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Association Archipel

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Music and Dance Go to War in Java

The kingdoms of pre-colonial Java were martial states. Much of the organisation and principles upon which those states rested was designed for war or the threat of war. These were also states where cultural activities flourished, at least in good times. Javanese culture, from pre-Islamic through to Islamic times, has been notable for its wonderful works of literature, multiple forms of *wayang* theatre, music and dance. These were all performance arts. Even literature – not normally thought of as performance art in Western cultures – was not read in silence but sung aloud to a range of poetic metres (*pupuh*).

Performance was central to Javanese arts, and so was war.² Readers familiar with Javanese literature or the *wayang* theatre will know the part played by martial skills and the bloody accounts of battle there. They may not, however, be as familiar with the role music and dance played in the real world of Javanese warfare. Here we are to some extent talking about what, in Western military history, is called drill. This is conventionally thought of as the great innovation of the Netherlands' Prince Maurits van Nassau (1567-

1. Merle C. Ricklefs was Professor Emeritus, the Australian National University and Monash University. He passed away on December 29, 2019.

2. I hope that no reader will imagine that this comment is in agreement with Clifford Geertz's historically unfounded, implicitly tautologous and absurd idea of the "theatre state": that pre-colonial Javanese and Balinese states rested on ceremonies and display which were in themselves "what the state was for". I am not the only one to have rejected this idea, but readers interested in my views could look at my long-ago review of Geertz's *Nagara* in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14:1 (March 1983), pp. 184-5.

1625), frequently regarded as the greatest European soldier of his age. This constituted professionalisation of warfare which could turn a group of fighters into an effective, unified fighting machine responsive to standardised orders. The pioneering military historian Hans Delbrück said of this, “The decisive point is externally exercising, inwardly discipline.”³ As we shall see from the Javanese sources cited below, the Javanese were prepared to learn whatever European-style drill had to offer. But they also had their own indigenous traditions in this regard. What Europeans called drill, Javanese called dance.

We may note *en passant* that there is a Javanese word *drel*, which also appears as *ědrel*, *ngědrel*, etc. The original 1847 edition of the Gericke and Roorda Javanese-Dutch dictionary defined *drel* as “firing continuously in unison with small arms” which is correct. But Gericke and Roorda added etymological speculation that this was “a corruption of Dutch *drillen*”⁴ which, like English “drill”, can mean, *inter alia*, to drill in the sense of to exercise, as in military drill. In the later 1901 edition, Vreede and Gunning added more speculation, offering two possible etymologies for this word, neither supported by evidence. One was again that it could come from Dutch *drillen*. The second is that it is onomatopoeic in origin.⁵ I believe that the second guess was probably correct. The word appears regularly in the sense of firing a salvo.⁶ We find this used, for example, when honorary salutes were fired with cannon or infantry weapons, along with *gamēlan* and other sounds, in celebration of royal or aristocratic weddings, at the great annual court *garēbēg* observances, at receptions of distinguished visitors, and so on. I can recall – and can find – no cases where Javanese *drel* means what Dutch *drillen* or English “drill” mean. It must be an onomatopoeic word for the sound of weapons being fired in salvos.

Our earliest surviving source with regard to the use of drill in the sense of training for Javanese soldiers that is known to me is the manuscript *Babad ing Sangkala*. This is a chronogram chronicle, that is to say, a brief account of events which are dated with chronograms (*sangkala/sěngkala*). The

3. Hans Delbrück, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte* (7 vols. Berlin: Verlag von Georg Stilke, 1900-36), vol. 4, p. 181.

4. J.F.C. Gericke, and T. Roorda, *Javaansch-Nederduitsch woordenboek* (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1847), p. 234.

5. J.F.C. Gericke and T. Roorda, *Javaansch-Nederlandsch handwoordenboek* (Revised ed.; ed. A.C. Vreede and J.G.H. Gunning; 2 vols; Amsterdam: Johannes Müller; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1901), vol. I, p. 573.

