section, I present notations of several different *pola cak* separately to show how each pattern is related to the general musical structures of the *cak* group. Each notation contains the pattern in combination with the *juru gending* and *juru klempung* in order to provide the necessary orientation for how the *cak* pattern is related to the beat and how many times it is repeated within one eight-beat cycle of the *gending*. Both the *cak* pattern and *juru klempung* are noted on lines without any pitch, since they are performed without a set pitch. At the end of this section, I include an overview notation in which all five *cak* patterns are presented in combination with the *juru gending* and *juru klempung*.

Sekaha Cak Puspita Jaya, the group trained and led by Ida Bagus Nyoman Mas, employed at least five different *cak* patterns at the same time. These are the same patterns that are found in the notation: *cak besik*, *cak telu*, *cak lima*, *cak nem*, and *cak pitu*. The names depend on the number of “cak” sung by one voice per *pola cak* cycle.

In *cak besik* (Balinese for “one”), only *polos* and *sangsih* form the complete *kotekan*. Each have just one *cak* call within one *klempung* beat, and the interlocking is based on the beat/offbeat principle dividing one *klempung* beat into two even sub-beats. Compared to most other *pola cak*, the *cak besik* is quite simple. Ida Bagus Nyoman Mas said that only a very few of the members of his well-trained kecak group still use the *cak besik*; most of the

24 Tenzer, *Balinese Music*, 46.

pengecaks are much “better” and can chant more elaborate cak patterns.²⁵ The *cak besar* is also known as *cak keseng* (supposedly from Balinese *seng*, “to lean”) or *cak oncang* (Balinese *oncang* = “repetitive striking”).

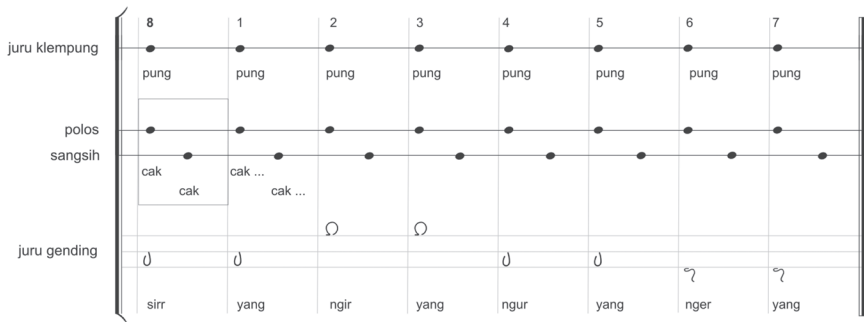


Figure 1.4: *Cak besar* (transcription by K. Stepputat).

The second and most frequently employed pattern is *cak telu* (*telu* is Balinese for “three”). This pattern can also be used for the *kotekan* played by the crash cymbals *ceng-ceng kopyak*,²⁶ for instance in *gamelan beleganjur*.²⁷ There are many slightly different *kotekan* with “*telu* character”; *cak telu* as described here is just one example. *Cak telu* spans two beats by the *klempung* and divides one *klempung* beat into four isochronous subdivisions (pulses). The *polos* starts, to be followed by the in-between *sanglot*, and finally the *sangsih*. All three parts have the same rhythmic structure; only the start of each pattern differs. The *polos* starts on every even beat (eight, two, four, six) and the *sanglot* follows right after the *polos*. The *sangsih* pattern actually starts on the last pulse before the *polos*, that is, the last pulse before the next cycle of *cak telu*. In practice, the *sangsih* pattern is started on its second note (third pulse of the beat) and comes in as third part in the interlocking.

25 Personal conversation with Ida Bagus Nyoman Mas, June 20, 2001.

26 Balinese gamelan ensembles use several types of *ceng-ceng*. The signifier *kopyak* refers to the type with the largest diameter (about 25 cm), which is played with two hands (see also Sukerta, 25–26).

