Review Article

Cultural construction of illness, festival and music in Southeast Asia

Muhamad Ali

Acts of integration, expression of faith: Madness, death, and ritual in Melanau ontology
By ANN L. APPLETON
Maine: Borneo Research Council Monograph No. 6, 2006, Pp. 361. Appendix, Maps Notes, Bibliography, Index.

Bridges to the ancestors: Music, myth, and cultural politics at an Indonesian festival
By DAVID D. HARNISH
Maine: Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2006, Pp. 260. Notes, Glossary, Bibliography, Index.

Listening to an earlier Java: Aesthetics, gender, and the music in central Java
By SARAH WEISS
Maine: Leiden, KITLV Press, 2006. Pp. 187. Glossary, Bibliography, Index.

Southeast Asia remains a rich region for students and scholars interested in understanding the place of culture within a variety of human activities. Three recent studies under review, *Acts of integration*, *Bridges to the ancestors* and *Listening to an earlier Java*, particularly demonstrate the ways in which culture plays a pertinent role in the health, performance and music of contemporary Southeast Asians. Although *Acts of integration* focuses on mental images, *Bridges to the ancestors* on a festival, and *Listening to an earlier Java* on musical sound, the studies shared the recognition of the interplay between two opposite yet interactive forces: sacred and secular; inner and outer; order and chaos; male and female. They argue that mental normality, aesthetics and music represent, shape and are shaped by culture characterised by such dichotomous categories. Amidst other studies which try to deconstruct culture as more fluid and hybrid, however, these works serve as a reminder of the place of culture as an underlying persistent force in shaping the views and lives of many Southeast Asian peoples.

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The cultural

Each of the works studies different objects of study and comes with specific findings. In *Acts of integration*, Appleton connects psychopathology to culture in that categories of normality and abnormality would not be understood without considering the wider context of culture. Primarily informed by the works of Stephen Morris, Victor Turner, R.A. Rappaport and Carl G. Jung, Appleton reflects the connection between psychopathology and 'traditional' healing practices in Melanau, East Malaysia, where Christian, Muslim and indigenous/'pagan' Melanau people coexist. Observing five traditional healers — the traditional Melanau *a-bayoh*, the *dukun*, the *bomoh*, the Chinese *sinsei* and the Catholic healers, Appleton argues that they all act as cultural mediators between 'the person who presents with a problem or illness and the forces behind the imbalance that has caused the problem to occur'.[1] Appleton argues that notions of normality and abnormality are culturally constructed categories, within space and time.[2] To her, personhood consists of negotiated processes structured in relationship to the experience of being in a world.[3]

Working on the Pujawali festival in the village of Lingsar in West Lombok, David Harnish explores how symbolic practices (music, performing arts and rites) shape socially active history, how modernisation shaped and was shaped by the festival, and how individual and group agency define Balinese and Sasak and their cultures.[4] Harnish pointed out that the festival has multiple functions: communicating with the divine, securing agricultural and human prosperity, helping regulate irrigations, being a forum in which to erect history, remembering ancestors, constructing socioreligious ethnicity, and harmonising relations between the two ethnic groups.

Sarah Weiss employs cultural analysis and musical analysis to explore the sound and performance of an old-style shadow puppet (*wayang*) and female-style instrument (*gender*) in Central Java. In her study, Weiss uses present musical practice to understand past musical culture. Although Weiss is an ethnomusicologist, her claim is that she uses an interdisciplinary approach: historical, anthropological, gender studies and ethnographic methods.[5]

Appleton, Harnish and Weiss all recognise dimensions of change in cultures but they do not define what culture means when they use it in different contexts: whether it is the total way of life, a way of thinking, feeling and believing, an anthropological theory of human behaviour, learned behaviour, or something else, and whether it resists change or changes. The three works locate culture as the representation of local tradition and continuities. The three works imply that culture is local, and anything local is cultural, whereas the 'external forces' (for example, globalisation, modernisation, colonialism, nationalism) are not culture. For example, Harnish claims that having no relationship with national, Southeast Asian or international militant

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1   Ann L. Appleton, *Acts of integration, expression of faith: Madness, death, and ritual in Melanau ontology* (Maine: Borneo Research Council Monograph No. 6, 2006), p. 110.

2   Ibid., pp. 91, 114–16, 121.

3   Ibid., p. 190.

4   David. D. Harnish, *Bridges to the ancestors: Music, myth, and cultural politics at an Indonesian festival* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), p. 11.