6. There are multiple examples in the Javanese newspaper *Bramartani/Jurumartani*. E.g. see the issues of 18 January 1866, 24 March and 31 March 1870; which can be consulted at <http://lampje.leidenuniv.nl/KITLV-docs/open/TS/Bramartani/bramartani.html>. There have been some problems with this URL in the past; in such a case, one must search for the database by turning to <http://catalogue.leidenuniv.nl> and searching for ‘Bramartanie Javaansch dagblad’.

manuscript was written in the court of Kartasura in November 1736.⁷ Here we find the statement that towards the end of the First Javanese War of Succession (1704-8), during the dry season, i.e. in mid-1707, the Javanese troops “were drilled (*ingĕmbat-ĕmbat*) by Dutchmen”.⁸ So the Javanese side was evidently prepared to incorporate European training and discipline techniques if they were useful, just as they enthusiastically adopted new European infantry weapons which were useful, notably the early snaphance muskets known in Dutch as *snaphaan* (the origin of the modern Indonesian word *senapan* for rifle), pre-packaged paper cartridges, and the bayonet. But they kept their indigenous weapons as well (e.g. *krisses*, lances, bows and arrows) and had nothing to learn from the Europeans about artillery or fortification construction.⁹ In the matter of drill, the situation seems to have been comparable: if the Europeans had a useful idea it would be adopted but the Javanese also had their own traditions of training and unison manoeuvring of military cohorts.

During that same war, the Dutch East India Company’s Madurese ally prince Cakraningrat II (r. 1680–1707) was drilling his troops in preparation for battle, according to the later 18th-century text *Babad Kraton*, but there is no indication that this was anything other than established indigenous-style training. The text describes the grand uniforms of the various professional troop companies and the officers’ fine outfits, and records that “the order of the Madurese folk/ was as in the past, when at war”:

Every day there was training by him (the prince)
on the *alun-alun* (the great square before the palace).
Making a great commotion was the swordplay.
There were those who fired and were fired upon,
others practised with short lances (*lĕmbing*)
and there were those (training with) blowguns (*tulup*).
A thousand Saragĕni [a troop company]
were trained to fire in unison.¹⁰

In the Second Javanese War of Succession (1719-23), the Dutch reported that rebel princes were drilling troops in what appeared to them to be the European fashion, “having their military keep watch and march according

7. British Library MS Jav. 36 (B). Romanised edition, translation and historical commentary are in M. C. Ricklefs (ed. & transl.), *Modern Javanese historical tradition: A study of an original Kartasura chronicle and related materials*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1978. See further details at the end of this paper.

8. *Babad ing Sangkala*, f. 357v. (III:38); Ricklefs, *Mod.Jav.Hist.Trad.*, pp. 108-9.

9. This is a theme in my book *War, culture and economy in Java, 1677-1726: Asian and European imperialism in the early Kartasura period* (Sydney: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Allen & Unwin, 1993); see especially chapter 8.

10. *Babad Kraton*, ff. 522r.-523r. Published edition vol. ii, p.202. See details at the end of this paper.

to strokes of the clock and beats of the drum in the European way".¹¹ But it is doubtful that the Javanese or Madurese needed Europeans to teach them such practices. The quote above from *Babad Kraton* indicates that there were indigenous ways of drilling soldiers. Europeans, like the Madurese of *Babad Kraton*, drilled their soldiers in handling sabres, but we may be confident they did not do so with regard to blowguns, a weapon not in use in European armies. And while the VOC certainly drilled using drums and kept watches according to the clock, so far as I am aware its European detachments did not employ music in battle in the way set out in the sources to which we now turn. The evidence that follows supports the view that military training and combat were rooted firmly in Javanese artistic practices, and vice-versa.

Leiden *cod. Or.* 4097 is a manuscript which is closely related to the text of *Babad ing Sangkala*. Whereas the events recorded in *Babad ing Sangkala* end in 1720-1, LOr 4097 continues into the late 1740s, the early stage of the Third Javanese War of Succession (1746-57).¹² In this text we find a description of an episode in the reign of Pakubuwana II (r. 1726-49) which is significant for our topic here, for here we see what seems to be military drill as dance performance.