27 Bakan, *Music of Death and New Creation*, 66.

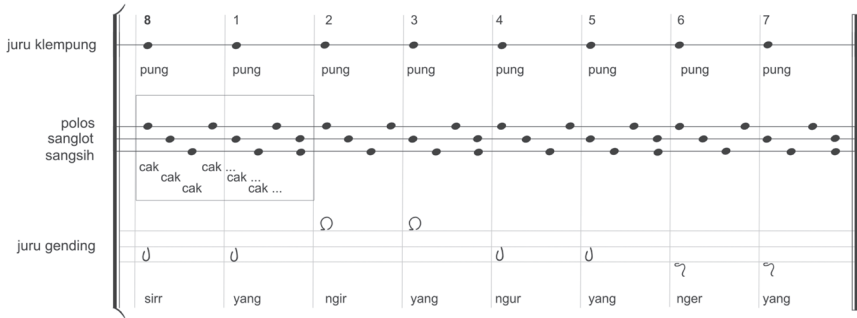


Figure 1.5: *Cak telu* (transcription by K. Stepputat).

With five *cak* within one *gending* cycle, *cak lima* (Balinese for “five”) spans four beats of the *klempung* and is almost as easy to learn as *cak besar*. The difference is found on the third beat of the *gending* cycle, where *polos* and *sangsih* have two calls each within one beat of the *klempung*, intensifying the structure to four *cak* calls (pulses) within one *klempung* beat.

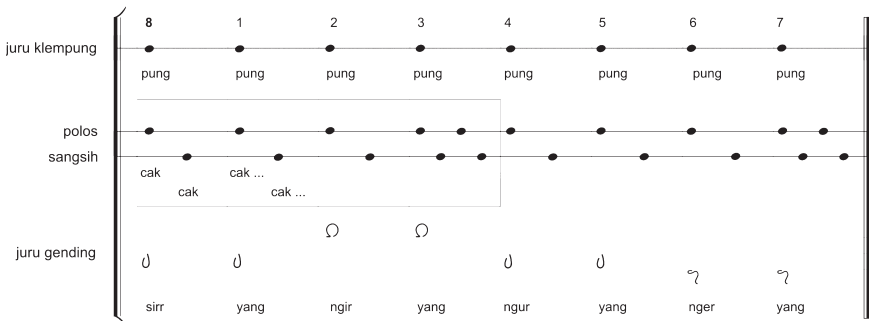


Figure 1.6: *Cak lima* (transcription by K. Stepputat).

Cak nem (Balinese for “six”) is similar to *cak telu* in complexity. Like *cak lima*, *cak nem* spans four beats of the *klempung*, starting on the eighth and fourth beats of the cycle and dividing the *klempung* beat into four pulses. As in *cak telu*, all three parts have the same duration series, which shifts in

relation to the beat in order to interlock. The *polos* part starts on the fourth and eighth beats and the *sanglot* follows on the next pulse. The starting point for the *sangsih* part is the last pulse before the *polos* starts, though in practice the *sangsih* starts with the second *cak* call of the *cak telu* pattern.

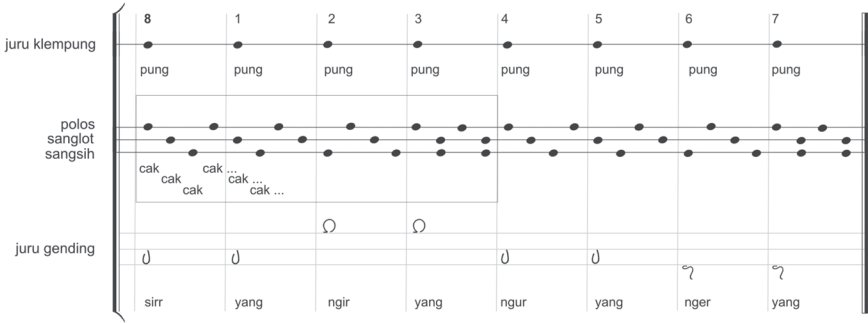


Figure 1.7: *Cak nem* (transcription by K. Stepputat).