5   Sarah Weiss, *Listening to an earlier Java: Aesthetics, gender, and the music in central Java* (Maine: Leiden, KITLV Press, 2006), p. 161.

groups, the people remained loyal to local culture.[6] These works do not provide us with an analysis of how the peoples in Sarawak, Lombok and central Java define their ways of life and categorise things in their own terms. If people view healing practices, festivals, music, shadow puppetry and performance as part of their culture, then the question is which definition the observers use when they argue that culture shapes the peoples' healing, festival, music and arts performances.

The shared contention among the authors is that culture is associated with continuity and persistence. There are aspects of culture that endure. Harnish puts it as follows, 'the festival and its diverse meanings and functions were *tetap sama* (still the same), despite some developments in terms of participants and improvements'.[7] 'Today, as perhaps a hundred years ago, the spiritual and social role of the festival is to generate harmony, *ramé* (lively experience), and the quality of *communitas*.'[8] Harnish recognises changes in some aspects of the music and dance, but external forces – globalisation, nationalism and religious identity – as well as new local leadership, influence the direction of such changes.[9] External forces do not inherently mean or bring change and the internal forces (age, tradition) do not always resist change.

The sacred

The sacred is present in the three works, but it has different meanings. For Appleton, it is the power of ritual that provides continuity and protection against change (such as death and illness). Appleton stresses expressive and instrumental dimensions of ritual, suggesting that it maintains health and balance and makes an individual socially integrated and also 'mitigates the effects of factors which are associated with mental distress'.[10] Ritual is not simply a primordial impulse; for Appleton, it is also 'a mechanism mediating and balancing self and the world, sacred and secular, inner and outer, rational and irrational'.[11] Ritual becomes important because it is related to matters of life and death. Death is associated with 'the disintegration or loss of the sense of self' and the loss of the soul makes a person emotionally unstable, and ritual serves to create a balance.[12] Appleton views participation in calendrical rituals as acts of integration and expressions of faith. 'Life and death are points on a single continuum, that the living and the dead can be incorporated into a single social order which is eternal',[13] but interestingly, there is the shifting between the sacred and the profane, between seen and unseen, waking and dreaming.[14]

For Harnish, the sacred in the festival is higher in meaning than the cultural, but it interacts with the economic and the political. Through ritual processes, the festival guarantees sufficient rainfall and irrigation water for the rice fields. The festival therefore has a universal appeal to the inhabitants of Lombok, Hindu Balinese and Muslim

6 Harnish, *Bridges to the ancestors*, p. 15.
7 Ibid., p. 9.
8 Ibid., p. 189.
9 Ibid., pp. 190, 198–204.
10 Appleton, *Acts of integration, expression of faith*, p. 10.
11 Ibid., p. 54.
12 Ibid., p. 195.
13 Ibid., p. 228.
14 Ibid., pp. 114–16.

Sasak alike.[15] The meaning of the festival can shift however. The regional government attempted to modify the meaning of the festival from a religious to a cultural one in order to separate Sasak participation from any religious implications. Many government officials claim that the *Waktu Telu* faith is not a religion and the temple is not an Islamic institution; therefore, Harnish suggests, Sasak participation at Lingsar cannot be 'religious'; it is merely 'cultural'.[16] As Harnish points out, 'the sacred always attracts the profane, and the Lingsar Pujawali conjoins seriousness with a sense of fun. The sacred also attracts politics, and various political forces vie to become associated with festivals'.[17] Among the local people, Harnish suggests, there are different perspectives on the nature of the Lingsar festival: *warisan* (inheritance), *budaya* (culture) or *agama* (religion).[18] Many local Muslims, whom Harnish categorises as 'moderate' and 'nominal', participate in the festival, with some engaging in the ritual, others disengaging and merely attending it. Some other Muslims reinterpret the myth and try to Islamise aspects of the festival because most attend out of a cultural obligation, not because of religious beliefs.[19] He suggests, 'the increasing Islamic orientation of the Sasak can still be accommodated, though further distance between the realms of traditional custom and faith will advance the festival's transformation from religious to cultural and presentational'.[20] However, religion and culture can actually be interpenetrating and overlapping. In addition, the sacred has no meaning without the secular.