In the month of Sura [AJ 1655 / 17 July-15 August 1730], His Majesty took pleasure dancing in the Sri Manganti¹³ (with) the Kapēdhaks¹⁴ and officials, dancing with lances, shields and pike stocks.¹⁵

It is possible to dance without music, but we may reasonably assume that the king and his close officers took their pleasures, rehearsing jointly formalised movements with these weapons, to the sound of the *gamēlan* orchestra. Following examples will strengthen that assumption.

We now turn to the most informative sources that survive, two remarkable and large chronicles describing the period of the Third Javanese War of Succession in extraordinarily informative detail. One is the autobiographical *babad* composed by the flamboyant prince Mangkunagara I (1726-95), whose life is the subject of my book *Soul Catcher: Java's fiery prince Mangkunagara*

11. Batavia to Heren XVII, 26 March 1720, in W. Ph Coolhaas *et al.* (eds), *General missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (13 vols; 's-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff; Den Haag: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 1960-2007) vol. vii, p. 475. This series is also available at <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/retroboeken/generalemissiven/#page=0&accessor=toc&source=1&view=>.

12. LOr 4097 is discussed at greater length in my *Mod.Jav.Hist.Trad.*, pp. 245-9. See details at the end of this paper.

13. A part of the court.

14. A class of court servants, in this period evidently young men serving as lifeguards of the king.

15. LOr 4097, p. 63. The text refers to *bēksa jēbēng tameng landheyan*. There is room for some minor discussion about how these terms relate to each other.

I, 1726-95.¹⁶ His chronicle bears the title *Sĕrat Babad Pakunĕgaran* and is the earliest autobiography in Javanese so far known. The copy available to us was begun on 17 August 1779, on the prince's 55th birthday in the Javanese calendar, and is 418 ff. long. The other work is *Babad Giyanti*, one of the finest of all Javanese chronicles, which also covers the period of the Third Javanese War of Succession. Its composition is conventionally ascribed to the Surakarta poet Yasadipura I (1729-1803), although there is no unequivocal confirmation of that. It is published in 21 small volumes (over 1500 pp.).¹⁷

We will look at some of the more informative passages from these two chronicles.

Mangkunagara I was, throughout his life, both a devotee of Javanese arts and a warrior to the tips of his fingers. (He was also, as I note in my biography of this extraordinary man, a great lover of beautiful women and much attached to *jenever*, "Dutch gin".) Regarding the early years of his rebellion, c. 1745, we read his autobiographical account of how, as he marched, the *gamĕlan* Cara Balen (Balinese Style) was taken along.¹⁸ When he established a rebel palace in the forest shortly thereafter, he enjoyed drinking, feasting, performance of the stately and sacred *bĕdhaya* dance, dancing girls and *wayang* theatre performances. War dances in the classical Javanese dance style were frequently performed (*tatayungan*) by the Madurese soldiers who at that stage supported him.¹⁹ Later, in 1747, when Mangkunagara was in alliance with his uncle Mangkubumi, the senior rebel, we also read of their soldiers "marching in battle order, beautiful with their *gamĕlan*".²⁰

In 1749, Mangkubumi ordered his lords to "teach war on the *alun-alun*" (the great square before his rebel headquarters). This was a war game, with some of the soldiers, commanded by Mangkunagara, acting as Dutch East India Company (VOC) forces. Cavalry (reportedly 4000-strong on one side, nearly 7500 on the other), infantry (reportedly 33,000) and 56 pieces of large and small artillery engaged. As did musical instruments: *kĕndhang* (hand-struck drums), the great *gongs*, *bĕndhe* and *beri* war-gongs are mentioned, along with European-style trumpets and the *gamĕlans* known as Kodhok Ngorek (Croaking Frog) and Cara Balen playing while artillery roared. One can imagine the spectacle and the cacophony, said to be like "a collapsing mountain".²¹

16. Singapore: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with NUS Press; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2018.

