

Sanggar: A Contemporary Platform for the Evolving Tradition of Balinese Gender Wayang

Ako Mashino

Tokyo University of the Arts, Japan

e-mail: akomas@sky.email.ne.jp

Abstract

This paper discusses the modernization of Balinese *gender wayang*, a form of traditional music ensemble traditionally performed during rituals and as accompaniment to shadow puppetry. In the past, the music was most often taught and learned individually in private settings. Once considered to be the most difficult gamelan in Bali, competent performers were relatively few. However, since the 2010s, a new platform, *sanggar gender wayang*—privately-owned locations and organisations for teaching the music—have emerged, successfully producing many competent young players. The development and flourishing of *sanggar gender wayang* corresponded to the increasing number of children who became interested in studying the form, as a result of the great popularity of *gender wayang* competitions in South Bali, which began in 2005. Since then, *sanggar* have powerfully influenced the *gender wayang* ecosystem as a whole, providing a new form of social network to support children learning the music, with an economic impact on the musicians and musical industries, and developing new pedagogies and performance styles. Today's *sanggar* teachers basically maintain their traditional way of teaching, as in the private lessons of the past. They still play together with their students and prefer a holistic approach whenever possible. On the other hand, they have also developed new pedagogies and techniques, such as systematising teaching methods, especially in teaching the basics to beginners, and categorising the repertoire. They also created a new performance style especially for competitions to efficiently display the competence and skills of the musicians, as well as large ensembles consisting of many performers, never seen before. Thus, *sanggar* embodies the Balinese concept of being *modern* (modern) in their own way, simultaneously preserving and modernising the tradition.

Keywords: children, education, teaching method, tradition

To be *Moderen* in Balinese Gender Wayang

This paper discusses modernization in teaching and learning *gender wayang*, a Balinese traditional music ensemble form. *Gender wayang* consists of one or two pairs of bronze metallophones and is traditionally performed during rituals or as accompaniment to *wayang kulit*, shadow puppetry. Because of its complicated musical structure and demanding technique, it has been considered one of the most difficult gamelan to perform (see Gold, 1998, p. 23). Before the 2000s, there were only a few children *gender wayang* players. Today, however, it is not difficult to find

children skilfully playing music throughout Bali.

Adrian Vickers writes that Balinese have “their own distinctive version of being modern” (Vickers, 1996, pp. 1–2), describing the quality of being *moderen* (an Indonesian word which originated from Dutch, meaning modern), as a form, process, or experience associated with progress and development (Vickers, 1996, p. 6). Here, I focus on *sanggar*, private organisations for teaching the music, as primary agents transforming the pedagogy and performing style of *gender wayang* to become *moderen*, and bringing changes to the musical ecosystem (Gold, 2016).

Venues for Teaching and Learning *Gender Wayang*

Teaching and Learning Privately

The most popular path to learning *gender wayang* is that one personally asks a senior musician to teach, arranges the dates, and visits the teacher’s home for instruction. This type of private lesson is still common, and until the late 2000s it was the only way to learn music. While I have often observed Balinese studying with senior musicians, some say that it is not comfortable for Balinese to personally ask specialists to teach them their valuable knowledge unless they have a close relationship with them. Some musicians added that older musicians in the past were rather “stingy,” declining to share their knowledge with others. The instruments were expensive and only a limited number of people could afford them at home. Thus, access to *gender wayang* study was heavily dependent on personal circumstances and the available social network.

Traditionally, it was uncommon to pay lesson fees in cash, although this is not to suggest that teaching is free of charge (see also Heimarck, 2003, p. 65). Instead, learners usually show their gratitude by bringing rice, sugar, coffee, and so forth, or by offering their labour for rituals held in the teacher’s home. The exchange process could be indirect and might continue for years after the actual lessons in some cases. Even today, teachers seldom set a price for their private lessons. How much the apprentice owes to the teacher is assumed to be immeasurable in monetary terms.

