

*In Search of Justice Narratives in Music Performances:
Intersecting Meaning among Musicians in Gamelan*

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Abstract

This paper explores how musicians and singers in gamelan performances represent ideals to criticize groups of people. The researcher believes that by implementing Thandeka K Chapman's approach (2011), in which personal, community, and global levels of social interactions forge meanings, musicians and audiences emphasize the significant issues in community. Using the idea the writer intends to show that articulating appropriate themes from social contexts, musicians and singers strengthen issues in social, political and cultural domains that result in the negotiation of the concepts of: balance of status, recognition of right, refinement of social conducts, better relationship between human and natures, and the like. Through metaphors in performances they mediate the dream and the reality they want to manifest in their contexts.

Keywords: performance, Indonesia, gamelan, narrative, justice

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Introduction

In the last five years or so, I have been observing the use of gamelan, an Indonesian musical orchestra, in various events in community. My focus has been the relationship between musicians and audiences in performances. Along the process of investigation, I get better understanding of how significant the role of musicians is, making them central figures in performances. This makes me pay close attention of relation among music, musicians, audiences and environments.

A question arises: what musicians want to express when performing gamelan? Performing gamelan is more than making sound of instruments available for audiences. It is unlike presenting a box in an empty space without meaning rather it is a condition that is responsive to social settings and conditions. Musicians express ideals: belief, desire, intention, and hope to deliver meaning to the well-informed audiences. Performances mediate ideas from performing artists to audiences in a fluid condition. This can be done after “mapping” (Jogerson, 1998:78) the aesthetic domain of audiences.

Performing gamelan requires understanding of what audiences think of environments, how they reflect community, and in what way they preserve nature. This is so because musicians do not perform ideas that derive from nothing rather they adjust with social setting and ritual or ceremonial background. Musicians need knowledge of environments that may become guide to formulate ideas for performance. They are required to be sensitive to issues that affect the way musicians create performances.

When perform, musicians do not rely on imagination of their personal point of view rather they try to correlate between what they think and what audiences think in the contexts of social life. So, they can develop ideas only when they are familiar with people and community and understand the issues that are available in the society.

Methodology

This investigation is based on field works done among 10 (ten) musicians and 10 (ten) male and female singers living in Surakarta (Solo), Indonesia. Interviews were done to collect data concerning performances in ceremonial and ritual contexts. In performances, musicians and singers consider to react to audiences who own ideals that exist in community. Using long experiences in playing gamelan and singing in performances, they react to audiences and fluid atmosphere to articulate current and significant issues to reach community goal. The researcher believes that implementing Chapman’s approach (2011), in which personal, community, and global levels of social interactions forge new meanings, musicians and audiences create meanings in the community.

Based on Chapman’s concept the researcher develops the concept of “intersecting meaning” in which three levels of social interaction intersect to establish new meanings in communities. The three levels of social contexts, each has different meaningful elements and fragments, create social dynamic that results in new atmosphere that provides space to the process of creating meanings. In this process musicians, who have previous experiences, are delved into larger context that results in new aspiration. Thus, belief, concept, and aspirations do not stay as they are rather

they are renewed to reach proper environments. It is in this process that musicians guide audiences to develop new ideas for the better community life.

Justice in Interactive Context

No matter how scholars disagree with the scope of the principle of justice, people believe that justice is not just personal matter rather it is a public domain in which all of the community members are responsible to maintain the concept. Justice covers wide context not only as personal morality but also as communal ethics in which all of people are actively involved in a public event; it should be implemented among members of the community. In line with this, Clive Barnett believes that the concept of justice should avoid prejudice and challenge imaginary geographical constraints by saying: “Freeing concepts of justice from imaginary geographical constraints and from restrictive rationalistic conventions presents a challenge to spatial disciplines to suspend their chauvinism about the use of spatial vocabularies in other fields” (2010:246).

Even if it is based on personal view the implementation of justice requires wide context in which variety of thoughts exchange position and roles in the constellation of people’s world-views. Everyone in the group is involved in “public policy” sharing equal chances to be part of the community. So, justice narrative cannot be executed by individuals who dominate others because it is a collective domain in which people make cooperative efforts. Personal views are parts of the elements contributing meaning to the whole system. Due to the necessity to reach equal position and civil right, every member needs to make efforts and it is in this context that all groups of people: government officials, merchants, lawyers, musicians, singers, and artists make sense of context in social interaction.