17. Batawi Sentrum: Bale Pustaka, 1937-9. Also published at <http://www.sastra.org/kisah-cerita-dan-kronikal/70-babad-giyanti>. The history of the original MS (the only complete copy of which, in 2338 pp., is held in Perpustakaan Nasional Indonesia) is set out in Ricklefs, *Soul Catcher*, pp. 351-3.

18. *SBPn* f. 74v.

19. *SBPn* f. 81v.

20. *SBPn* f. 139r.

21. *BG* vol. v, pp. 49-52. See also *BG* vol. xii, p. 79. For musical terms used in this

Mangkunagara also described the way in which dance was drill. In early 1751 he was exercising his soldiers with bows and arrows, parrying with pikes and “set to fight with lances, dancing (*běběksan*) in turns.”²²

As in the case cited above of Pakubuwana II doing martial dances with his soldiers, in *Babad Giyanti* we also find such an occasion. Ca. late 1752, Mangkubumi – then still the rebel king – took his pleasure with “the *bědhaya* dance and the soldiery dancing”.²³ Similarly, on the occasion of the meeting between Pakubuwana III and the newly minted Sultan Mangkubumi in 1755, after senior appointments to the new Sultanate had been made, “the *tumenggungs* all performed the lance-dance (*běksa jěběng*)” along with other entertainments.²⁴

Music and dance played roles not only in drill and war games, but also on campaign. In 1750, Cakraningrat II was advised that Mangkubumi was rich in both his soldiers and his music. It was reported that he had 30,000 cavalrymen and over a thousand banners (companies) of infantry and that his commanders took with them many *gamėlan* orchestras in the styles of Kodhok Ngorek, Cara Balen and Gala Ganjur.²⁵ In early 1750, Mangkubumi’s soldiers prepared for battle the following morning, “along with the *gamėlan* being played while the soldiers danced (*tatayungan*).”²⁶

When battles commenced, the advancing soldiers were often described as being accompanied by the sounds of drums (*tambur*; *kěndhang*), great gongs and the *běndhe* and *beri* war-gongs, as in the war game mentioned above, as well as *saruni* (shawm).²⁷ *Gamėlan* played as well.²⁸ In 1751, Mangkunagara’s army marched towards battle with the VOC, “the *gamėlan* Cara Balen taken along to battle”.²⁹

Mangkunagara’s autobiographical account of the battle that followed is evocative:

Dark was the smoke from the black gunpowder,
the musket-shot raining down.
The light and heavy cannon fired together,
their sound like a volcanic eruption.

paper, consult J. Kunst, *Music in Java: Its history, its theory and its techniques* (3rd ed; ed. E. L. Heins; 2 vols; The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973).

22. *SBPn* f. 251r.

23. *BG* vol. xiii, p. 8. There might be some disagreement with my translation; the text reads *akasukan wau sri bupati, běbědhayan prajurit tayungan*. Multiple other such references are to be found in the *babads*.

24. *BG* vol. xvii, p. 70.

25. *BG* vol. viii, p. 28.

26. *SBPn* f. 204v.

27. E.g. *BG* vol. viii, pp. 61, 68, 76; vol. x, pp. 14-15, 30; vol. xvii, p. 8.

28. *BG* vol. viii, p. 74.

29. *SBPn* f. 239v.