Sanggar

Sanggar refers to a space and organisation for performing arts, usually directed by an individual owner-artist—most often an experienced performer and alumni of the Institute of Indonesian Art (Institute Seni Indonesia, or ISI). Many *sanggar* have regular classes for children, while some *sanggar* focus primarily on performances.

The majority of the students at *sanggar gender wayang* are students of elementary or junior-high school age. In some *sanggar*, there are a few of kindergarten age and some in high school, as well. Boys and girls are approximately equal in number. The lessons are held according to a fixed schedule, and the students pay regular fees for participation.

Most *sanggar* members arrive from the neighbourhood, while some are accompanied by their parents, who bring them by car or on motorcycle. *Sanggars*, particularly large-scale ones, resemble schools in that they consist of one or a few

teachers and many children, and in that the students are often categorised into several classes according to their competence. Some *sanggar* use a grading system and exams to move up to advanced classes, and some have their own uniforms and membership cards.

Sanggar in Bali first emerged in the 1970s (McGraw, 2013, p. 107) and flourished since the 1990s (see also Downing, 2019, pp. 42–67). But *sanggar* dedicated to *gender wayang* have appeared only since the 2000s, when competitions in the music gained popularity in South Bali. In 2005, the first *gender wayang* competition was held as part of the annual Youth Art Week (Pekan Seni Remaja, or PSR), in Denpasar, where students competed representing their schools, and other local competitions followed. As I have described elsewhere (Mashino, 2009), these competitions successfully motivated many children to learn music. Many parents brought their children to the *gender wayang* specialists, who opened *sanggar*, arranged the lesson schedules, and purchased additional instruments to accommodate many students. Today, more than a dozen *sanggar* are actively teaching children in Denpasar. Since 2013, the Bali Art Festival (Pesta Kesenian Bali, or PKB), has also held an annual Bali-wide *gender wayang* competition, which enhanced *sanggar* development over broader regions. Competitions and *sanggar* of *gender wayang* have developed in parallel since then.

Teaching and Learning in *Sanggar*

Below, I describe two *sanggar* lessons in *gender wayang* which I observed during my fieldwork in 2018 and 2022.

Sanggar Gangsa Dewa (2018)

Sanggar Gangsa Dewa in North Denpasar was established in 2008 by Ni Ketut Suryatini, a former instructor at ISI. She said more than 400 children had been registered (meaning that they had come to the *sanggar* at least once and their names and addresses were documented), and around 50 students were actively coming to the lessons at the time of my visit in 2018.

When I visited the *sanggar*, 16 instruments set in rows fully occupied a room of her family property. The *sanggar* was open on Saturday and Sunday, from 9:00 to 16:00, while the students, accompanied by their parents, came in twos and threes, and replaced each other. I observed the afternoon class for beginners. First, eight children, including both girls and boys, started by playing “Tulang Lindung,” a basic piece popular for beginners. All played the *polos* part, one of the paired parts of *gender wayang*, together. After that, three of them repeated it once more, while another tried to play *sangsih*, the other part of the musical pair, of the same piece with them. Then, one of them proceeded to the next piece, “Sekti,” alone, probably because the others had not yet learned it. Next was another small boy of kindergarten age, who presumably was there to learn the music for the first time. Suryatini explained to him how to sit correctly, grasp the *panggul* (beaters), and strike and mute the keys. After he tried to strike and mute the keys several times, he was replaced by three other children, who played “Sekti” together. In this way, various pieces were performed a

few times each, and the students constantly replaced each other. While waiting their turn, they chatted with each other, buying, and eating snacks, or just stared blankly at the lesson. Even though many do not attentively observe the lessons of others, their presence and hearing the music would provide an opportunity for legitimate peripheral participation, that is, to unconsciously prepare an image of what they would learn in the future (Lave & Wenger, 1993).

