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MELÉ YAMOMO



00:24:52 My doctoral research and artistic practice began with a question: *How do we listen for the voices of Southeast Asian performers in archives where their presence is often muted?*

Trained as a composer and theatre-maker, I entered European academia expecting to find traces of local musicians alongside the European opera companies that toured Manila and other colonial cities. Instead, the archives resonated almost exclusively with European voices. The sounds I sought were inaudible within the epistemic and bureaucratic logics of these collections.

To locate them, I learned to listen differently. The archive, I realised, is not a neutral repository but a chamber of bureaucratic control. To trace the lives of local performers, I had to follow the faint echoes that appeared in other kinds of documents—police reports, fire permits, sanitation records—where artists' names surfaced in colonial surveillance. When I began searching the archives in Manila, Singapore, Jakarta, and Hanoi, these were the places where I finally encountered them. To find the colonised,

I had to think like a coloniser. In the colonies, racialised brown bodies were extremely policed, so I needed to find these bodies within the records of how they were being policed.

In the nineteenth century, concert halls were the most flammable buildings because candles were used for lighting (electricity had yet to arrive). It meant that whenever musicians had a concert, they had to apply for a fire permit. When European operas were performed in an opera house in Manila, locals were listening as well, and I learnt this from local police reports showing that opera companies would pay local enforcement to walk around the opera house to shoo away the 'Indians' lingering around the concert halls. In the Age of Empire, European colonists sought their own India, so the lands they settled in became their 'India', and the local people became 'Indians'. So, in actual fact, the police were walking around to keep the local *indios*—Tagalogs—away. In parsing through this epistemic violence within colonial police documents, I could, however, prove that the locals were listening.

In my postdoctoral research project, I moved away from the canons. I no longer wanted to write about these bodies through an archival system that demanded my own to sustain the fiction of Western music's universality. Rather than adding another citation proving that brown bodies had listened to the colonially imposed European canons, I wanted to listen differently—to ask *how* they were listening, *what* they were hearing, and *what else* sounded in those encounters.

From this experience emerged my notion of the 'sonus'—the relation between sound and body. Sound itself may be the vibration of air, but sonus names how that vibration resonates within and through particular bodies. The Dutch national anthem, for instance, sounds one way to a Dutch listener, another to an Indonesian, Surinamese, or South African one. Once sound is stripped from the bodies and communities that sustain it, the sonus dies. That is what colonial archives often do: sever sound from its life-world.

By 2013, my research had turned to the earliest sound repositories themselves—the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv and the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv—founded around 1900 with the imperial ambition to record the world. These collections are, in a sense, resonant tombs: they hold voices detached from the bodies that once gave them breath.

Between 2018 and 2022, through my project Sonic Entanglements, I organised a consortium of Southeast Asian researchers and sound scholars who surveyed colonial sound archives across Europe. After Sonic Entanglements, we received funding from the EU Joint Project Initiative for Cultural Heritage (JPICH) to form a European consortium comprising SOAS University of London, CNRS (France), and the University of Amsterdam (UvA). Together, we collaborated with the BBC Archives, the British Library, the Musée de l'Homme, the Jaap Kunst Archive, and the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision.

One outcome of this collaboration is Pratinada (pratinada.net), a digital platform that aggregates colonial-era sound recordings of Southeast

Asia held in European institutions. It provides metadata translation into ten lingua franca languages used across the region, enabling researchers and communities to search these archives in their own languages. Pratinada functions not only as a portal of access but as a digital space for restitution and rematriation, reconnecting the sonus of archived voices to their living cultural lineages.

When I speak about these histories, I often recall Jaap Kunst, the Dutch ethnomusicologist who in 1919 arrived in the East Indies, recorded gamelan with funding from Queen Wilhelmina, and published *Music in Java* (1934). His name became central to ethnomusicology, yet the names of the Javanese musicians he recorded remain unacknowledged. Our ongoing work traces those recordings back to their villages to recover the identities of the artists who made them possible.

That same year, through Sonic Entanglements, we visited the Lautarchiv at Humboldt University Berlin. There we encountered a 1917 recording of Raden Mas Jodjana, a Javanese nobleman and dancer who had moved to Europe in 1914. The label described it as 'erzählung'—narration—but when we listened, he was singing. Historian and wayang practitioner Sri Margana, who joined us, recognised the melody as part of a fourteenth-century Panji story still performed today in East Java. He sang along. In that moment, through Margana's body, he breathed the sonus back into the sound archive. It became a living repertoire once more.

In 2024, during a DeCoSEAS workshop in Bali, I met Amabilita Sudarmanto, a philologist and *sinden* (a Javanese female solo singer) from Yogyakarta. She works with nineteenth-century court manuscripts titled *Kagungan Dalëm Sèrat Pasindhen Bedhaya utawi Srimpi* (*Lyrics of the King's Bedhaya or Srimpi Dances*). These scrolls, richly illustrated with *Wèdana Gapura Rënggan* paintings, record the narratives of court dances in lyric form, sung with gamelan.

One of them, *Bedhaya Kuwung-kuwung*, recounts Sultan Hamengku Buwana VIII's journey to the Netherlands in 1919—his visit to Queen Wilhelmina and his stay in Rotterdam. Because the text is written as a song, it is both a historical record and a musical score—a living archive that must be voiced to exist.

In our collaboration, Amabilita sang the scroll's text, completing the act of archiving. The written word met its sonic body. The performance lecture we created took its title from a line in that manuscript: *Tumrap susilaning gèndhing winor laguning lèlagon*, which roughly translates to 'in harmony with the song, fused by singing'. It reminds us that in Javanese historiography, a text is incomplete until it resounds through voice.

To listen decolonially is to recognise that the archive is not a tomb but a body awaiting breath. When we sing with it, it breathes again.