The emotional

The three works argue that the religious is closely related to the emotions or feeling (*rasa*, in Javanese). These works recognise the tension between emotion and cognition, but in music and arts performances, emotion prevails, although feeling and thinking are considered as neither distinct nor opposed processes in the case of health and illness.[21] If Clifford Geertz interprets the term *rasa* as both 'feeling' and 'meaning',[22] Weiss sees *rasa* as having multiple meanings ranging from its association with Javanese Tantric and Islamic mysticism to mundane bodily and emotional sensations.[23] 'Javanese *rasa*', Weiss argues, 'is mostly based on religious philosophy and doctrine, as a continuum connecting deep mystical understandings to the surface sensations of bodily experience.[24]

Moreover, according to Weiss, *rasa* has dual nature: associated with emotional release and with restraint, with educated refinement and unreserved human response, and with controlled rightful order and cataclysmic chaos.[25] *Rasa* is also gendered: male and female.[26] Although some local players say that 'the inner essence of the

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15 Harnish, *Bridges to the ancestors*, p. 8.
16 Ibid., pp. 69–70, 74.
17 Ibid., p. 19.
18 Ibid. p. 38.
19 Ibid., p. 118.
20 Ibid., pp. 207–8.
21 Appleton, *Acts of integration, expression of faith*, p. 270.
22 Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 135.
23 Weiss, *Listening to an earlier Java*, p. 9.
24 Ibid., pp. 105, 110–1.
25 Ibid., p. 15.
26 Ibid., p. 159.

style is feminine, the sound is feminine'[27] and that 'what guides the player is not the mind (*akal*), but the spirit (*jiwa*)',[28] Weiss interprets *rasa* as not inherently female. For Weiss, the female-style gender and the old-style *wayang* can be interpreted as revealing a non-linear, more interactive and more plural model of gender and power relations. A female/male dialectic is a dynamic force for cultural creativity.[29] Furthermore, gendered interaction between chaos and order generates the sacred music and aesthetic, but also reconfirms the political authority of the court.[30] The aesthetic is iconic on many levels in Javanese culture, as embodied in the relationship between the old-style puppeteer and the female gender player, and is intricately bound with the *rasa*.[31] Weiss however is not clear about where the *rasa* comes from. Also, is it a fixed state of feeling? Where is the place of mind (*akal, pikiran*) if there is tension or compromise between feeling and thinking? In other words, where is the place of balance and harmony?

For Harnish, *rasa* is present as a unifying force among different groups. While performance on a social level realised respective cultural selves in opposition to one another, on a spiritual level, it forges a unity between the groups.[32] The experience at Lingsar is both one and two. 'The "two" are the respective experiences of the Balinese and the Sasak that are sometimes constructed in opposition to one another. The "one" is the resulting unification of the two.'[33] Thus, the festival is 'a cultural site of both struggle and reconciliation'.[34] For Appleton, illness or suffering is not just a sign of disorder and imbalance in the individual, it is also an indication of disorder and imbalance in the world and a sign of a breakdown in the relationships between a person and his/her world.[35]

The religious and the emotional are embedded in music and the persistent goal is harmony. Harnish sees the connections between religion and music. Music reflects the 'natural order' of existence. It expresses religious or spiritual sentiments, but also creates a unique sociocultural context for things to happen.[36] In Lombok, music represents religious orientations: those who used traditional gamelans with bronze instruments were regarded as *Waktu Telu* (religiously nominal or syncretic), and those who engaged non-bronze instruments were *Waktu Lima* (religiously conservative), although contemporary use of gamelan has been de-ritualised.[37] The meanings of the varieties of music at Lingsar have changed over time,[38] but despite such change, music remains a balancing and harmonising force. 'Music has a special relationship with religion and cosmology; it is developed upon structural elements shared with cosmology and has an efficacy to transform reality (time and space)

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27 Ibid., p. 19.
28 Ibid., p. 33.
29 Ibid., pp. 54, 160.
30 Ibid. p. 95.
31 Ibid. p. 101.
32 Harnish, *Bridges to the ancestors*, p. 4.
33 Ibid. p. 188.
34 Ibid., p. 207.
35 Appleton, *Acts of integration, expression of faith*, p. 8.
36 Harnish, *Bridges to the ancestors*, p. 13.
37 Ibid., p. 38.
38 Ibid., p. 121.

and to create balance and harmony.'[39] Music and ritual express and support a balanced universal order, thereby preventing chaos.