Suryatini put a list of 32 pieces to be learned on a wall of the room, categorised by complexity into five classes: “*dasar 1*” (basic 1), “*dasar 2*” (basic 2), “*mahir 1*” (advanced 1), “*mahir 2*” (advanced 2), and “*maha*” (excellent). Each category comprised four to nine pieces. Most pieces on the list, including those originally from other areas, belonged to the so-called Style Kayumas (Kayumas-style) repertoire, which she inherited from her father, the late I Wayan Konolan, who was respected as a master of *gender wayang*. While Konolan also identified some basic pieces to teach beginners and some others for experienced players, he never tried to systematically categorise or characterise his repertoire. It is basically Suryatini’s own initiative to clearly categorise her repertoire and systematise the teaching methods according to their complexity and requisite performing skills, while other *sanggar* teachers around Denpasar also employ similar classification systems, so that the students have clear targets at each stage and can proceed gradually, step by step.

Sanggar Suara Murti

Sanggar Suara Murti was organised in 2013 in Sukawati, Gianyar, by I Ketut Buda Astra, a *gender wayang* specialist and graduate of ISI. He has directed *gender wayang* teams representing Gianyar regency in Bali Art Festival competitions several times and won first prize in 2013 and 2015. His village of Sukawati is widely known as a centre of shadow puppetry, where many puppeteers and *gender wayang* musicians live, while his Suara Murti is at present the only *sanggar* specially dedicated to teaching music to children. According to Buda’s wife, around 150 students have registered in the *sanggar* and 100 are actively studying today.

When I visited the *sanggar* in 2018, Buda and his young assistant were teaching 14 beginners in one *kelas* (class); according to Buda, three of them were complete beginners, and the others had just started to learn a week before. They tried to play a short entry piece together that Buda composed for beginners. After Buda demonstrated the melody, they tried to play together. But soon, they drifted apart, as most of the students only partially understood what they should do. Buda and his assistant went to the confused students to teach them one-by-one, indicating the keys to be struck from the opposite side, while some other students tried to play by themselves and some others just sat absent-mindedly. As everyone was playing independently, it sometimes became chaotic. After Buda and the assistant went around, they tried to start together again, but the group soon fell apart. This repeated in the same way several times. Although Buda knew it was difficult to teach so many at once, he said he could hardly refuse people asking for lessons, so he tried to teach them as a *kelas*. Buda and his assistant were amazingly patient and highly concentrated with each targeted student amid the many instruments chaotically ringing out.

When I again visited his *sanggar* in 2022, they had stopped teaching the large *kelas* and shifted to private or small-group teaching, which he called “*privat*” (private), which, Buda said, more parents preferred, as they found it more efficient. Now his daughter and senior students had become his assistants, teaching one or two children each, simultaneously but separately at different locations in his family compound. This enabled all teachers and students to be more focused and able to concentrate on each other than in a larger class. Buda does not clearly classify his students according to skill, though he considers what they should learn next by observing each student’s competence.

Sanggar as a Contemporary Platform for Teaching and Learning

Sanggar Activity as Social Networking

Most *sanggar* classes are basically open to anyone who would like to join, even if he or she does not have a personal connection to the teacher. On the day of *sanggar* activities, many people gather at the teacher’s house: the students’ parents attentively observing their children’s lesson or recording videos; their little brothers and sisters; the teacher’s family members supporting the *sanggar* activities as assistant teachers or secretaries. All are involved in the activities, developing a social network, which as a whole contributes to supporting the children in learning and performing. The experiences of learning and performing together in *sanggar*, as well as waiting, chatting, or exchanging information, shapes a specific community based upon and focused on the music. The uniform T-shirts with *sanggar* logos also contribute to a sense of belonging to one community. Trophies which some students won at competitions are usually displayed in the *sanggar* rehearsal space, as an honour for the *sanggar* as a whole.