Individuals, who have freedom to behave and think in community, consider justice as the fundamental and substantial value in society. To achieve justice every member needs to conduct personal contact and interaction with other members rather than generating genetic engineering for their interaction. Ronald A. Lindsay believes that genetic engineering on social interaction cannot make better environments; it can only impair the condition of the society. Lindsay continues that the engineering “will exacerbate existing social divisions and inequalities, especially if only the wealthy can afford genetic enhancements (2005:3).

The researcher positions the role of individual as an important figure in reaching justice because they are central to the process of interaction in community. They are the paramount in the negotiation of ideals to generate morality, following Joshua Kassner’s idea (2011:219). As moral agents they feel obliged to accommodate other’s view to keep community intact. When justice concept is implemented everyone in the group will feel secure because they already know the concept and are able to constitute practical reasoning. Barnett further explains how individuals use reasoning when they conduct interaction with other people. Citing J. Tully he says: “Using concepts like justice, equality, and freedom is a matter of practical reasoning, meaning that it involves the activity of ‘being able to use a general term in various circumstances and being able to give reasons for and against that use’” (Barnett, 2010:247). It is this reason that the researcher intends to contextualize justice concept

in gamelan performances especially to implement the concept in wider contexts of variety of group resulting in general meaning of justice for audiences.

The Narrative of Self

Performing music is held in a particular situation and it orients on specific purposes. It reacts to specific issue by using perception taken from environments. Musicians, who are also active in social events, make use of values in social domain to represent current issues. What happened to Outlanders in diaspora worlds among Danish group in Denmark, for example, shows how musicians use social settings as a means of constructing narrative of self. Reem M. Hilal explored this issue in the negotiation and construction of the narrative as follows:

Through their music, Outlandish expresses the ways in which what differentiates between people binds them through a process of recognition, to borrow from Judith Butler. Focusing on Outlandish's music, I examine the role of music in the negotiation and construction of narratives of self by contemporary Muslims that counter those that have been constructed for and against them (2015:20).

The construction of self occurs in complicated process in which musicians reinforce rules of conduct to maintain social order. The process mediates musicians to express current and meaningful issues to the members of audiences and at the same time they forge social norms to comply with the development of thoughts. This occurs in a dynamic process in which every member develops thoughts. It eventually affects not only the way people react one another but also more importantly how individuals struggle in the group. I believe that musicians use basic ideas that function as "the bedrock of group solidarity and survival" to use Donatus I Njoku term (2015:25).

In the process of interaction musician preserves connectivity using individual point of view not only in personal but also in communal and global contexts using Dianna Harris' concept that music is "a means of grounding, provoking, and connecting' with himself and his community (2011: 394). This connectivity alters people's orientations that eventually "change from looking at the universe as fixed, and translate our attitudes in a way that allows us to connect with one another (2011: 395). It is in this context that people improve their world-views and perspective in wider context of environments.

The above process leads musicians to evaluate and consider moral values by contrasting evil and good, equality and inequality, justice and injustice, the concerns for keeping the community alive. In other words, they conserve principles as references that guide people to protect unity. They interpret the ideals in new environments expecting to bring new interpretations, expectations, dreams, preferences, and aspirations and contextualize them in performance. These result in the formation of new issues among members of audiences.

Being in this context, individuals make sense of self and others in a community group and a global environments aiming to negotiate proper ideals. The process occurs following Thandeka Chapman's model in which "something personal and immediate, such as living in dangerous neighborhood, can be related to global issue of violence

and war” (2011:50). In this process personal meaning achieve global meaning by using interactions in different levels. Contents of performance are then constantly adjusted to environments negotiating perspective to reach final concept.

Chapman’s model of Justice Narrative in Gamelan Performances

The researcher thinks that Thandeka Chapman et. al.’s article on “A Social Justice Approach as a Base Teaching Writing” is a seminal model for an analysis of justice narrative. They apply social justice approach to writing in a literature class in which students use ideas from contexts and environments to format the writing. This approach can be applied to other kinds of arts in different context such as in dance, theatre, and music performance. In this article the researcher is going to show the use of the concept in gamelan performances.

As a model of analysis the process of writing in literature owns a specific characteristic: it triggers an individual interaction with environments in community. Chapman et. al. model defines writing as a nurturing process of interconnections among members of community in different levels. They classify the interaction into three levels: personal, community, and global contexts (2011:539). Each level has its own characteristic that will become guide to the process of interaction.