Though the *cak pitu* pattern has the second highest number of beats sung by one voice, it is one of the simplest patterns. *Cak pitu* (Balinese for “seven”) has only one part. The pattern spans four beats by the *klempung* and divides the *klempung* beat into two pulses (an on-beat and an off-beat). *Cak pitu* is also known as *oncel*.

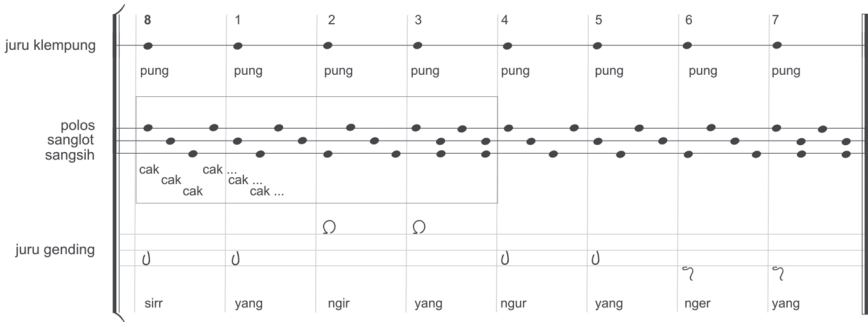


Figure 1.8: *Cak pitu* (transcription by K. Stepputat).

Cak lesung is the longest pola cak, spanning a complete eight-beat cycle. The interlocking of *polos*, *sangsih*, and *sanglot* is difficult because it is based on a three-part pattern that must be related to the four-pulse subdivision of the *klempong* and the other pola cak. According to Ida Bagus Nyoman Mas, this pattern (like *cak besik*) was taken from the rhythmic patterns used for rice pounding. This concurs with the name *cak lesung*, since *lesung* is the Balinese name of the stone mortar in which the rice is pounded.²⁸

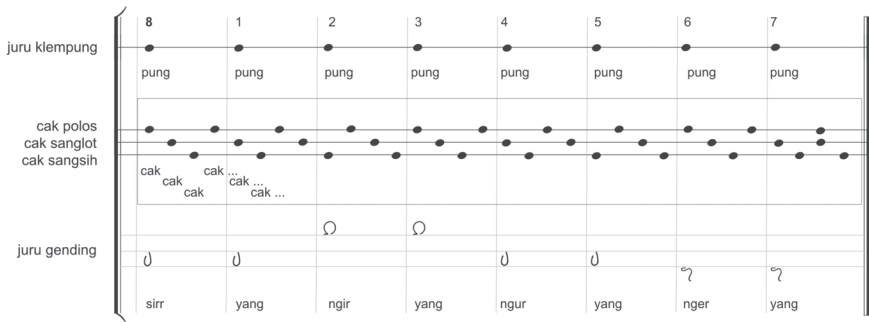


Figure 1.9: *Cak lesung* (transcription by K. Steputat).

According to Ida Bagus Nyoman Mas, who said that all pola cak are generally sung at the same time, there are moments in which certain patterns are ideally omitted. When the pengecaks chant in a slow tempo—for instance at a sad moment in the performed plot—the two pulses of *cak besik*, *cak lima*, and *cak pitu* would be much too slow to maintain the ideal density of the *kotekan*. Instead of *kotekan*, they would sound like single cak calls that are unrelated to each other.²⁹

The pola cak described above are not all the cak patterns that are possible. As in all genres and musical styles on Bali, new patterns are constantly being developed, especially new forms of *kotekan*. In addition, traditions and styles differ significantly from village to village or from group to group. Here I will

28 A fascinating source of different rice pounding patterns is the IWF video “Iseh Rice Pounding,” published by Urs Ramseyer in 1974. The video shows this basic two-part interlocking as well as a wide range of complex interlocking patterns performed by up to six women.

