

But readers interested in Indonesia will also be rewarded by this book and its enlightening portrait of the Indonesian state as it negotiates the complex institutional and bureaucratic consequences of its profound turn to democracy in the twenty-first century.

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Gamelan girls: Gender, childhood, and politics in Balinese music ensembles

By SONJA LYNN DOWNING

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One of the most widely-studied music cultures in Southeast Asia, Balinese gamelan has long been a staple of the ethnomusicological canon. But since the early writings of Colin McPhee, the narrative of gamelan and its development, both in and out of Bali, has been a fundamentally male narrative. In this male-dominated practice, most of the master instrumentalists that ethnomusicologists study and collaborate with have been men; thus have we inadvertently centred in our publications largely male experiences and perspectives of Balinese gamelan. Sonja Lynn Downing's *Gamelan Girls* offers a nuanced and compelling counter-narrative, exploring how young women and girls, against a backdrop of conflicting ideologies and assumptions around gender, childhood, cultural identity, and instrumental performance, navigate their own femininities and roles as gamelan musicians, asserting individual and collective agency to construct their own identities.

Drawing on a decade and a half of fieldwork, *Gamelan Girls* is a richly textured ethnographic account of girls and young women playing gamelan in Bali, with particular focus on the few private studios — *sanggar* — that create and nurture these playing opportunities. Downing closely follows three such *sanggar*, tracing a chronological path of changing attitudes and opportunities among their members, teachers, and directors to illustrate how these musicians 'are changing the face of the performing arts in Bali' (p. 41). Their stories come to life on the pages. Yet the book is also a broad historical examination of the place of women in Balinese culture, society, and politics, punctuated throughout with thoughtful comparisons to other cultures across Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Even more, it is a carefully researched synthesis of theories and insights on gender and childhood from a wide spectrum of intellectual frameworks in ethnomusicology, anthropology, history, psychology, gender studies, and phenomenology.

The first three chapters lay the groundwork for Downing's research questions. The Introduction details her motivations and research methods, then outlines the series of aesthetics, beliefs, and discourses that create tension between perceived ideal characteristics of Balinese femininity and those of "good" gamelan performance'

(p. 6). Chapter 1 paints a multilayered picture of the many organisations and structures — traditional, private, and governmental — that have both supported and controlled girls' gamelan in Bali. Downing reaches back through historical records to elucidate how the conflicting priorities of village gamelan groups (*seka gong*), caste, government-sponsored schools, conservatories, competitions, festivals, and private *sanggar* have each differently affected attitudes and action around girls' and women's musical opportunities. Chapter 2 introduces the *sanggar* organisations, directors, teachers, and players who are the focus of the book. Here, Downing discusses the formation and changing reception of each *sanggar* and frames the general activities, experiences, challenges, motivations, and philosophies of both members and teachers. The chapter draws heavily from interviews and field observations, and Downing consciously centres her collaborators' voices here and elsewhere. She pinpoints common threads among organisations and individuals without shying away from their differences, drawing out both connections and distinctions.

Chapter 3 examines the complex web of local, national, and global forces whose competing ideologies have shaped Balinese gender identity formation; Chapter 4 does likewise for Balinese concepts of children and family. Together these chapters elucidate the intersecting challenges facing young women and girls who play gamelan in Bali. Downing considers how these musicians have grappled with 'the repressive ideals of womanhood promoted by the Indonesian state' (p. 76) while also negotiating the recent campaign of religious pride and cultural preservationism in Bali and the conflict between, among other things, Balinese gender complementarity and Balinese patriarchy. She then explores the inherent contradictions between Balinese constructions of childhood and Indonesian state-promoted ideals of family. This leads to a discussion of Balinese education systems and the growing effects of commercialisation and tourism as well as globalisation and consumerism on Balinese conceptions of childhood and children's music-making. Throughout, Downing dances seamlessly between the micro and the macro, pointing out larger historical and geographical trends in one breath, connecting them to an ethnographic observation in the next. She relates comments from interviews and personal communications to these larger threads in ways that never feel forced, allowing her consultants in the field to shape both her arguments and her narrative.

Chapter 5 looks at the ways girls and young women assert agency in gamelan performance, stepping into leadership roles or otherwise 'challenging previously accepted gender divisions, stereotypes, and associated musical and physical styles of playing' (p. 117). Using theories of embodiment, Downing examines interactions where these musicians are asked to move and play in ways that either reinforce or push against gendered stereotypes as well as instances in which they themselves must navigate such choices. Through these analyses, she uncovers a creative middle ground: girls and young women finding new ways to play and interact, disrupting gendered notions of both social acceptability and musical excellence and thus 'transforming oppressive ideologies of childhood, womanhood, femininity, and artistic creation' (p. 142). In Chapter 6, Downing draws on her most recent field research to illuminate the current 'state and status of girls in gamelan' (p. 143), with special focus on the concept of *kompak*: unification or togetherness. She returns to musicians we've followed through the book — children and teens now in their 20s — and introduces

a younger generation of gamelan girls, uncovering processes of performance and pedagogy both familiar and new. This rich diachronic approach offers a bird's eye view of grassroots change in gender roles, expectations, abilities, and opportunities in Balinese gamelan. The book's Conclusion describes two recent performances that show these changes in action, but it also looks to the future, soberly outlining the 'social and political conditions needed to keep the small movement of girls' gamelans growing' (p. 169).

Gamelan Girls is at once an intimate story and a sweeping theoretical exploration. You care about these girls and young women; you're rooting for them. Downing's carefully researched and nuanced arguments come alive through their voices and experiences. Yet their stories will reverberate far beyond Bali, inspiring closer examination of gender roles and women's and girls' agency in male-dominated musics across the world.

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The materiality and efficacy of Balinese letters: Situating scriptural practices

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In Bali, two contrasting paradigms of literacy have come to coexist. In the first half of the twentieth century the Dutch colonial government, and since 1945 and Indonesia's independence, the Indonesian national government, have promoted as part of their programmes of education and knowledge, mass communication, and religion, a modern form of literacy, which is associated with printed texts and typographic Roman script. This modernist form of literacy has become a fundamental characteristic of Bali's reformed Hinduism (*Agama Hindu*) which requires every citizen to embrace a monotheistic doctrine formally taught in a holy book and which is independent of Balinese traditions of worship focused on local deities and ancestors. In contrast, another quite different understanding and practice of literacy has continued to exist in Bali, one which has deep historical roots in ancient Java and Bali, and South Asia, and which both deploys Balinese script (*aksara*) as a phonetic script representing speech but which also, used in rituals, meditation and secret teachings, is invested with an inherent efficacy and power which can change the world.

Annette Hornbacher in her Introduction, explains that, drawing on philology, linguistics, religious studies and anthropology, the essays included in the present book are intended to reconsider 'an analytical distinction' which anthropologists, historians of religion and philologically based scholarship have drawn between a local Balinese orally and ritually informed orthopractic religiosity and a modern book religiosity linked to an exclusionary universal belief system (p. 70). The essays complement Raechelle Rubinstein's discussion of the ritual and tantric aspects of poetic