The heavens were all darkness
 and the earth shook.
 Ever more was the battle as if the very sky was roaring,
 as if the heavens were collapsing.
 The drums, *bëndhe* and *beri* gongs,
 the (*gamēlan*) Cara Balen echoing,
 and like rain was the falling musket-shot.
 The soldiers who died
 toppled from their horses.
 Many there were who were wounded,
 many who died,
 the dust of the earth spattered with blood.³⁰

The playing of music during battle probably goes back to pre-Islamic times in Java. In the Old Javanese classic *Bhāratayuddha* by Mpu Sedah and Mpu Panuluh, written in AD 1057, we find battle scenes with superhuman actors, magical weapons, and unbelievable numbers of fighters. In these imaginary battles, we also read of gongs, cymbals, horns, booming drums, percussion instruments, trumpets and sounding conches which accompany marching armies and battle scenes. The text says that those musicians as well as bearers of banners were to be regarded as immune from attack.³¹ In the Old Javanese *Sumanasāntaka* by the 13th-century Kediri poet Mpu Monaguna, we also find extravagantly imagined combat scenes, with supernatural weapons, millions of troops and divine beings. We also read there about gongs, drums and cymbals being played during the fighting.³² Other such examples can be found in Old Javanese *kakawin* texts.

Returning to the real world of battle, we may ask how were these *gamēlan* ensembles, with their several performers and instruments, taken to war? The sources known to me do not answer this question for us. In principle, there seem to me to have been three possibilities. (1) The instruments could have been slung between poles (*pikul*) over men's shoulders and carried thus to their assigned locations for the battle, as one may see them carried today. (2) The instruments and performers were possibly transported there in ox-drawn carts (*grobag*). (3) Or, the instruments were mounted on horseback. To speculate among these three, we must have regard to the circumstances of battle. We should recall General Helmuth von Moltke's famous dictum that no battle plan can with any certainty extend beyond the first encounter with the enemy's main force.

30. *SBPn* f. 240v.

31. S. Supomo, (ed. and transl.), *Bhāratayuddha: An old Javanese poem and its Indian sources* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1993), pp. 178-9, 214, 234-5, 237.

32. Peter Worsley, S. Supomo, Thomas M. Hunter and Margaret Fletcher (eds, transls and annotaters), *Mpu Monaguna's Sumanasāntaka: An Old Javanese epic poem, its Indian source and Balinese illustrations* (Bibliotheca Indonesica vol. 36; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), pp. 365, 375, 387. My thanks to Peter Worsley for reminding me of these references.

Once battle commenced, the disposition of forces, the directions of attack or retreat, whose orders were to be followed and the thousand-and-one other circumstances of battle could transform rapidly. The *gamēlan* orchestra might find itself too far in the rear of an advance to be heard, or its location might suddenly change from a relatively protected venue to the path of a cavalry charge, a pell-mell infantry retreat, a target of cannon barrage, and so on. I therefore presume that such orchestras must be able to be positioned not only for battle but also for rapid relocation. Men transporting musical instruments on *pikuls* over their shoulders or oxen pulling carts would probably be too slow. Furthermore, wheeled vehicles were poorly suited to active battle fields, which might be broken up by uneven ground, ditches and cannon-ball craters and littered with the bodies of dead and wounded soldiers and animals. I therefore think that (3) above, mounting the instruments on horseback, was probably the preferred way to transport the *gamēlan* ensembles.

In using horse-mounted *gamēlan* on the battlefield, Javanese armies would have shared a widely spread military tradition, one particularly familiar in the Islamic world. Deploying music in war is known from very early times, particularly from Middle Eastern states. There are documents recording this at least by the time of Alexander the Great. Firdawsi's *Shah-nama* of the 11th century describes Persian martial ensembles including horns, trumpets, reed-pipes, drums, bells, sonettes and cymbals. The Umayyads and 'Abbasids (7th-13th centuries) are recorded as using "mounted drums", kettledrums mounted in pairs on either side of a horse's or camel's neck. In the time of the Ottoman Sultan Othman I (d. 1324), large kettledrums were sometimes carried by elephants. The Ottoman *mehter* ensemble – consisting of shawms, trumpets, double-headed drums (*tabl*), kettle drums (*kös*) and metallic percussion instruments – "played continuously during battle" from a position near the battle standard. Feldman writes that "during campaigns or processions, the musicians were mounted on horses or camels; the *kös* was taken on a camel or an elephant".³³ European martial music from the Middle Ages onwards borrowed from these Islamic cultures. Crusaders adopted the practice of mounted military bands performing in the midst of battle from their Arab enemies, Bruce Gleason writes. While trumpeters and kettle drummers were widely found, so also were "other brass instruments, as well as woodwinds and sometimes even bagpipes".³⁴