29 Personal conversation with Ida Bagus Nyoman Mas, June 20, 2001.

mention one additional pola cak that has been published by Wayan Dibia.³⁰ For the purpose of better comparison, I have transcribed Dibia's notation into the one used above. The pattern is called *cak ocel*.³¹ Like *cak pitu*, it is a cak pattern not based on interlocking and can thus be performed by a single pengecak chanting this *polos* part. It is much shorter than *cak pitu*, with four repetitions in one *gending* cycle.

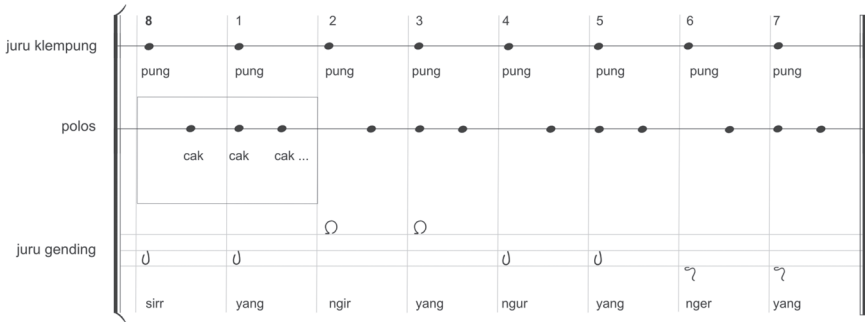


Figure 1.10: *Cak ocel* (transcription by K. Stepputat).

30 Dibia, 13–14.

31 *Ocel* means “wobbly, not firmly rooted in the ground.”

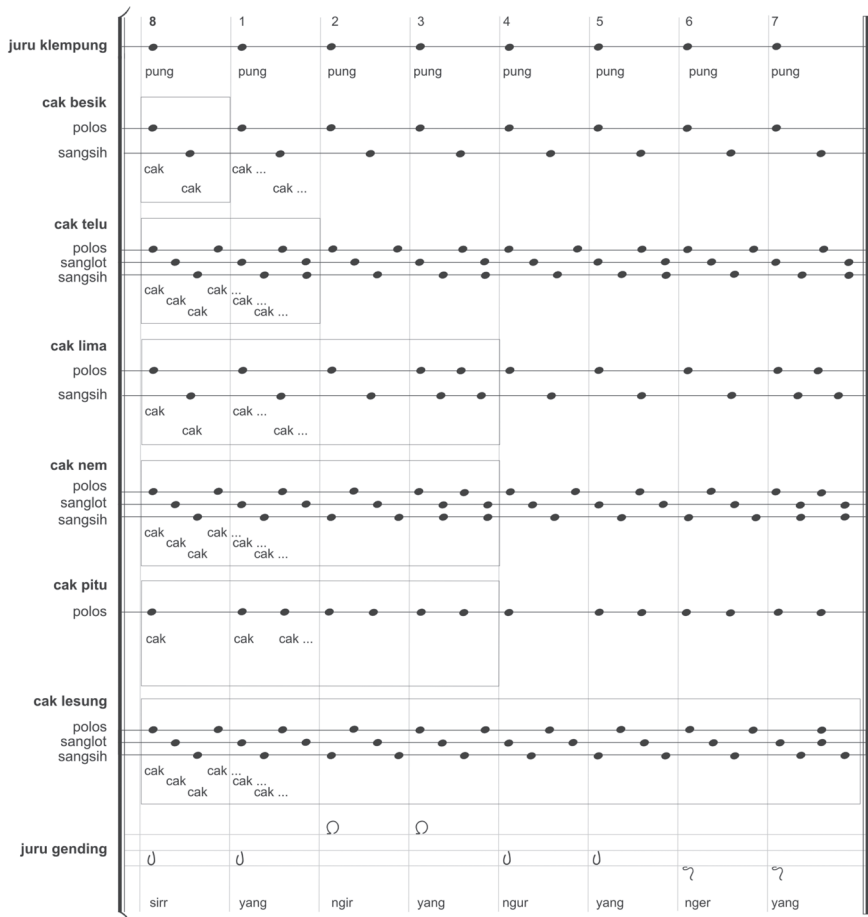


Figure 1.11: All pola cak in combination with juru gending and juru klempung (transcription by K. Stepputat). Previously published in Stepputat, “Performing Kecak,” 70.

