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Sonic Returns: In Harmony with the Song, Fused by Singing

Jay Yamomo & meLê yamomo

(1.)

The Sonus of the Archives

meLê yamomo: When I first searched for Southeast Asian musicians in the colonial archives of Manila, Singapore, Jakarta, and Hanoi, I expected to find them in cultural or music collections. Instead, they appeared in police, sanitation, and fire department records. To locate colonized artists, I had to think like a colonizer.

Brown performers were rarely documented for their artistry. They were archived as risks to be monitored and controlled. Concert halls lit by candles required fire permits. Performers needed sanitation clearances. Musicians entered the archive not through their music, but through bureaucracies of surveillance.

This experience shaped my thinking about the *sonus*: the relation between sound and body. Sound resonates differently depending on who embodies or hears it. A Dutch anthem will sound one way to a Dutch listener, another way to an Indonesian, Surinamese, or South African subject. Once sound is stripped from its body, the sonus dies. Colonial sound archives repeat this severing. Field recordings in Southeast Asia and recordings of colonial prisoners in Europe built empires and academic careers. We remember the recordists who became professors. We rarely know the names of those whose voices were captured. My projects – *Sonic Entanglements*, *DeCoSEAS*, *Re:Sound* – seek to resuscitate these sonus by reconnecting sounds to the bodies and communities that gave them life.



(2.) Sonic Returns

Jay Yamomo: In thinking about archives, I often recall a story from home in the Philippines. On Bohol Island, artisans once practised *asin tibuok*, a centuries-old salt-making tradition. In 1995, the government passed a law mandating that all salt sold in markets be iodized. Public health improved, but artisanal salt suddenly became illegal. The kilns went cold. The embodied rhythm of salt-making was silenced. A heritage practice was criminalized overnight.

Like displaced sound archives in European museums, *asin tibuok* reveals how heritage is endangered not only by time, but by policies that treat culture as irrelevant to modern life.

This is why we must think of archives as ecosystems rather than storage. A recording is not alive simply because it is digitized. It lives when rooted in community – when children grow up recognizing themselves as custodians of memory, when songs and gestures are passed on as part of daily life.

Restitution, then, is not only about repatriating objects. It is about creating conditions for resonance – for archives to return as living practices rather than static exhibits.

(3.) Death and Re-animation of the Archive

meLê: In 2019, through my project *Sonic Entanglements*, we gathered artists, archivists, and scholars. For nine days, we visited archives in Amsterdam, Hilversum, Berlin, and Vienna. One of those who took part was friend and colleague, Sri Margana.

Sri Margana: I am a historian at the Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta. My grandfather was a *dalang* – a puppeteer and musician – and when I was young, I trained in *wayang*, the Javanese tradition of dance, music, and theatre. Later, I became a historian. This gives me insight into both the performing arts and research. And it is a reminder that in Indonesia, scholarship is often intertwined with artmaking. Recently, I have been researching the Phonogram Archive kept in the Lautarchiv at Humboldt University in Berlin. During our trip to the Lautarchiv der Humboldt Universität-Berlin, I discovered recordings of Raden Mas Jodjana. Born in the royal court of Yogyakarta, he learned dance and music from an early age. In 1914, he went to study in the Netherlands, but soon devoted himself to the arts – dance, music, painting, sculpture. He became one of the rare Javanese professional artists in Europe who could live from his art. He was in contact with many great European artists and intellectuals, and was involved in the cultural movements of his time.

meLê: Jodjana brought Javanese performance into conversation with Europe at a moment when Europe was defining its modernity against its ‘Others’. Wilhelm Doegen recorded his voice as part of the Lautarchiv. When we visited in 2019, we listened to one of these shellac discs.

Sri: Yes. The recording was of a fourteenth-century Panji story. This is a repertoire still alive today, sung to accompany *tari topeng*, the mask dance in Malang, East Java. As I listened, I recognized it, and I sang along.

meLê: That was a striking moment for me, and for everyone present. Jonathan Sterne describes sound archives as ‘resonant tombs’ where the voices of the dead reside. Removed from their communities, these recordings can feel like cultural cemeteries. But when Sri sang with Jodjana, the archive was reanimated. It was no longer just a voice frozen in a European institution – it was a living repertoire, resonating across bodies and generations.

(4.)
 Sonic and Performative
 Entanglements of
 Archive and History

Jay: During the DeCoSEAS workshop in Bali in 2024, I encountered the work of Ama.

Amabilita Sudarmanto: I'm Amabilita Sudarmanto, a philologist and a *sinden*, a Javanese traditional female singer. I am studying the performance context of old Javanese manuscript writing, specifically *Kagungan Dalĕm Sĕrat Pasindhen Bedhaya utawi Srimpi* – 'Lyrics of the King's Bedhaya or Srimpi Dance' and its 21 court dance lyrics. These scrolls are not just meant to be read. They are written in lyrical form to be sung and performed with *gamelan*.

One *bedhaya* dance called *Kuwung-kuwung* illustrates Sultan Hamengku Buwana VIII's journey to the Netherlands in 1919. The text records his travels, where he stayed, and whom he met. But because it is written as lyrics, it is also a song to accompany dance. It is both a historical record and a performance score. In Java, this is how history is archived: not just in writing but through embodied performative repertoires. Without performance, they are incomplete.

Jay: What do these scrolls show about the colonial relationship between Indonesia and the Netherlands?

Ama: In my interpretation, they show the imbalance of power. Even the succession of kings was interfered with by the Dutch. The scrolls record that. They are historical documents and evidence of colonial intrusion.

Jay: When you sing them as a *sinden*, you are not just reviving history, you are also offering a critique.

Ama: By singing, I let the manuscript speak as it was meant to. The colonial archive reduces it to paper, but performance brings it back to life again. It is a way of saying this knowledge is not only past – it is still living.

meLê: I have been asking: can we speak of decoloniality without always starting from colonialism – without centring European epistemology? In many aural and oral cultures, the archive resides in bodies, through what Diana Taylor calls 'performative repertoires'. A sound practice is kept alive in the persistent repetition of these repertoires in performing human bodies. The body itself becomes the medium and the repository of culture.

When Margana sang along with the Panji story in the *Lautarchiv* recording, his living body and voice became the medium through which Raden Mas Jodjana and the history of this repertoire were reanimated. The performance lecture on which this article is based is 'Tumrap susilaning gĕndhing winor laguning lĕlagon', which I loosely translate to English from Javanese as 'in harmony with the song, fused by singing.' Through Ama's singing as a *sinden*, the past folds into the present, which may allow us to imagine an entangled decolonial future.