33. W. Feldman, "Mehter", in H.A.R. Gibb, P. Bearman *et al.* (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, New [2nd] Edition* (13 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1986-2009), vol. vi, pp. 1007-8; H. G. Farmer, "Ṭabl-Khāna", in *ibid.*, vol. x, pp. 34-8.

34. Bruce P. Gleason, "Arms and men: Mounted musicians in battle and on parade", *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History*, vol. 17 no. 2 (Winter 2005), pp. 80-3; Gleason has published a fuller discussion in "Cavalry and court trumpeters and kettledrummers from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century", *The Galpin Society Journal*, vol.62 (April 2009), pp. 31-54, 208. He observes there that in artillery units,

Dance also played a part in the conduct of battle itself, providing a form of discipline which was rooted in the dance-drill in which the soldiers were trained. Ca. May 1745, Mangkunagara went into battle with Madurese allies against VOC forces. The Madurese “all danced (*tayungan*) in unison, their pikes near, dragged along the ground as they advanced” towards Company fire.³⁵ In 1748, in an engagement with the Company’s troops, Mangkubumi’s infantry again advanced “dancing (*tayungan*) and shouting”.³⁶

Thus it was that in pre-colonial Java, music and dance accompanied the celebrations and joys of life. They also accompanied bloodshed and death on the field of battle, echoing across the blood-spattered ground.³⁷

Manuscripts cited

- British Library Jav. 36 (B), *Babad ing Sangkala*. Written in the court of Kartasura in November 1738. Romanised edition, translation and historical commentary are published in M. C. Ricklefs (ed. & transl.), *Modern Javanese historical tradition: A study of an original Kartasura chronicle and related materials* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1978). The *Babad ing Sangkala* text occupies ff. 349v.-373v. of the MS, which is available digitally at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=mss_jav_36_fs001r
- British Library Add. MS 12318, *Sĕrat Babad Pakunĕgaran*. Mangkunagara I’s autobiographical account of his years in rebellion, in a copy dated September 1779. 418 ff.
- British Library Add. MS 12320, *Babad Kraton*. Written in Yogyakarta in AJ 1703–4 (1777–78 CE) by R. Tg. Jayengrat. Available in digitised form at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_12320_fs001r. The published edition referred to is the transliteration in I.W. Pantja Sunjata, Ignatius Supriyanto and J.J. Ras (ed. and translit.), *Babad Kraton*, 2 vols. [Jakarta:] Djambatan, 1992.
- Leiden *cod. Or.* 4097. This seems to be a later version of the *Babad ing Sangkala* textual family which was acquired by a European sometime in or after 1760. The text is turned from verse to prose, but inexpertly such that some passages are still readily recognisable as verse despite being written on the page as if prose. The manuscript is discussed in detail in Ricklefs, *Mod.Jav.Hist.Trad.*, pp. 245–9.

Abbreviations

BG *Babad Giyanti*
 SBPn *Sĕrat Babad Pakunĕgaran*

kettledrums could be transported in wheeled chariots (just as the guns were transported on wheeled limbers) rather than on horseback, but I do not picture that being done in the midst of battle.

35. SBPn f. 78v.

36. SBPn f. 166r.

37. Readers may be interested also in the discussion of 19th century and later musical developments in Sumarsam, ‘Past and present issues of Javanese-European musical hybridity: *Gendhing Mares* and other hybrid genres’, pp. 87–107 in Bart Barendregt and Els Bogaerts (eds.), *Recollecting resonances: Indonesian-Dutch musical encounters (Verhandelungen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* vol. 288; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014). My thanks to Ben Arps for bringing this to my attention.