Intermission: Scales in Kecak

Curious about what scale is the basis for a kecak performance, I ran into almost as many answers and explanations as there are options for grouping notes in Balinese scale systems. The best semiserious answer I got was, “What scale? *Nah, saih kecak* of course!”³² Many more answered “*pelog*,” some more explicitly “*pelog selisir*.” The term “*saih lima*” also appeared, and a few interlocutors added “*slendro*” or “*saih gender wayang*.” What is certain is that kecak employs more than one scale system throughout a performance.³³ To understand the complexity of scale use in kecak, we must briefly examine Balinese scale systems and the different melodic elements of a kecak, which consist of the basic melody (*lagu pokok*), the unison pengecak interludes (*pangalang*), and the soloist parts (*tembang*).

When Colin McPhee wrote his still authoritative book about Balinese music, the Javanese terms *pelog* for a seven-tone scale and *slendro* for a five-tone scale were not commonly known on Bali. Instead, musicians referred to these scales as *saih pitu* (Balinese for “row of seven”) and *saih lima* (“row of five”), respectively.³⁴ Fifty years later, most Balinese musicians use the imported Javanese gamelan terminology, with *pelog* replacing *saih pitu* and *slendro* replacing *saih lima*.³⁵ However, the names for modes that make use of five tones within the seven-tone scale (called *patutan*) have remained.³⁶ To turn a seven-tone *pelog* scale into a five-tone *patutan* scale, the fourth and seventh notes of the scale are left out, yielding a scale with two different interval sizes (large and small).³⁷ Hence, the basic difference between the *saih lima/slendro* and a five-tone *patutan* taken out of the *saih pitu/pelog* is the interval structure. While *slendro* is roughly equidistant within one octave, the *pelog* makes use of two types of intervals. Finally, the most common *patutan*—the one to which most *gamelan gong kebyar* instruments are tuned—is

32 Personal conversation with I Wayan Sudirana, June 2018. Sudirana is a Balinese musician, ethnomusicologist, and teacher at ISI Denpasar.

33 See also Dibia, 10.

34 McPhee, 37.

35 Tenzer, *Gamelan Gong Kebyar*, 28.

36 Tenzer, *Gamelan Gong Kebyar*, 28–29.

37 The *patutan* can be based on any of the seven tones of the *pelog* scale. For further explanations of the different modes in *pelog* and an overview of *patutan* tunings, see Tenzer, *Balinese Music*, 32; Tenzer, *Gamelan Gong Kebyar*, 28–29.

called *selisir*. In the ascending scale of *ding-dong-deng-dung-dang*, the large intervals occur between *deng-dung* and *dang-ding* (next octave).

Vocal techniques and genres permit much more freedom of interpretation and intonation, since they do not have to stick to set scales. The alteration or “bending” of notes to make them *miring* (slanted) and the insertion of in-between tones (borrowing the Javanese terminology, these tones can be called *pamero*) are very common among Balinese vocalists.³⁸ In *kecak*, a vocal genre, such alterations occur in *pengecak* unison parts and in *juru tembang* solo parts.