The social and the past

The other contribution that the three works have made is analysis of the minimum role of the individual and the emphasis upon group agency in the construction of meaning. The social has its crucial power. Meanings vary, but, for the music to be 'meaningful' and experienced as such, the environment must be properly set. At Lingsar, Harnish argues, 'this prepared environment manifests when the symbolisms of ritual objects have been activated and intermixed'.[40] All redefine Turner's word, 'communitas'. For Harnish, the shared rites create a sense of 'communitas', where separate social roles and ethnic identity dissolve the establishment of a unified spiritual order.[41] According to Appleton, communitas or human interrelatedness is useful in analysing complex mental experiences: senses of danger, alienation, disorientation, anxiety and so forth.[42] For Weiss, although not expressed explicitly, the social force is located in the intersection between the court and the village, male and female, but more importantly in the collective myth.[43]

Following Mircea Eliade, Harnish sees myth as, 'expressing, enhancing, and codifying belief', revealing moral wisdom, and providing a statement of reality, 'by which the present life, fates, and activities of mankind are determined'.[44] Harnish views history and myth as equally meaningful and all variations of both are valid within their own context. And meaning is communicated through the identification of founders and ancestors, assertion of their religions and spiritual powers, and subordination of the other group.[45] Thus, the collective myths provide more than just rationales for the festivals, they are celebrations of ethnicity.[46] In Lombok, the Sasak and Balinese myths directly conflict and have contemporary political meanings. Most Sasak feel that the Lingsar is an inheritance from their ancestors and most migrant Balinese believe that they received a mandate to rule Lombok from their deities. Thus, 'whoever owns Lingsar, its temple, and its festival, holds spiritual power to control the destiny, fertility, and prosperity of Lombok'.[47]

For Weiss, the place of myth is also crucial in the continuity of the music in central Java. The twentieth-century construction of maleness and femaleness, chaos and order, restraint and expressed emotion in musical and *wayang* performances resonates with the Javanese versions of the Bharatayudda, dating back from the twelfth century CE, particularly the introduction of women in the battlefield.[48] Even though there are some changes in Javanese *wayang* performance over the course of the twentieth century, indicating some discontinuities caused by hybridisation and the impact

39 Ibid. p. 125.
40 Ibid., pp. 165–6.
41 Ibid., p. 8.
42 Appleton, *Acts of integration, expression of faith*, p. 43.
43 Weiss, *Listening to an earlier Java*, pp. 124, 131, 158.
44 Mircea Eliade, *Myth and reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 20.
45 Harnish, *Bridges to the ancestors*, pp. 46, 68.
46 Ibid., p. 68.
47 Ibid., p. 43.
48 Weiss, *Listening to an earlier Java*, pp. 131–58.

of the west, continuities with the past cannot be ignored in order to understand fully Javanese aesthetics.[49]

Significance and future research

Appleton, Harnish and Weiss have made important contributions to the cross-cultural study of mental illness, festival and music in Southeast Asia from primarily cultural perspectives. Binary opposition exists between western and local ways of thinking and doing things; cultures still exist however. Appleton believes that mental illness in 'traditional societies and technically advanced societies' is different.[50] Appleton further claims that 'in combination with Melanau ontology and the spiritual beliefs that seemed universal throughout the community – whether Muslim, Christian, Baha'i, or a-Likou, the traditional healer was the cornerstone of a foundation that sees the scene for possibilities and experiences to occur which perhaps don't exist in a modernized western context'.[51] She also sees the meaning of death in the 'eastern societies' as a point in a continuum, an experience that needs to be celebrated in a festival, unlike death in western societies where it is understood as 'a fall into meaninglessness, darkness, terror, and utter aloneness'.[52] She maintains that individuality, objectivity and rationality are notions of personhood which are uniquely western.[53] Weiss still maintains that Javanese and western musics are necessarily distinct and that the former are less scientific than the latter.[54] Methodologically, there is more awareness about the need to make a paradigm shift 'from understanding the other to understanding the self',[55] 'from a positivist and objectivist perspective' to 'a more reflexive and interacting player',[56] or 'from one monolithic approach to multi-disciplinary approach'.[57] For future research, however, one needs to problematise more seriously their use of categories and acts of categorising in the first place: 'western', 'local', 'religious', 'cultural', 'scientific' and 'emotional' are words which do not completely reflect the reality which is not always categorical, but more inter-relational, multi-dimensional and open-ended. Students and scholars of ethnology, anthropology, religious studies and history of Southeast Asia will find these works useful and interesting.

49 Ibid., p. 160.
50 Appleton, *Acts of integration, expression of faith*, pp. 12, 23.
51 Ibid., p. 161.
52 Ibid., p. 242.
53 Ibid. p. 308.
54 Weiss, *Listening to an earlier Java*, pp. 109, 112.
55 Appleton, *Acts of integration, expression of faith*, p. 308.
56 Harnish, *Bridges to the ancestors*, p. 13.
57 Weiss, *Listening to an earlier Java*, p. 161.