Sanggar and Competitions

The development of *sanggar gender wayang* has definitely corresponded to that of competition. According to I Ketut Agus Swastika, a *gender wayang* musician leading Sanggar Swasti Suara in Denpasar, the most common motivation for students to start learning *gender wayang* at his *sanggar* is to participate in competitions (Swastika, pers. comm.). Competitions have provided opportunities for young musicians to appear in public and gain social attention, which motivates them to learn the music further. In addition, if the children successfully win prizes, they earn advantage points for entering junior-high or high school. Even if they do not win a prize, their parents are very proud to see their children performing the music on stage. *Sanggar* significantly supports them in preparing for competition, and thus have contributed to the flourishing of competitions as well, by supplying many of the participants.

Sanggar Economy

While the *sanggar* lesson fee is usually inexpensive and affordable, the income from *sanggar* activities as a whole is significant, as it enables the owners to buy more

instruments, employ assistant teachers, and support their lives. Fixed payment systems clearly setting fees simplified and modernised the traditional gifting custom in which teachers never set a price, so that their special knowledge became more accessible to the learners and their parents.

The development of *sanggar* has had an impact on the music industry as well. *Sanggar* students buy their own *panggul* (beaters) to use at home and bring them to *sanggar* lessons, and today, most have their own instruments at home. Increasing numbers of people can afford to own expensive bronze instruments privately, while less affluent people would buy iron instruments which are inferior in resonance but are regarded as adequate for learning at home and can be purchased at an affordable price. Additionally, if the children participate in competitions, parents need extra money for participation fees, make-up, hair-setting, and costume rental.

The growth of *sanggar* has been seen as a consequence of a rising middle class and aligned with the performers' desire to pursue their interests more independently (McGraw, 2013, p. 108; Downing, 2019, p. 38). I would add that affluent parents' passion for their children to develop competence in performing arts is another powerful factor promoting *sanggar* activities, as the development of *sanggar gender wayang* is supported by many parents who spare no expense for their children.

Pedagogy of Gender Wayang: Continuity and Change

Traditional Pedagogy Continued

As previous studies have described (McPhee, 1970; Bakan, 1999; Gray, 2011; Minagawa, 1994; Umeda, 2009) to mention only a few), Balinese artists have always taught their arts through performing together. This means that the students learn a piece through intensive observation and listening to their teacher's performance, while playing together with them. Nick Gray writes that multi-sensory perception and imitation of the teacher's performance enabled him to learn "not just notes but the teacher's whole manner while playing," and that he sometimes felt as though his teacher was "physically forcing the piece" into him (Gray, 2011, p. 42). This "playing together" pedagogy basically endures today. Even in the large *sanggar* classes I described, the teachers play together with students and also often individually attend to a targeted student, so that the student can perceive the body movements and sound of the teacher directly at very close range, although the degree of intimacy between teacher and student in a private lesson would be different from that when many students learn together.

Traditional Balinese pedagogy also favours a holistic approach. In 1937, Colin MCPhee observed that when teaching children, a gamelan musician performed complete musical patterns without dividing them into short units, and at tempo (McPhee, 1970). Michael Bakan also described his drum teacher's holistic approach (Bakan, 1999, p. 284), citing McPhee's observation that "the teacher is merely the transmitter" who just shows "the complex design hung on the wall" and tells his student to copy it (McPhee, cited in Bakan, 1999, p. 282). Umeda Hideharu, a Japanese ethnomusicologist, also describes his experience in the early 1990s when

his *gender wayang* teacher taught him by repeating a complete long piece without a break for hours (Umeda, 2009, p. 34).