Melodic Elements: Juru Gending (Second Part), Juru Tembang, and Pangalang

Some of the melodic elements are closely related to the rhythmic structure. This applies especially to the *lagu pokok* sung by the previously mentioned *jur*u gending, which has a melodic element in addition to the metric orientation the *jur*u gending provides for the *cak* group. This *lagu pokok* uses only three of the five possible tones in the *pelog selisir* mode. The syllables that are sung in an eight-beat cycle are “*sirr yang ngirr yang ngurr yang ngerr yang*”; each fill-in syllable *yang* is sung on the same note as the word before. The vowels refer to the vowel of the notes according to the Balinese *ding-dong* notation system.³⁹ The *sirr* and the *ngurr* are on the *dung* (U), the *ngirr* on the *ding* (I), and the *ngerr* on the *deng* (E). (O) and (A) are not present.⁴⁰

Frequently the *jur*u gending varies the melody over the course of two cycles (16 beats). The variation occurs with the second *ngirr* on the *nding*, which is then sung one octave lower. This variation is common and has been used by most *kecak* groups that I have recorded. Well-trained *kecak* groups with skilled *jur*u gending might vary this typical *gending* even more and use several different melodies.

Whatever melody the *jur*u gending sings, it is very closely related to the metric structure of *kecak*. In contrast, the *jur*u tembang has neither a metric nor a pitch relation to the rest of the group. Though naturally he has to start

38 See Herbst, *Voices in Bali*, 41–42.

39 For an overview of the notation system and its use, see Hood, “Notating Heritage Musics,” 62–64; and Seebass, “Between Oral and Written Tradition.”

40 The vowel “i” in *sirr* overrules the vowel of the note.

and stop singing at the right time during the performance, his singing is not part of the musical frame required to keep the *pengecak* group together. His parts add to the sonic density and the dramatic element of the performance.

The *juru tembang* received his name from the Balinese word *tembang*, which means “song” (*menembang* = “to sing”) but is also used as a general term for Balinese vocal music. The tunes a *juru tembang* sings during a *kecak* performance belong to the category known as *sekar alit*, *macapat*, or *pupuh*.⁴¹ *Macapat* tunes are categorized by the number of lines, the number of syllables within each line, and the vowel at the end of each line (*padalingsa* system).⁴² The song text and contents however may differ. *Macapat* songs have a basic melodic outline open to interpretation and variation by each performing singer. Singers may use notes that are not part of a set scale by deliberately bending the intonation, adding, and/or omitting tones. This great variation in the melodic contour makes a clear definition of a scale difficult. Nevertheless, *macapat* songs are generally based on a scale with five tones that is either *pelog selisir* or *slendro*.⁴³

In several scenes of a *kecak* performance, certain *macapat* songs—or parts of them—are sung by the *juru tembang* to indicate the mood of the characters or the entire scene. Hence, the function of the *juru tembang* singing *macapat* songs is to add an emotional, scene-specific level to the ongoing *pola cak* structure. For instance, a *macapat* song structure included in nearly every *kecak ramayana* performance is “*sinom uug payangan*.”⁴⁴ It is performed when Sita is left alone in Rahwana’s palace, mourning her fate.⁴⁵

In general, the *juru tembang* is free to choose the song he sings, albeit there is a limited selection of songs that fit the mood. When I asked Wayan Dibia if the *juru tembang* was really free to choose the melody he sings, he

41 Herbst, 38; Tenzer, *Balinese Music*, 101; Vickers, “Kidung Metres and the Interpretation of the Malat,” 225.

42 For more information, see Schumacher, “Musical Concepts in Oral Performance of Kakawin in Bali.”

43 See Herbst, 41–48 for an elaboration of intonation varieties.

44 According to Kadek Widnyana, the title refers to the destruction of the village of Payangan. *Sinom* is the general title of one song structure of the *pupuh* repertoire; the Balinese word *uug* means to destroy. Interview with I Kadek Widnyana April 1, 2006. Kadek Widnyana is *dalang* and teacher at the ISI. An alternative spelling is “*sinom wug payangan*.”

45 Dibia, 19. All *kecak* groups that performed the “Kepandung Sita” plot from 2000 to 2001 (seventeen groups) used “*sinom uug payangan*” at this point in the performance.