

## *Keroncong Music and Social Identity in Surakarta, Indonesia*

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2020  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

This article aims at exploring how keroncong (folk music) musicians construct identity in community contexts. Performing music is not free from contexts rather it authorizes their position and role in that society. Being on stage they want to confirm statuses and validate world-views in public. They intend to present ideals and thoughts in larger settings. With that process, they strengthen meanings and legitimize organic structure of the community. They interact and negotiate thoughts resulting in the formation of identity among the musicians. Leading to the construction of identity musicians formulate a social group guided by three social categories: individuality, originality, and adaptability. In the implementation of individuality musicians forge social cohesion as a social group. In that process this category is intensified by originality in which the second enhances the quality of the first. Finally, the musicians empower these categories by contextualizing their adaptability in performance settings. These processes synthesize elements of social categories that eventually lead to specific musicians' identity.

Keywords: Keroncong Music, Surakarta, Identity, Individuality, Originality  
Adaptability

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## **Introduction**

Keroncong, a folk music popular in Surakarta, was thought of as originated from Portuguese in 16th century even if only view evident was associated with the history. Nowadays, this music becomes the most popular among groups of community in urban city Solo (the nickname for Surakarta city, Central Java, Indonesia).

In addition to its popularity in recent time keroncong was also well-known in the mid of 20th century not only among Javanese but also among Japanese people. This was because the Japanese intended to keep memories when occupying Indonesia (Frederick, William H, 2011). Even if the Japanese occupied Indonesia in a very short time (1942-1945), they had deep understanding of the music. That was why they also promoted the keroncong for their cultural diplomacy with Indonesian more specifically with Javanese people. Many of the Japanese, especially senior people who used to live in Java during colonialization time, liked singing keroncong pieces and some of the songs are still popular among Japanese in Japan today.

Keroncong is also popular in schools and among community people in Surakarta. Elementary, secondary, and high school students play keroncong instruments and sing for the music. They learn keroncong in classes or in extracurricular activities among their colleagues for fun. At home, they also listen to the music from radio, television, and you-tube occupying their spare time before they study for the schools.

In universities students play the music both in intra- and extracurricular activity. Some of them learn the music in campus and some others play in community for living. It is in this contexts that they can develop knowledge and skills for the music. Some other students play the music for strengthening social meaning and significant. Small number of the students intend to play the music more seriously with professional keroncong players and singers. In this contexts they become the members of the community demanding them to be more involved in that keroncong group.

Students from universities are more likely to learn the keroncong for different purposes. They who want to study for developing knowledge and theories will focus on approaches and methods in the field of music.

The purpose of this study is to explore how musicians in keroncong performances and rehearsals make sense of social categories to formulate identity in that contexts. Since performance and rehearsals are not free from contexts musicians use them to initiate the construction of the identity. Using three social categories they can construct identity relevant to their environments and social settings.

## **Social Contexts of Performances**

In the above mentioned contexts a group of musicians get involved in deep process in which every member exploits specific interests. Being in the community they must be aware of their position in making sense of the settings and situations.

Like many other art activities keroncong music exists in specific social environments resulting in the close relations between the group and social activities. There are some dynamic process in which keroncong musicians adjust their orientation with the

environments. Performing keroncong does not occur in a vacuum in which musicians think of only music or they may not orient on nothing more than aesthetic dimension. Musical performances signify musician's concepts resulting in mirroring world-views of the musicians. On the other hand, music also represents what happens in community since ideas in community inspire the concepts underlying the performances. What musicians play are the manifestation of the community concepts. Music is also useful in community live by emphasizing the recent ideas of society where they exist. Reacting to this issue Jim Watkins strongly maintains the issue by saying that "The purpose of appreciating a work of art is not to determine the worldview that shaped it, but to allow the work of art to shape, challenge, question, and enrich our own worldviews"(Watkins, 2020). Maarten Van Opstal & Jean Hugé, on the other hand, provide different angle in criticizing this issue by believing that to "reconcile variety of worldviews and knowledge systems in joint social development worldviews construct is urgently needed" (Van Opstal, 2013). They think that through this process new worldview will appear as needed by community that tries to make sense of social development in current society. Yazhong Deng commented on this issue by saying that others, self, the interaction of self and others are elements that support the formation of worldview (Deng, 2019).

The importance of music in society can be seen from how performances provides meanings to social events like ceremonies and rituals. The relationship between music and social events creates certain atmosphere ensuing strong condition in that community. It is through this process that music can enhance the power of the music to audiences and their contexts.