I agree with Bakan and McPhee, from my experience as a gamelan student, I also often felt as if my teachers kept going ahead unmindful of me. However, as I have observed the lessons of others since the 1990s, I found that most of the *gender wayang* teachers, whether in *sanggar* or privately at home, were considering the student's specific competence. Experienced musicians always carefully observe and evaluate each other's competence while playing together, whether in teaching or in performance. Choosing a piece that fits the student's competence, controlling the tempo, and managing the length of the phrase to be repeated, the teachers, to a greater or lesser degree, compromise their holistic approach, even though they might still appear to the student's eye to be showing "the complex design hung on the wall." How far they actually compromise may depend greatly on personality and circumstances. There are many stories about short-tempered gamelan teachers (Minagawa, 1994; Umeda, 2009). However, these *sanggar* teachers are generally calm and patient. They seldom scold or show signs of frustration even if their students cannot smoothly understand, and make conscious efforts to foster children: they divide a phrase into short units, and repeat them one by one before proceeding; they physically touch the students' hands to correct and indicate where to strike; they often verbally communicate with the students, asking "*sudah?*" (already?) or encourage them with words such as "*bagus!*" (good!) or "*yah!*" (yes!).

Developing Teaching Methods

While traditional pedagogies persist, *sanggar* teachers have also developed new methods and tips corresponding to changes in the teaching-learning circumstances. For example, Suryatini has developed a unique method to teach students how to correctly grasp the *panggul*: first, she told her students to make fists and open two fingers, then placed the *panggul* in the correct position there, told them to put their thumb on it, and then adjusted the other fingers to the right positions. When both hands were ready, she told them to watch her demonstration of how to make a sound. Then she told the students "*pukul*" (strike) the keys, "*angkat*" (raise) the hands, and "*tutup*" (mute) with both hands, showing the necessary hand movements. She then proceeded to a section of a piece called "Tulang Lindung," verbally directing "*Pukul, tutup, pukul, tutup.*"

She often used kinesthetic terms such as "*bersama*" (lit., being together, which means that both hands move simultaneously), "*sendiri*" (alone; only one hand moves), "*lompat*" (jump; striking a key which is not adjacent), or "*mundur*" (return to the original position), but did not use solmization of each note, as in *ding dong deng dung dang*, when teaching beginners.

Training for Competition

Another distinctive teaching style developed in *sanggar* is that for competition. *Gender wayang* competition has developed a specific performing style to efficiently demonstrate the performers' skillfulness in order to win the prize. The performers

usually play at a faster tempo than in rituals, emphasising cohesion and accuracy, and displaying their competence visually through decorative gesticulations (Mashino, 2020).

Before competition became popular, at the point when the student could understand the melody and was barely able to follow the teacher, the lesson usually ended, or the teacher would proceed on to another piece. My teachers preferred to play various pieces during lessons, as they quickly got bored of repeating the same piece many times. Further, teachers seldom teach or explain in detail the delicate movements of the *panggul* or subtle adjustments to the dynamics or tempi. Lisa Gold writes that players expect to have this freedom when playing, and they feel it brings the pieces of music to life (Gold, 2016). Spontaneous reactions to their co-performers on the spot, individual creation of new ornamentation, and subtle hand movements could not be taught, but should be acquired through and during the performances (Gray, 2011, p. 126).

In contrast, the performance on the competition stage is the complete, finished product of a longer process of rehearsals, in which the tempi, timing, breath, and body movements are perfectly elaborated and fixed before the performance, so that the musicians can play in perfect synchrony. Particularly for high-stakes competitions, teachers may intensively and generously teach the techniques they have, as the students represent their *sanggar* as a whole.

The *sanggar* teacher is responsible for supervising the performance throughout the process, during which the students repeat the same piece numerous times. On the day of competition, *sanggar* teachers also often take care of their students by taking them to the site, bringing instruments, and preparing offerings, though the participants' parents may sometimes take on these roles. The *sanggar* teacher is virtually the director and conductor of the competition performances, which are the product of collaboration between the teacher and students.