Other important feature of the model is that the writing, as well as performing, presenting, and articulating ideas, stimulates psychological process that results in the awareness of individuals in wider social contexts. Individuals own internal living power that is readily changing to adjust with other powers. This process results in the refreshment of its format and content. It is through this process that internal elements of awareness react to social challenges that occur in their environments. Even if individuals are involved in inherent process it is the interactive process that defines the final format and content of the thought because they intentionally mean to gain new thoughts.

For Chapman individuals do not have static characters attached to their personality rather they maintain a group of characters that develop in their environments. Through an intensive communication with other individuals they construct configuration of meanings. Mutual collaboration among individual, that occurs in the above contexts, negotiate to find what is proper for the community. The contrast among ideals results in an “amalgam” in which new aspiration is constructed. This fusion leads into new meaning that can be called “intersecting meaning”. This meaning reflects the current ideals that are relevant to the present-day condition.

Using similar approach to writing literature, performing music mediates the three levels of interaction (personal, local, and global) leading into a particular and new perception. Personal level provides basis for local and global processes resulting in new orientation for the individuals. The interactive process of individuals in local and global environments stimulates complicated process of intersection resulted in the “intersecting meaning” mentioned before. The three levels of awareness occur when the integration of value system strengthen the whole system in community. This affects people’s orientation that stimulates interpretation of all potential meanings.

Like what happens in Nigeria, this process stimulates re-orientation of value system that “would promote national image, respect for human life and corporate values” (Njoku, 2015:25). This eventually binds the participants to feel in the same atmosphere and formulate the sense of being in the same community (Salavuo, 2006:254). This process can be seen as individual orientation that emphasizes the importance of listening music as a means to forge a sense of self. Listening to music “often form allegiance that transcend time and place plays crucial role in forging sense of self in ways that are important to understand but difficult to explain” (2004:703). Thus, performances recall personal aspects of life – of the position, relation, belief, ethic, prestige, etc – to construct new values in relation to the current settings and situation.

The value construction forges the formation of pride, self, and dignity that heightens musicians’ and audiences’ statuses and roles in the community. Furthermore, these processes help in the formation of identity, a basic ideal in which characters and personalities are modelled into a social unit, as Salavuo puts it, “Discussions about music are a core part of any music culture, and they help to form identities and create a sense of togetherness and belonging” (2006:254). This is the most fundamental value that inspires behaviours and thoughts. In Javanese community this practice is significant to mediate musicians to articulate ideals that represent strong voice that may not be heard in daily community settings. For audiences this representation provides media to absorb the current buzzing issue.

Presenting Justice in Performance

The following passages explore how Chapman concept inspires the frame of reference for musicians and audiences in gamelan performances. Especially, how musicians orient themselves on the three contexts formulated by his model of interaction. For musicians, the contexts have significant role in the articulation of issues because they intend to adjust with the dynamic of the environments. Since musicians are involved in the environments, they know what issues are relevant to the community. For that reason, the musicians can articulate appropriate issues such as: to criticize the misconduct of rulers, to disagree with the management of natural resources, to condemn the behaviour of bureaucrats, and to promote government’s programs. A heated issue of corruption, for example, can be presented as follow:

Kuwi apa kuwi e kembang melathi
Sing tak puja puji aja dha korupsi
Marga yen korupsi negarane rugi
Piye mas kuwi iya ngona ngono-ngono kuwi

[take a look what is that? That is a jasmine flower]
[I wish you do not corrupt]
[because if you corrupt, the country will collapse]
[what do you think sir, what you said is correct]

In the above example, musicians’ idea corresponds to the stanza especially the second and third lines representing the main idea of the song. The idea emphasizes the current social issue that is widely uttered on television program, newspapers, and

social media. The choice of the issue does not occur by accident as every member of the community is exposed to the issue.