### **Categories in Social Context**

Being in social setting, musicians create social categories that are meaningful in their group and environments. These categories are socially sensitive, adjusting with the conditions and atmosphere, and for that reason musicians keep them as a means of orientation in social settings. Since the categories are essential in the formation of thoughts they can be used for laying some ideas in social interactions.

In the intensive process of social environments the social categories mediate musicians' world-views and the social conceptions leading to the dynamic of social interaction and in turn help the formation of ideals among the members of the group (Deng, 2019). Using these categories they share feeling, expectations, orientations, and hopes.

The social categories help musicians choose directions to reach their goals. These categories make the musicians feel convenient to live among people in that community. Among many categories involved in that social processes three categories seem to be significant in fostering the social interaction. I believe that musicians are aware of these categories and keep them to conduct musical activities in that community.

What is the importance of the three categories in the group considering that many other categories also exist in the community. These categories lead to the way the members of the group manage the behavior and the way they think of group activities because they share similar experience in the same social settings.

Among musicians in Barona group, the young keroncong musicians in Surakarta municipality, the three categories emphasize more on the condition of the group than other categories in the context. Using them in musical activities musicians can create better conditions to achieve better rehearsals and performances. Each category will work in connection with other categories resulting in reaching the goal of the group. The success of the group depends so much on the dynamic relation among these categories. All of the members make efforts to support the process by keeping the categories accesible in performing activities.

The three categories are individuality, originality, and adaptability. Since they are significant in making sense of social conditions I will explore them by contextualizing them in a specific setting using relevant contexts.

### **Individuality**

Individuality means something about person, a human being in his/her own existence. In this situation, musicians think of the self even if they are in a group of professionals. They assume that being in social activities is a means of expressing self in wider contexts. They need to orient themselves among other people to show that they have something peculiar for the community.

In rehearsals or performances musicians are aware that an autonomy allows them to negotiate relationship with other members and to transact their position in the community. It is in this sense that they create specific characters leading into a distinctive qualities. Persons appear to be part of the whole system in which everyone plays part in relation to other people. Thus, a person cannot behave as he/she wants it to do without thinking of their colleagues in the group.

Being in social contexts musicians exist in a place where all of the members of a group have the same interest and orientations. This occurs when everyone feels being in-group and follow the same regulation and duty for the development of the society. In other words, orientation of a process and its result will accomodate the aspirations of the people in that community.

Even if individuality has something to do with a person, this category works well when a musician meet his/her colleagues in a group. This category achieves better quality by being in comparison with others and it contrasts with different characters of things and people. Individuality works in relation to others and among the most significant feature of the category is its role to format the quality of an individual. It is the category that gives direction to orient what musicians think and do on stage and on rehearsals before they perform.

Individuality implies many sub-categories such as “it is me”, the awareness of self, and the ability to perceive oneself in a clear condition. Through this process seeing oneself through deep reflection is urgent thing to do in order to get objective perception of self (Rödl, 2018). Anyway, individuality can be seen as a means of indicating the way people affiliate with a group of people; to whom a person associates when he/she performs a specific behavior in a particular setting.

In wider sense, individuality shows how a person creates a sense of attachment in an environment using particular orientation to reach a specific goal. It is a means of negotiating relationship in a healthy condition when an individual person manages to be in-group with a personal expectation and assumption.

## **Originality**

In dealing with individuality musicians try to keep aspects of the social process original without any imitation. What they think and behave are real, manifesting what they have in their mind not something out there. They want to maintain contexts, issues, and relationship fresh and genuine. In sustaining the dynamic of social process musicians avoid artificiality, something not essential in the group. Musicians cannot just use any value but they must combine proper values in which “a person’s value orientation and his or her view on how to understand the world and the capabilities it offers, the lens through which the world is seen”(van Egmond & de Vries, 2011).

Musicians gain originality by reflecting notions from culture and religion as well as from social environments. They may conduct “experiments” through social participation and criticism intending to gain new ideas on proper perspective. This is not just a trial and error process manifesting any behavior but it is an observation to adjust the relevant thoughts. This process needs contemplation and reflections otherwise it will not result in the ideal conceptions.

The main character of this category is authentic meaning reliability to keep the character of the group. This category becomes significant in this context because it maintains the essence of the group and at the same time sustain the legitimate status of each individual. What essential to keep social process is to escape from unnecessary relations that lead to the wrong interpretation of what people want to say in that process. Essentially, originality requires good perception of what should be kept the relevance of behavior in the group. Thus, the members of the group should rely on mutual understanding that lead to the solidity of the community.