Conclusion: Change for Continuing

All *sanggar* teachers I met during my fieldwork emphasised that their motivation to organise *sanggar* was to keep alive their tradition, their own regional performing style, repertoire, aesthetics, and philosophy, which they inherited from their family or forerunners. They expect that their *sanggar* children will somehow carry on what they are performing today. Teaching the basics to beginners—especially child beginners—naturally demands extraordinary perseverance and specific methodology. Many established musicians admit that they cannot or will not teach beginners. The musicians who organised *sanggar* have a special passion to nurture the next generation. Suryatini thought that teaching beginners is the most important and the most difficult. She said to me “If the students have already mastered the basics, they can go anywhere, learn from anyone.” (Suryatini, personal communication, August 25, 2018).

On the other hand, *sanggar* shapes a new type of socio-cultural space for experiments that may transform traditional pedagogy, custom, and performing style, and produce a new aesthetic value. Brita Heimarck writes that modernization in

Balinese music is an alteration of past traditions, adapting them to modern needs (Heimarck, 2003, p. 9). Two different but interrelated approaches of *sanggar*, carefully teaching the basics to beginners or refining and elaborating competition performance, embody the Balinese concepts of continuing their tradition and becoming *moderen* at the same time.

In an anniversary event in 2015, Denpasar City included a massive *gender wayang* performance by 100 children; Gianyar also followed that example, with 150 child players to which *sanggar* of Suryatini and Buda contributed (see also Gold, 2016). Each regency showcased amazing numbers of child musicians proficiently playing the old, difficult, and sacred music. These massive performances, in which many musicians perform together in a cohesive manner, were uncommon in the past and would be impossible without the development of *sanggars*, which supplied many players who learned the same piece in the same style, as well as many instruments with the same tuning. The performances at public events presumably displayed the traditional values in a *moderen* manner. Lisa Gold writes that built into Balinese “tradition” is innovation and “tradition and innovation are lively organisms that play off of one another” (Gold, 2016).

While large-scale teaching and performance were not allowed during the COVID-19 outbreak, the *sanggar gender wayang* continued their teaching activities. Avoiding larger classes, dividing their students into smaller groups, wearing masks, and using hand sanitizer, most *sanggar* continued their classes. On-line competitions were also held so that the children kept their motivation to learn. Many musicians were critical of and unsatisfied with evaluating the recorded performance, but they mostly admitted that it was better than nothing. When the emergency declaration was lifted in 2022, competitions and other performance opportunities for *sanggar* returned. For example, Buda’s *sanggar* performed *gender wayang* as a group in the temple ceremony at Pura Dalem Sukawati in September 2023, where twenty instruments were played together and around seventy children participated in total (Buda, Facebook, September 30, 2023). His daughter Sindy, who was one of Buda’s first child students who won a competition in 2013, has already graduated from ISI and is leading other young *sanggar* musicians, actively performing *gender wayang* and other gamelans, such as *selonding* and *gamelan semar pegulingan* in the *sanggar* (Buda, Facebook, September 27, 2023).

Sanggar is a contemporary platform not only for teaching and learning *gender wayang* to keep the tradition alive, but also for creating new types of performance. They simultaneously produce a driving force to continue the tradition and transform it to be *moderen*.

Acknowledgement

This paper is supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant 19K00151, 19K00240 and 23K00135. I also acknowledge Wendell Ishii for his editorial assistance with this paper.

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Biography

Dr. Ako Mashino acquired a BA in 1991 and an MA in 1996 from Tokyo University of Arts. She earned her doctoral degree (PhD) from Ochanomizu University, Japan, in 2002. She currently teaches ethnomusicology, Balinese gamelan, and other courses at several universities, including Tokyo University of Arts, Meiji University, and Kunitachi College of Music in Tokyo. She is the editor of an anthology titled *Minzokuongakugaku juuni no shiten* (2016) (12 Perspectives of Ethnomusicology) and has written several articles and papers in both Japanese and English. She is also an active performer of Balinese gamelan gong *kebyar*, *gender wayang*, and *geguntangan*.