Pak Waluyo, a senior male singer in Surakarta, believes that participation in community will help musicians and singers internalize “the intersecting meaning” (personal communication, August 1, 2017). For him, presentation of a song opens wide space to create imagination for musicians and singers. It stimulates interaction between musicians and audiences especially because it targets the greedy people who want to gain personal matters. Musicians and singers intend to convey messages of disapproval on current situation especially the imbalance position between those who gain power and the under-pressured groups who suffer from the lack of power. Presenting the song musicians hope that audiences perceive strong image of “broad, diffuse, and vague sets of beliefs, emotions, values, preferences, and ideals” (Jackson, 2005:29) that are current and may occur in reality. Pak Rusdiyantoro, another senior male singer in Surakarta, also believes that the meaning of the song can guide them to understand and reinforce human rights, social welfares, freedoms, and liberties (interview, November 3, 2016). Similarly, a song called ”Biko” by Peter Gabriel is not simply a political rally song with an ability to facilitate ‘collective identity formation’ but a protest song able to intersect with the political consciences of audience members” (Drewett, 2007:39).

Ideals offered by a song do not only make sense in personal level but more importantly in community and global levels as it is mentioned in Chapman model. This process is widely known in gamelan community because in performances people orient themselves on social welfare as it happens in other aspects of life in community. Musicians and singers do not only think of gamelan performances as a means of amusing audiences (they call it *tontonan*, an entertainment) but also of presenting social rules (*tatanan*, a social order), and expressing a guide of ethical conduct (*tuntunan*, a moral force). According to Pak Waluyo, a performance should take ideals from community and orient its meaning to justice, the fundamental issue in community (interview, August 1, 2017). The process of getting meaning in community can be illustrated in the following diagram:

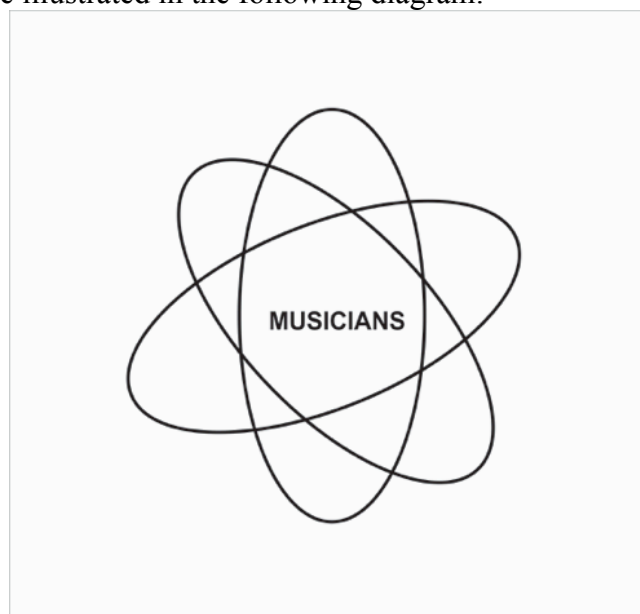


Diagram 1. Musicians are involved in the personal, communal, and global social interactions.

The complex social interaction in performances, as shown in the diagram, reflects the process in which personal values are conflicted with community and global values. This conflict occurs in a changing configuration that put musicians and audiences in a constant dialogue to find ideals. Through this process musicians and audiences are involved in a liminal stage that requires consideration to make good decision. It is in this context that all of the thoughts are contested to find the best assessment to ethical values in community. Thus, Chapman model provides reference for musicians and audiences to find the best ideal that is conceivable in the three levels of contexts, personal, communal, and global environments. This social environment provides local values such as *tontonan*, *tatanan*, and *tuntunan* mentioned above to get position in a real environment. These ideals find new format in which conflicting thoughts find agreement. This process can mediate ideals such as glory, virtue, and wisdom find meaningful to contest with negative values such as corruption, exploitation of resources, and dishonest behaviours.

Conclusion

To conclude this article, I would like to emphasize that musicians and singers do not only use performances to affect people's orientation in aesthetic domain rather they also use it as a means of conducting dialogue with audiences. Musicians and singers intend to articulate real issues: disagreement with natural resources management, condemnation to bureaucrats' behavior, promotion of government's programs, and criticism to rulers' misconduct. They believe that music can be used as a method of expressing voices in which people are struggling for social welfare and balance of life. Moreover, performances can provide alternative point of view in which, by their own deliberate choice, audiences can change world-views through the use of images that exist in gamelan (music) performances. This image reverberates in the minds of audiences that in turn will influence the way they think and behave in community. In a way, music can be used as a means of expressing voices in which people are struggling for harmony and justice, as they are reflected in their world-views. As a whole, people in gamelan community use performances for portraying social issues: social welfare, freedom, justice, human rights, etc. The contents of the performances strengthen the values and vice versa resulting in the reinforcement of new social and cultural values for the contemporary life and the future.

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