The reason why originality becomes significant factor to foster identity is because it can see a thing in a larger situation. Sheril D. Antonio, for example, posits that originality is a complex phenomenon, like what happens in evaluating art, more just what we can see in everyday life

but more importantly, see them in a larger cultural and global context. When it comes to looking at a work of art, I ask them to try and see it in a variety of ways: first by assessing the individual elements in the visual text itself; then to try and see it from artist’s perspective by carefully looking for revealing clues in the work of art; and finally to try and see what it wants to be – without attachments to either the creator intention or our desire as spectator (which might not be possible) (Antonio, 2016).

What I intend to say here is that to gain a sense of originality we have to go beyond what ordinary people can see and think and this is important step in getting the real originality valuable in this context. Using this view we can avoid the vagueness that we may experience when we do not implement the critical way of thinking.

## **Adaptability**

This category is crucial in the development of social identity because it evaluates and criticizes the environments by making sense of relevant categories. In this sense, the pertinent categories are individuality and originality. To adapt other categories demands flexibility in which an individual considers environments as potential elements to construct identity. Interconnection among categories is the key to initiate the formation of identity.

Implementing adaptability category needs capability to compromise personal desire and group needs. The use of this category is for fostering moderate condition in which people feel comfortable being in new social settings. Thus, flexibility is required to adopt something applicable in a certain environment. This is more than just adjusting someone's concept but more importantly to make wise decisions. It is the process of demolishing doubt with proper consideration to avoid unnecessary conditions.

To achieve this goal someone needs to apply a genuine and intelligent thought leading into a better condition of society. In performances, musicians need to be alert to a negative impact of a disadvantage category. Avoiding this category musicians need to be consistent to commit with all of the considerations implied by the members of the society. By using this strategy people will reach the destination.

## **Identity**

From the above discussion we can say that musicians exist in community using personal values and they use specific orientations that make sense of categories in the group. Three categories create strong orientation to formulate identity where groups of musicians intend to orient in their activity. Using these categories they want to promote individuality and at the same time reach originality of their aspects of life as well as to adapt social values to make sense of their community.

Using three social categories musicians construct identity for making ideals among members of the group. These musicians make use of them as a means of keeping the group solid in dealing with the dynamic of social interactions. Every member of the group tries to be active in the social settings fulfilling requirements for the interactions. All of the members eventually develop group awareness for constructing the identity meaningful for the group. When this occurs musicians can develop mechanisms that foster the solidarity among colleagues.

The formulation of identity is crucial in the group for keeping the behavior in line with the group and the community. Jess Wistlestone believes that owning identity has benefits not only for directing orientations but also for making decisions to be confident in making choices between options. She said: "Having a sense of what kind of person you are makes it much easier to decide how you should behave, and to have confidence in your choice between options" (Wistlestone, n.d.).

Constructing identity is a long process using several social categories in a changing situation and interactions (Todd, 2005). It is in this sense that all of the aspects of categories are interacting to get a better sense in that community. Musicians who exist in this situation are implementing all of the considerations suitable for the process.

When this occurs musicians feel convenient both in the group and in the community. Being in the situation makes them appropriate to express musical concepts that eventually inspire other people in that group. By using this strategy musicians may be able to emphasize the events to get meaningful values in social environments. Since the musical concepts are powerful in the formation of feeling audiences may experience deep impression such as giving them inspiration to the strength to-live (Yoshitaka, 2007). Experiencing the intensive atmosphere like this leads people intend to re-orient themselves not only at the time of performances but also after the musical concerts. I believe that this is the best contribution of the music to the community at large. By using this “technique” audiences can makes associations proper for their world-view. The process of constructing identity among musicians in rehearsals and performances can be seen in the following Figure 1.



Figure 1 The construction of identity using individuality, originality, and adaptability in social category

## Conclusions

Among many categories that exist in relation with musicians and community three categories are dominant in the process of constructing identity in performances and rehearsals. These categories (individuality, originality, and adaptability) are interconnected one another in such a way that musicians can make sense of self and group among people in performances. Constructing identity is an active process in which musicians are aware of their position and they know what to do in what kind of environments they will behave and how to do it properly. Using music they can make sense of social setting to become their own and at the same time they implement world-view to gain solidarity in the community. Thus, constructing identity requires active participation and knowledge of better future and development.

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